



# Reflections on a Pedagogical Shift: A Public Speaking for Social Justice Model

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**Keywords:** social justice, activism, critical pedagogy, public speaking

**Abstract:** While the basic content of the public speaking course has changed little, the method and manner in which these skills are taught can, and should, reflect the dynamic socio-political contexts in which we live and teach. This reflection essay addresses a struggle to keep the public speaking course relevant, innovative, and practical while also incorporating necessary learning outcomes. As a potential solution, I introduce a Public Speaking for Social Justice Model for the introductory course. The model requires that students thoroughly examine a timely social justice issue; situate themselves and their classmates within the issue while featuring marginalized voices and narratives; seek a critical, well-researched understanding through sustained analysis and interrogation; and offer pragmatic solutions in order to affect change. The paper concludes with appraisals and limitations based on utilization of the model for four years.

Public speaking is a foundational course taken mostly by first- and second-year students as a general education requirement at universities, colleges, and community colleges across the United States (Engleberg, Emanuel, Van Horn, & Bodary, 2008; Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). For two decades, I have found myself in an ongoing struggle to keep the course timely, relevant, and practical for our dynamic student populations and evolving sociocultural contexts. Through conversations and discussion panels at yearly communication conventions, I find that many of us experience frustrations with the limited variety surrounding textbook content, syllabi, presentation types, and course format. There are multiple critiques of our field's limiting and often outdated public speaking textbooks (Frobish, 2000; Hess & Pearson, 1992), as well as critiques of the syllabi that are used to teach the public speaking

course (Fisher, 2010; Gehrke, 2016; Porrovecchio, 2005). In this reflection essay, I add my own voice to the call for significant change in this foundational course that for many students may be their *only* communication course during their college careers.

Despite the oft-argued relevance and significance of the introductory communication course, specifically the public speaking component, Keith (2016) contended that the course has changed very little over the past 100 years. Porrovecchio (2005) discussed the “template” of this foundational course: one that often is institutionalized, that contains the standard four or five presentations on different topics, the typical organizational schemes, and any other accoutrements that best reflect an instructor’s personal style. Additionally, with the large number of institutions requiring all students to take public speaking, many programs utilize a Basic Course Director, which often results in standardized department-wide syllabi, textbooks, and content, as well as a large number of fixed-term/part-time instructors teaching the course (Morreale et al., 2016). This similarity among syllabi, along with the vast number of public speaking textbooks available for adoption/purchase that follow similar, if not identical, patterns regarding approach and content, seem to suggest that any discipline-wide deviance from the traditional manner and method for teaching this foundational course has yet to be thoroughly addressed or implemented on a large scale.

Although numerous published articles on public speaking focus on analyzing and reducing public speaking anxiety and communication apprehension, some communication scholar-educators have published articles that highlight alternative methods for teaching the course; these alternative methods include invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Salazar, 2015), culturally relevant pedagogy (Colvin & Tobler, 2012), service-learning in the public speaking course (Ahlfeldt, 2009), and using “community” as a guiding theme (Swenson-Lepper, 2012). In lieu of these useful approaches, I continue to grapple with the palpable tension between the challenging constraints and endless possibilities of teaching the introductory public speaking course in a manner that supports my own pedagogical philosophies with regard to communication activism, as well as our discipline’s learning outcomes.

## **Problem: The Need for a Pedagogical Shift**

By my 10th year of teaching public speaking, I grew weary of listening to speeches every semester on the joys of pet adoption, the benefits of CrossFit, and why we should stop drinking water from those terrible plastic bottles. Porrovecchio (2005) and Fisher (2010) both noted the trend of students to choose seemingly random topics that inspire little awe or intrigue due either to the availability of research or because they believe it will be “easy” for them to discuss these topics. While such topics are worthy of exploration, I believed there must be a different method that I could use to teach basic public speaking skills, while also empowering students to think critically about social inequities and engage in a worldview that extends beyond their own limited experiences and positionalities. Additionally, with the limited time between speeches, students rarely can explore any of their chosen topics with true depth or critical thought which often provide audience members with a cursory-level summary of the topic or issue at hand. While reviewing the National Communication Association’s (NCA) Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC), I found myself drawn to LOC #9: *Influence Public Discourse* and reflected on its application in the introductory public speaking course. Two of the supporting elements of this learning outcome include (a) evaluating local/national/global issues and (b) advocating a course of action to address these issues, both from a communication perspective. As I reflected on the more “traditional” model for teaching public speaking outlined by many in the communication discipline, I wondered how I am preparing my students to engage in and influence public discourse that addresses

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local, national, and/or global issues through the introductory public speaking course. These pedagogical concerns served as the impetus for a shift in my approach to teaching introductory public speaking.

