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A BEGINNING COURSE IN PUBLIC SPEAKING FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES¹

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THE importance of beginning work in public speaking in colleges and universities is felt by all teachers of speaking, and especially by those who have had to do with the problems which this work presents. I am sure that all who have undertaken this particular task will agree that nothing in our entire field is more perplexing or presents more varied aspects that demand our earnest consideration.

An examination of beginning courses as they are now offered in various institutions, reveals a striking lack of uniformity. This is apparent in many particulars, as for instance, in the time allotted to the work, in the academic credit which it receives, and in the content of the courses offered.

When one observes these and similar phases of the situation it appears that in each institution, the beginning course as it is now offered, has in nearly every instance been shaped to meet a local need or demand, so that at the present time there are almost as many different courses as there are institutions offering them. Thus the status of the beginning work in public speaking in the colleges of the country at the present time would seem to present a situation that is little less than hopeless. And yet, in the midst of the apparent chaos which now exists, if one will take the pains to gain a closer view of the situation, one cannot fail to be impressed by the remarkable *unanimity of purpose* that is to be found in the midst of the great variety of details which appear upon the surface.

Were it possible to enter fully into a discussion of matters of credits, hours, conditions of entrance, and the various phases of the subject which naturally suggest themselves, I am sure that it would prove not only interesting, but exceedingly profitable, but since any one of these aspects is of sufficient importance to take our entire time, it seems desirable to consider only those that appear of prime importance. This paper will be limited, there-

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fore, to a consideration of the content of a beginning course in public speaking for colleges and universities, with some discussion of ways and means of accomplishing what may appear to be the desired ends of such a course.

Observing that this course, as it is now constituted, is, in nearly every instance, an outgrowth of local conditions, we may well inquire into what have been the circumstances that have given the work its present status. I think that all beginning courses may be classified roughly under three distinct heads, according to the ends which they have been shaped to achieve.

First, there is the course that is designed for students who have no intention of pursuing the study of public speaking further;

Second, the course that is designed for students who have definitely in view a further study of the subject, and who wish in this course to lay a sound foundation for the same;

Third, the course that must take care, in the best possible way that circumstances will allow, of students of both of the above classes.

Since it is with a course of the third type that I have had chiefly to do, and also, inasmuch as this is the type of course which most colleges are offering at the present time, it is the one that I shall discuss.

When we consider that most beginning courses are of comparatively recent origin, that they have taken their present form largely through force of circumstances, and that for the most part, each department has been left entirely free to work out its own salvation, is it to be wondered at that conditions are precisely as we find them at the present time?

I have said that in the midst of all of the confusion that exists in this work, there is to be found a striking unanimity of purpose. This, I am sure will appear as very much of a paradox, in view of the fact that every beginning course is different from every other. Yet we may well pause to consider this fact: recently there was published in *THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL* résumés of the beginning courses that are now being offered in some of the leading colleges of the country; no two are alike, and yet, if we compare them with reference to their several aims, there is a notable similarity. From a comparison of the work of different institutions, and from talks with a great many teachers with regard to the subject, I am led to believe that in most instances our aims are substantially the same.

So far as I have been able to observe, very few colleges have seen fit to limit their beginning work solely to the end of the mere making of extempore speeches. Practically all seem to recognize the value of stimulating the thinking, the imagination, and the powers of expression of the student by means of the interpretation of the thoughts of others, through the medium of prose or poetry, or both, and nearly all seem to be agreed also that there should be some definite instruction in the use of voice and body; instruction which will be quite as fundamental a part of a man's education in developing his personality, improving his personal address, and cultivating his powers of conversation, as well as teaching him specifically how to make a speech. Therefore, the foremost aim of such a course should be to lay a broad foundation. It should harmonize with the other factors in education in helping to develop more effective personalities and more useful citizenship. It should serve as a means of stimulating and developing the powers of the whole man. It matters little whether he is to make a public speech, give instruction in the class room, carry on the business of an office, or appear at a social function; in each and all circumstances he needs to be able to use his mind, his voice, and his body to the best advantage. In short, such a course should be as broadly educative as possible. For this reason, a course that is to serve as a real foundation should employ the means that are necessary to accomplish this larger end.

