

PUTTING SPEECH IN MIDDLE SCHOOL -WITHOUT AN ARGUMENT

by Paul K. Schwarz

In February, I watched a couple of our seventh graders talk before a public Board of Education meeting. Before an audience of more than two hundred they spoke with great feeling and animation about how their class had developed a relationship with the residents of a nearby nursing home. Speaking in an extemporaneous style, with one note card apiece, they were sensational! But in our town, they are certainly not unique.

I have taught a speech course to every Scarsdale Middle School student for fifteen years now, to favorable reviews. I've spoken at conferences, and written about it in these pages and elsewhere. Still, our program is unique. I know of no other middle school where speech is taught as a separate required course for all students. This issue of *Rostrum*, dedicated to Middle Schools, is a great forum to spell out what I think every middle school ought to be doing.

First of all, unequivocally, a course in public speaking *is* appropriate for the middle school. To those who question it for this "vulnerable" age, I have always said, "precisely *because* of the age." Well taught, this course *builds* self-confidence and a positive self-image. In the proper atmosphere, students are highly supportive of one another. At no other age are students so ready to leap into projects and untraditional assignments, whether or not these involve oral presentation. Why not build, at this early age, a foundation in a skill the student will use throughout academic and later life?

For All Students

In this journal I need make no brief for the importance of public speaking as a required skill for success in life. Yet I am equally sure that many readers work in programs where speech and debate involve an elite upper level of students. I am passionate about bringing my program to every child in the school. Why should this fundamental skill be restricted to any level of the student body? There would be as much logic in offering physical education classes only to students who read above grade level. Speech is a universal skill. We are not training solely the future lawyers or legislators, but the entire population. The Middle School philosophy embraces this approach. Middle school is where most classes are

heterogeneous; where "tracking" is generally anathema. This is where educators still believe in the development of the whole child.

Speech, Not Debate

If you are absolutely wedded to the concept of bringing forensics to the middle school, you might want to stop reading right here. I am talking here about kids learning to get up and talk to a group, simply that. I will leave debate to the high school. There is much to learn about speaking first. Deal with the basic skills of poised, energetic, extemporaneous style presentation in front of an audience. Don't confuse the issue. What *every* member of society needs is the ability to make sense, and a good impression, on his or her feet. The attempt to produce "debate" in the middle school classroom generally subordinates the oral skills to the academic content, or totally disregards speech technique in an effort to teach the subject matter. The result is the neglect or worse, the denigration of the skill. Teach the art of speaking, and let the subject matter be secondary. In my assignments, students have topics, but they have great latitude in the choice.

The greatest challenge is to get students of this age out of the habit of reading and reciting. For up until now they have probably been praised for doing precisely the wrong thing. They have read other people's words aloud. They have shared their own writing aloud. They have pretended to speak, in reality reciting in sing-song inflections a rote script playing in some dim and distant corner of the brain. Get them to engage the brain in real live speaking. This won't be done by asking them to discourse on academic topics or abstruse issues. Let them talk about how they hate Sunday school, or their aunt's smoking. Have them sell an old shoe, or talk about winning a soccer trophy.

Speech in the middle school can include many of the standard forms of speech, such as personal experience, demonstration, information. A course should also draw liberally on theater games, improvisation, and impromptu speaking. Students of this age will dive into all of these with glee because these activities are fun. My challenge, I have always said, is to take an activity which most adults dread more than death or the

dentist, and make my classroom a place that kids love to enter. A dry textbook approach to classic speech would be doomed at this level.

A Stand-Alone Program

At Scarsdale Middle School, every student takes speech for three weeks in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. They come to my classroom, a unique place. This separate unit stands apart as a course. During those three weeks the English teacher works on an interdisciplinary unit with a team member. These projects are a bonus spin-off of the speech program. Clearly then, our district has made the commitment of devoting a teaching position to Public Speaking at the middle school level. So while I am part of the English department, Public Speaking, in the minds of faculty and students, has an identity and integrity it would lack if it were merely a unit of work, such as "spelling" or "the short story." Skill and achievement in speech is recognized and given credibility in students' minds. They value the skill; they strive for excellence; they appreciate the recognition for their achievements.

In Your Middle School

Can you establish this course in your middle school? That all depends. You will have to convince the administration and the community of its validity and value. Is that possible? It is fairly easy to make the case for the prevalence of oral communication in our society, even that your students will speak more than write in the future. You may find an administration or school board reluctant to establish an independent program. Interestingly though, I find most people's reaction, once they see it, to be some variation of, "I wish I'd had this course at that age!" Argue for its existence on its own, and not subsumed in English or Social Studies classes. Argue for the recognition of this skill as a skill.

Course Guidelines

I would hope to persuade the reader to establish this course in a middle school. The regular readers of this magazine may not be in a position to do that. This issue is read in middle schools, so perhaps there is a chance.

Are you, or do you have someone with the background, the interest, the skill in speaking? A love for kids at this age? A

readiness to have a good time with them?