In a review article about public speaking theory, content, and pedagogy throughout the 1990s, Goulden (2002) argued that the emergence of a more contemporary model of public speaking is predicated on the willingness of the communication education community to make much-needed changes regarding perspectives and pedagogy. Similarly, Fisher (2010) argued that public speaking was designed for the purpose of participating in the democratic process of engaging diverse opinions on a host of socially relevant and contextual issues. Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996) recognized the difficulty in offering one precise definition for social justice, but offered one approach toward social justice as “the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced” (p. 110). Rudick and Golsan (2016) also supported the desire of many educators to make a pedagogical shift toward social justice by stating, “as our (global) society moves ever closer to political, social, and ecological disaster, we fear that disconnecting learning from a social-justice understanding of education does not serve students’ or society’s best interests” (p. 112). Patterson and Swartz (2014) specifically called for the inclusion of a new learning outcome within the basic communication course that they labeled social justice sensibility, which encompasses citizenship education through public speaking. Taking into account my own struggles and reflections, calls from colleagues such as these offered here, and the timely NCA learning outcomes, I designed an introductory public speaking course that is rooted in social justice advocacy.

### **Solution: Teaching Public Speaking Through a Social Justice Framework**

The model I developed (and continue to tweak) has an underlying commitment to sustained, in-depth, critical engagement with a *singular* topic for the duration of the public speaking course. Through three major presentations, the ultimate goals of this model are for students to (a) thoroughly examine a timely social justice issue; (b) situate themselves and their classmates within the issue while featuring voices and narratives that are frequently marginalized; (c) seek a critical, well-researched understanding of the issue through sustained analysis and interrogation; (d) succinctly explain the complexities of the issue to their classmates; and (e) offer potential macro- and micro-level solutions that are pragmatic and realistic in order to affect change. I contend that the skills acquired through this particular framework more accurately represent the demands and limitations students will face as democratic citizens within and beyond the academy, as well as the types of presentations or “public speaking” that they may encounter in their future careers. The more traditional outcomes of an introductory public speaking course—utilizing effective delivery techniques, demonstrating ethical standards in researching and presenting presentations, adapting messages to the diverse needs of audiences, and utilizing critical thinking and listening skills—remain an integral component of the course.

The first presentation of the semester is a speech of introduction, wherein students introduce themselves to their classmates, typically at the beginning of week four after spending considerable time discussing what social justice encompasses and researching/selecting their topics. During this speech, students share a variety of their cultural identity positions and discuss how these positions contribute to their self-concept and worldview, reveal their chosen social justice issue and rationale for the selection, and offer a brief narrative that personally connects them in some way to social justice broadly or, more specifically, their chosen social justice issue. The objective here is for students to begin to critically examine their own positionalities in relation to how they see themselves as well as how these positionalities affect the

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lenses through which they engage in the world around them; as a result of these examinations, they will begin to situate themselves within a framework of social justice. Students are encouraged to focus on the parts of their identity that are most salient at this juncture and that they are comfortable sharing with their classmates. This presentation is uniquely important, as it responds to Donovan and Tracy's (2017) argument on critical pedagogy as a means of transformation: "If we heed the call to create students (citizens) who create social justice activism beyond the classroom, an integral step is to create students who are self-reflexive about their own experiences, attitudes, and (in)actions regarding social justice" (p. 379).

In their second presentation, students are required to think critically about the social justice issues they have chosen and to research and analyze the larger systemic and structural contexts that produce these inequities and allow them to persist. They must provide historical context for the social justice issue, describe an existing organization that is directly involved in the fight against this injustice, and discuss a recent event connected to this issue. The act of finding, selecting, and describing a current event that directly connects to their social justice issue, through multiple news outlets, offers an opportunity for students to increase their news literacy, engage in what is happening in the world at this moment, and demonstrate to themselves and their classmates that these social justice issues are contemporary, urgent, and important. The main objective of this presentation is for students to gain stronger understandings of what advocacy looks like in a "real world" context and also to start thinking about the implications of advocacy from the perspectives of dominant and marginalized voices.

The third presentation allows students to strengthen their understanding of advocacy by utilizing a combination of credible evidence, narratives, and emotional appeals to persuade their audience members that action must be taken to disrupt the systems, structures, and behaviors that allow these social justice issues to persist. Students must offer both macro-level solutions that address structural change and micro-level solutions that any person could enact, including their classmates. The inclusion of both macro-level and micro-level solutions is important because it allows students to make connections between the actions taken by individuals and groups (e.g., protests, letter writing campaigns, voting) and structural/systemic solutions that effectuate long-lasting change. Through this persuasive presentation, students learn how to passionately and enthusiastically argue for necessary change by featuring the voices and stories of those most connected to these social injustices.