There seems to be the feeling in some quarters at the present time that the only thing necessary in a beginning course is extempore speaking. With the teachers who hold this view I must say frankly that I cannot agree. The very great value of skill in extempore address in present day life no one will deny, but with the view that it is the only thing necessary in a beginning course, I cannot agree, for I do not believe that extempore speaking serves to accomplish all that should be accomplished. The student may acquire the ability to express his own ideas before an audience with a reasonable degree of effectiveness, and yet be utterly helpless when he attempts to quote similar ideas that have been expressed by others in the form of prose or poetry, or to read effectively something from the printed page. How often have we heard the student who is able to give a fairly effective extempore speech, attempt to read or quote something, and do it in a dull, monotonous fashion, almost devoid of meaning, that shows little or no appreciation of proper emphasis, phrasing, or the general laws of expression!

If we could agree that the only thing necessary to be gained from a beginning course is skill in extempore speaking, then our problem would be simple. But if we believe that it should be something more—that it should be expression in a very much larger sense, then the problem is a very different one. There is no doubt that most students would prefer to have a course in which only extempore speaking is required. It is equally true, no doubt, that they would like to be able to pursue the study of English without having to know rhetoric, or ever having to write an English composition. The question is: Should they?

I hold that any beginning course that is to be truly fundamental; that is, one that will lay a foundation that will be of greatest ultimate benefit to the student in developing his powers in the most effective way, should be much broader than this. It should be one that will comprehend as fully as possible the means that are necessary to accomplish the two-fold end of:

First, a full and complete appreciation of that which is to be expressed, and

Second, the development of those powers of voice, of body, indeed, of the whole personality necessary to that expression.

I believe that our teachers, left free as they have been, to work out this course practically as they chose, have gone to one or the other of two extremes. There seems to be a tendency either to offer a course consisting chiefly of the theory of expression, or to omit theory almost entirely, and confine the work chiefly to drill in speech making. Either extreme I believe to be fundamentally wrong if the broader aims which we have considered are to be subserved. In the one case the student is required to learn to the minutest details, the *why* and *wherefore* of the subject, but is afforded little opportunity for gaining skill in the actual use of the principles studied; while in the other, drill and practice are emphasized at the expense of all things else, and the learner is left quite in the dark as to why he should or should not do a great many things which are highly important to effective expression.

If, then, we are to teach both the doing and the reasons for the doing, the question arises—What proportion of attention should be given, in our instruction, to the doing, and what to the reasons for the doing?

I am inclined to believe that in the past altogether too much attention has been paid to the *why* and *how* of the subject. Stu-

dents have been required to study principles altogether too much as principles, and to an extent that they have been bored by them rather than helped. Also, the principles studied have not been so correlated with their practical work that they have felt them to be of any real value as aids in expression. Here, as I see it, is our great need: First of all, to present theory and practice in the proportion that will secure maximum results, and so to correlate the two that there will be a very vital and necessary relation between them.

To this end let us consider the principle of a minimum of theory and a maximum of practice. Suppose we say that all detailed discussion of theory be eliminated from the class room; that the student be given definite and regular assignments upon principles, his preparation of which may be checked up by written reports to be handed in, or by an occasional brief test covering the essential phases of the subject under consideration, thus leaving the way open for constant and regular practice. This makes the class room of the teacher of public speaking a laboratory in which students learn to do by doing—the process going on constantly under the eye of the teacher. What mode of teaching this subject could be more effective! If the student is to read something, or deliver something, or do this or that particular thing with his voice or with his body, let him stand before the class and attempt it. If he fails, let him know wherein he fails. Show him how one thing is better to do than another; bring his information from what he has read outside to bear upon that particular point, and thus correlate his knowledge of the theory of it with his actual practice of it in a way that will bring it home as a very vital problem that is worth solving. Let him try it again and again if necessary, and help him to get the result he is working for. Let the class have a part also in working it out, and in this way make the work an intensely practical application of every principle studied.

I am more and more convinced that this is just what should be going on in the class room constantly throughout our beginning course. It should be a laboratory method from first to last—a continuous process of putting the student up to do some definite thing, working with him right on the floor before the class, encouraging, suggesting, drawing him out as can be done by the teacher in the presence of the class, I believe, better than in any other way. By this I do not mean that the student should expect to get all his practice in the class room. Indeed, he should be required to do

a good deal in the way of practice and drill outside. He should have a partner for practice, with whom he meets regularly to work out the things that have been suggested or attempted in the class room. But many students are unable to get results when working by themselves. Where one student, perhaps, may be able to take a suggestion from a teacher and work it out successfully by himself, ten will need the teacher's aid. Herein, therefore, lies the necessity for making the class room a laboratory, and likewise the opportunity for making the work of the beginning course intensely practical, without losing any of the value that is to be gained from a study of the theory of the subject. In fact, it affords the best possible means of gaining a knowledge of underlying principles, since it consists at all times of theory applied in a most practical way.