Establish from the outset that this is a non-competitive class. Set aside all thoughts of contests, matches, ratings, points. You can find times during the year to have special events like a speech contest, but make your classroom a place where the goal is to have everyone win. Make the class, as audience, the primary support group. Young speakers may feel that they are in mortal peril up there, like high wire aerialists. The audience needs not only to be the listeners, but also the coaches; not only the cheerleaders, but also the safety net.

Do you have to give grades? If not, don't. I make a compromise. I am asked by my department to give a grade for each student at the end of their three weeks. I don't put a grade on individual speeches. I write fairly extensive evaluations, using an assessment rubric. In addition, seventh and eighth graders are responsible for writing self-evaluations, using the same rubric. This is accomplished by having them take speeches home on videotape for review. The emphasis is on positive self-evaluation. At the bottom of the page, after the rubric, is a space. "Comment on one or two things you did well." One of the signs on the wall of my room says, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're probably right." I am absolutely convinced, from my experience, that most students, given the right feedback, experience a gain in self-confidence in this activity.

Make It Fun

At this age, at any age(?), fun is an important component. I will start off on the first day with any group by playing a game. It might be just a "name game," or a "story line," each player adding a word to compose a story as quickly as possible. Or it might be a full-period game of "To Tell the Truth," letting the audience guess which of four storytellers is really talking about a real-life experience.

The "Pet Peeve" speech is a great one for beginners. They can't help but have a good time with it. The ordinary sales speech becomes a game when the speaker must "sell" an item of no value! And the normally serious persuasive speech can be fun when the impromptu situations become the proverbial "refrigerators to Eskimos" pitch.

At every turn, there is a way to inject a little levity. A practice session becomes "The Olympics," with "judges" holding up numbers. Even determining the speaking order can be fun. Shuffle the cards and cut the deck.

Make Room for Success

Don't overemphasize writing and written organization. Require something, to be sure. I don't let kids get up without handing me an "outline." But I'm fairly flexible about what it looks like. I want to see that some planning has gone into it. One of the beauties of this class is that while you'll certainly get great success out of those top all-around students who also write well, you'll also get wonderful work from those who don't, if you allow it. Remember that this is a skill which just might have more in common with baseball or ballet than it does with books. Another sign on my wall, its source lost, reminds, "When you speak, the audience gets 7% from your words, 38% from your tone of voice, and 55% from your body language." Let the topics, and most of the speeches, be from outside academia. Two of my seventh graders, only recently mainstreamed and far from academic stars, recently captivated their classes with demonstration speeches, one on karate moves, the other on how to solder a wire.

Get the Whole School on Board

Talk to your colleagues. Get them to buy into the basics of public speaking. If the kids go to their next period and give an oral report by burying their heads in scripts, you might as well give up! It may take inviting colleagues in to see your classes, or sharing your materials, or evaluation sheets, but get them on board.

Find ways to give students real speaking opportunities. If there's a concert, let students comment on the music. If there's a guest speaker, let a student do the introduction. And certainly, when there's a report to the Board of Education, let the kids do the talking!

Can Every Student Really Do This?

Well, almost. I teach 900 students each year, and I do find two or three for whom I'll make a special arrangement. Getting the number that low, by the way, is partly a function of some of the strategies mentioned above: the non-graded approach, the non-academic emphasis, the games. And a few of those who do make it to the podium do so after an intermediate step, speaking just for the camera, for example, and watching a replay with positive feedback. The "Introduce Your Partner" speech works to break down fear and reluctance. The student is introducing a classmate as if that person is "today's guest speaker." "You're doing it for her! This is not about you," I tell them. And even the most hesitant can get up there.

Public Speaking is inherently a pressure situation. Do you want to increase that tension in the classroom, or minimize it? I do both. Sure, my room is set up in an arena format, a raised platform and optional lectern for the speaker. Added lights and hanging mikes serve functional and symbolic purposes. Pressure! But, many subtleties serve to break down that tension, not the least of which is the "on deck" seat next to me. Ostensibly, it's to hand in the outline and check the note card. In fact, it's the opportunity for one more encouraging pep talk, or a little hand-holding, usually figurative, occasionally literal! In the rare case, it's the time to intercept the student who isn't going to succeed at the lectern, avoid the disaster, and look for another strategy.

This Won't Be Easy

Trying to set this up in your school won't be easy. Most people won't be ready for it. For openers, you will be bucking two current trends. First, your students won't be writing. But they will be learning to interact in the medium through which they will communicate most throughout life. Second, they won't be using computers. (Good Grief!) But they will be learning to "inter-face" with a far more complex audience: other human minds.

On what stone tablets is it written, after all, that all human knowledge, at least for the 11 to 14-year-old, is contained in the four major academic disciplines? If you have a real middle school, ready for team planning, interdisciplinary teaching, innovation and experimentation, you can do it. The only question is whether the adults are ready for this. Your students will love it.

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