All three presentations are graded using a rubric that I designed to assess the skills required for each presentation, as well as their continued understanding, explanation, and analysis of the social justice issue at hand. I do include a final round of presentations during the last week of the semester, where students have the option to re-do any previous presentation for a chance to earn a higher grade after making changes based on my feedback and the feedback of their peers, although this option connects more to my own pedagogical philosophies than to the social justice model presented here. Additionally, throughout the semester, students engage in three ungraded "mini-presentations" that are meant to offer more opportunities for them to practice their public speaking skills in a relaxed environment. These skills include impromptu speaking, vocal variety, utilizing transitions, maintaining eye contact, and eliminating vocal fillers. Finally, there is no single textbook that I have discovered to work perfectly with this particular model. One textbook that works well is *Presentations in Everyday Life: Strategies for Effective Speaking* (Engleberg & Daly, 2009) where the authors make the distinction between presentations and public speaking, noting that students are far more likely to give presentations in their courses, careers, and outside interests than they are to give traditional public speeches. Given the amount of outside readings connected to social justice that I often assign, I typically utilize a more concise public speaking

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handbook in lieu of a full textbook [i.e., Griffin's (2011) *Invitation to Public Speaking Handbook* or Ford-Brown's (2013) *DK Speaker*].

## Continuing to Reflect on Our Pedagogy

The anticipated outcomes of an introductory public speaking course are achieved through the design and implementation of this model. Through readings and class discussions, students engage with contemporary issues that include marginalization, dominant and minoritized positionalities, and imbalances of power relations. These readings and discussions create a foundation for students to critically analyze unjust systems and structures within contemporary contexts in order to influence public discourse, which is one of the additional learning outcomes for the course. Achievement of this added learning outcome also addresses the call by Giroux and Giroux (2006) to prepare students for what it means to be critical, active citizens locally, nationally, and globally. In my assessment of this model for the past four years, when comparing the entire learning experience to ten previous years teaching the more traditional public speaking course, I find it to be effective in accomplishing the aforementioned student learning outcomes, preparing students to become more engaged citizens, and meeting the demands of a contemporary introductory-level course.

Reactions from students who have taken this course have been largely positive and often include comments about enhancing their ability to critically analyze social problems around them, increasing their awareness of issues that do not affect their own daily lives, and discovering or reinforcing their passion around a social justice issue. Not all students respond positively to this model, however, and some feedback occurs each semester surrounding the “limiting” nature of being “forced” to choose a social justice issue that they did not find either interesting or relevant to their lives. Typically, these reactions are shared during office hour visits and come from students with multiple layers of privileged identities who struggle to select a social justice issue to which they feel they can personally relate. I also recognize that instructor positionality plays a role as well as geographical location of the institution. One way I address this issue is by encouraging students to examine their daily lives, hobbies and interests, and other coursework for inspiration. For example, I frequently ask students to think about what is readily available to them by virtue of the location of their homes; this prompted one student to examine the issue of food deserts after realizing that many people live more than 5–10 miles away from grocery stores with fresh fruits and vegetables and must rely upon public transit with no available routes to take them to these grocery stores.

I find myself reflecting most often on these situations, as I continue to wonder what I might be missing or where the disconnect may lie between *my* goals of creating civically-minded, critically-thinking, globally engaged citizens and the goals of today's contemporary *students* who enter my public speaking course every semester with their own ideas of how the course will be structured. Using this model over the last four years, I have seen a slight decrease in my student evaluation scores that seems to correlate with my social justice framework. Given the recent political climate in the United States, including a poll conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which found that 55% of the 902 White U.S. Americans surveyed believe that Whites are discriminated against in society (Gonyea, 2017), and the rising use of the label “social justice warriors” as a pejorative, it is not surprising to discover that some students are increasingly resistant to what they sense as a liberalized agenda within college classrooms. Despite this resistance, I continue to teach the course using this social justice framework and hope that discussions around public speaking pedagogy will persist and thrive.

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## Conclusion

This model for teaching public speaking with a social justice framework is simply one attempt to decenter dominant norms and voices in the classroom and engage students in the process of analyzing injustices through the lens of those individuals who are most marginalized and underresourced in larger systems and structures around the world. If instructors are to heed Moon's (2010) call for critical scholars to encourage students to "unlearn" their previous notions about the world that bolster the status quo and envision alternative notions about the world that challenge it as well as Donovan and Tracy's (2017) call to create students (citizens) who engage in social justice activism beyond the classroom, more voices need to enter this dialogue and offer their own models for teaching the introductory public speaking course in a manner that supports a forward-thinking and civically engaged discipline.

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