If, then, the principles to be employed are placed before the student in such a form that he is able to grasp them readily, and gain a thorough working knowledge of them outside the class room, then we are afforded our greatest opportunity for effective work.

I doubt if the time that can be devoted most profitably to principles and to practice can be expressed in terms of actual percentages, so much depends upon circumstances, such as the personnel of any given class. But I am sure that few of us who have had to do with this problem will question the truth of the statement that public speaking is about one per cent theory and ninety-nine per cent practice. If, then, our work is so arranged that the student is enabled to gain a substantial body of working principles as a foundation for all that he does, without the sacrifice of any of the time that might be devoted more profitably to gaining skill through actual practice, we shall have accomplished, it seems to me, a maximum of efficiency in the conduct of this work.

If we can agree, then, that the theory offered in this course should, insofar as possible, be reduced to a minimum and presented in a manner that will give to every principle a practical application, we have next to consider the nature of the theory to be used. On this point I believe we are supposed to be less in agreement than upon any other. Here again I think we must consider the general end which I believe we are all striving to attain—expression in the broad sense in which it has already been considered.

If the student is to gain this broader training in expression, there are certain things which he may reasonably be expected to be able to do. He should gain sufficient mastery of the laws of expression,

First, to be able to read intelligently from the printed page;
Second, to be able to quote acceptably, thoughts that have been expressed by others;

Third, to be able to give effective expression to his own thoughts.

That is, he should have training in reading, in declamation, and in extempore speaking. I do not mean to say that he can be expected to gain any great degree of perfection in these things in a course extending only throughout a single semester, but that these are the lines along which the student should work if he is to gain a broad foundation—one that will ultimately be of greatest service to him whether he continues his study of public speaking or not. I can hardly conceive of a beginning course being considered adequate, which leaves the student ignorant of phrasing, emphasis, and similar basic principles that are essential to both reading and speaking, or which fails to take into account some form of declamation, the ability to present ideas expressed in the language of another with the same facility with which he might express his own thought.

I am fully aware that there are some teachers who will at once take issue with me on this point. They will no doubt agree that the work should be conducted along lines sufficiently broad to comprehend both reading and speaking, but so far as declamation in any form is concerned—in it they find no virtue! There is no doubt that declamation has been often over-emphasized, and frequently conducted in a manner that has resulted in the worst forms of bombast, but when it is used sanely and to a proper purpose, it has certain values which are not easily obtained by other means. In the first place, it gives the student an opportunity for acquiring experience and skill in a higher form of expression than he will ever be likely to gain in beginning work by means of extempore speaking. And again, a familiarity with the splendid English of a great speech is of unquestioned value in expression.

I am aware that declamation has been so often cheapened—nay, outraged, by the use of “Spartacus to the Gladiators” and “The Midnight Ride of Jenny McNeal” that the term is rather in disfavor, but when I speak of it as a valuable aid in expression, I refer to it only as it has to do with material that is wisely chosen and properly employed. Surely the teacher who has had experience in the use of declamation must recognize that there are the widest differences in the nature of material available for this purpose. A great deal of it is so entirely foreign to the experience of the average

pupil that it should not be attempted; and again, much of it has so lost its vital nature with the passing of the years that it has no present interest. There is a great deal of material, however, that comes entirely within the comprehension and experience of the student, and that also possesses the same vital character that it had when first spoken.

What student of history or biography would not appreciate John W. Daniel's Eulogy of Robert E. Lee or Henry Watterson's analysis of the Life of Lincoln, or Beecher's Tribute to the Flag,—all speeches that make an appeal as genuine as if they were spoken but yesterday.

It is by the use of material of this kind that the student gains certain values which he does not get when his practice is confined solely to the expression of his own ideas upon current topics. By it he learns how other men have thought and felt and expressed themselves. He learns that the problem of addressing an audience of one thousand people upon an important occasion is a very different one from addressing a small group of his class mates upon a matter of fact topic, and he learns that the diction of the public speech is very different from that of the carefully prepared essay. To be sure, something of the same training is to be had from the reading of material of this kind. But when it is committed to memory and delivered well from the platform, it becomes in a certain sense the speaker's own, and gives him an opportunity for a thoroughly genuine appeal. What student can take any masterpiece of oratory, study it sympathetically, and learn to speak it well, without gaining certain definite values in the cultivation of thought, of imagination, and of the powers of expression that are not to be gained merely from the use of his own crude English—values comparable to those that are to be acquired by the student of literature from the reading of great books? I believe, therefore, that declamation has a very legitimate,—nay, shall I not say indispensable part to play in our beginning work, in helping to cultivate those higher powers which should be possessed not only by every public speaker, but also by every broadly educated person.

The question, then, with regard to the nature of the theory to be employed, must be determined by the ends that we seek to gain. If our aim is something more than merely that of acquiring skill in discussing commonplace topics, then the principles to be employed must accord with that aim. I believe that our instruction

should be sufficiently broad and basic to serve as an adequate foundation for the expressional needs of the educated person under all circumstances.

I can express my thought concretely in no better way than by speaking of the work as it is now conducted in our own institution. Let me say, however, that we make no claim of having what we regard as an ideal beginning course; indeed, it falls far short of what should constitute such a course. The fact that it is limited to two hours a week for one semester, and that a single instructor is responsible for the work of one hundred or more students, has made the realization of ideals impossible. I wish to speak merely of what we have been able to accomplish insofar as circumstances have permitted.

We start the work of our course by attacking at once the whole speech problem. No suggestion is given to the student at first as to what he should or should not do. He is assigned the duty of bringing to the class, for his first speech, some material object with which he may illustrate his talk. He is given no directions as to what it is to be, other than that it shall be something that he is interested in, and knows a good deal about, and which he thinks he can make interesting to the class. He is left entirely free to choose his own subject and the material with which he is to illustrate it, and I may say that usually the results of his first attempt at speech making are very gratifying. Almost invariably he chooses a subject in which he himself is vitally interested—one upon which he has some first hand information, and therefore is able to discuss with a great deal more enthusiasm than he is if the subject were assigned to him, or he were to select one somewhat foreign from his own interests. The speaker at once has a definite object to attain, and by means of something to handle and demonstrate, he does, unconsciously, what he would not be able to do if he were to go before the class with the thought of delivering a formal speech. For instance, the student who is very much interested in advertising will present exhibits showing the virtues of various types of advertisements, or samples of manufactured products, or models of machines or apparatus will be shown.

After attacking the work in this way, by bringing the student more or less unconsciously into the game of public speaking, we then begin to learn how certain particular things should be done. One of the first of these is the organization of speech material. I

doubt whether very much can or should be attempted in the study of speech structure in the beginning course. I think, however, that enough instruction should be given in the simple principles of speech organization to enable the student to present his ideas in an orderly manner in his extempore work. The next step is to teach him how his ideas, when properly organized, may be presented in a genuinely conversational form, and here we meet with more misconceptions with regard to what constitutes good and bad speaking than at any other point in the work. Some in every class have been high school declaimers; others have copied the style of delivery of some idolized spell-binder, and it is very hard for them to believe at first that a form of delivery based upon plain conversation could ever be effective in a public speech. We then have the task of ridding them of these preconceived notions, and teaching them to speak like sane human beings.

After having gotten our bearings by placing before the student in this way, some definite standards whereby he is able to judge under any circumstances whether a public speech is good or poor, we then proceed to teach him how to employ various means for making his expression more effective. He is taught the principles of correct control of breath for purposes of speech, the use of the voice, enunciation, platform deportment, gesture, emphasis, phrasing, voice quality, pitch values, et cetera, each principle being brought to bear upon the practical work in reading, declamation, and extempore speaking, which extends throughout the course, the aim being to lay a broad foundation for expression, and to meet, as fully as circumstances will allow, the needs of the individual student—in a word, to accomplish as best we are able, the ideals which I have attempted to set forth in this paper.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is my confession of faith with respect to the beginning course, and I offer it to you with the hope that it may be suggestive rather than dogmatic. And if it serves to lead to a discussion that will enable us to see exactly where we stand, and then to take some definite steps toward improving the present status of this work, the purpose of this paper will have been accomplished.