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THE PROBLEM OF SPEECH CONTENT

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PROFESSOR HUNT'S stimulating article in the June QUARTERLY on the problem of speech content has opened what should prove to be an interesting and valuable discussion. The indictment commonly made against courses in public speaking—that in them is taught the form, but not the substance, of speeches—would find ample support in most colleges and universities which offer speech work. The emphasis is almost everywhere placed on delivery and on the principles of speech organization. Content has largely been left to take care of itself. A common attitude among teachers of public speaking is, "It is not our task to teach economics, or sociology, or political science. We are interested primarily in teaching students to speak well, and to organize their material well." Let us grant at the outset that our *primary* interest is as stated. If it becomes our *sole* interest, public speaking is indeed a provincial field. We must recognize our responsibility to other fields of learning and to the interests of society at large if public speaking is ever to have any very advanced academic standing or to be of practical service. Professor Hunt summed up the matter when he said, "The problem of content . . . should be recognized and dealt with as an integral part of instruction in public speaking."

How to deal with the problem of content, while at the same time giving due attention to delivery and the principles of speech organization, is a question that well merits attention. In this paper, an attempt will be made to answer, in part, the following questions: "Why is attention to subject-matter necessary? How may the choice of subjects be controlled? How may the accumulation of speech-material be supervised? What methods of conducting the class will help to put emphasis on content, and stimulate interest in it?"

I. WHY IS ATTENTION TO SUBJECT-MATTER NECESSARY?

Let us consider several reasons for the importance of emphasis upon subject-matter.

In the first place, without supervision, students will choose subjects which will almost invariably be of a trivial nature. Their idea will be that almost any subject will do, so long as the formal principles of speech organization are used. I have heard speeches like these: "The arrangement of buildings on the campus," "Why freshmen should wear the class cap," "How the mocking-bird calls for its mate," "How to throw a forward pass," "What goes on in the locker room after the game?" "Go to convocation," "Do not bolt classes," "Attend the — game," etc., etc.,—and then some people wonder why public speaking is not given high academic recognition!

The second reason is that during the course of five or six speeches, each student's speechmaking efforts are scattered among five or six utterly unrelated topics. The result is that no one of them is given a great deal of thought. Naturally, the treatment is superficial. The student waits until the day before his speech, or brief, is due, and then gropes desperately around until some possible topic suggests itself. How the speech is ordinarily prepared may best be left to the imagination. Even if the subject of the speech were worthy, the preparation would be poor; and even if each speech were well prepared, the result at the end of the course would be a scatter-shot one. The student would have dealt with topics so diverse that his intellectual gain would be negligible.

So much for the selection of subjects. On the side of the actual development of topics lies a still more cogent reason for guidance in speech-material. Over-emphasis on form has led to shallow treatment of content. If any sort of reasoning or evidence is said to be good, if only it carries out this or that principle of clearness of belief or impressiveness or action, can we wonder that there is little or no effort made to find material that is of *itself* good? Can we wonder that there is no attempt to get down to bedrock and discover that which is right and true? We simply have not trained student to *think*, in any real sense. And until we do thus train them, until we realize that public speaking demands knowledge and research just as does any other subject, we do not deserve academic recogni-

tion. We are teaching elocution, no matter how much Phillips or how much psychology we may know.

It needs to be stated and restated that students can learn to apply the principles of speech organization just as well when dealing with worth-while subjects as when discussing the sort of topics mentioned above. Triviality and superficiality in content are not necessary. Our great need is to stimulate serious investigation and worth-while discussion. Public Speaking will grow in importance and value as it succeeds in meeting that need.

II. HOW MAY THE CHOICE OF SUBJECTS BE CONTROLLED?

Obviously, control of the choice of subjects is the first step in securing better subject-matter. What kind of subjects shall we permit? To escape the evils of a program which skims over all fields of knowledge, it is necessary to make a more or less arbitrary decision as to the particular branches in which speeches will be encouraged. Here the judgment and tastes of the teacher come in to a great extent, but it seems to the writer that the type of subject which has the greatest *general* interest and importance, and is most in harmony with the needs of the day, is to be found in the field of the social sciences—economics, political science, and sociology. No doubt there are many who would prefer other groups of subjects—witness Professor Hunt's excellent suggestions—but it is difficult to conceive of another group which has an equal importance to all classes of students, or which is of equal significance in connection with the various public questions of the day. Since the scope of subject-matter must perforce be limited, the limitation should be drawn with a view to the greatest good for the greatest number. And all students, in their future positions, will have, or should have, a vital contact with some one of these fields.

Admitting that there is wide room for diversity of opinion, let us, for the sake of definiteness, accept the limitation suggested above. Let us decide that our speech subjects shall be drawn from social, economic, or political sources.

Now let us assign subjects to each student—and this is the heart of the whole matter—*so that each student will discuss but one general subject during the entire course.* In other words, the student's entire energies, insofar as they are devoted to the accumulation of speech-material, are to be devoted to a serious study of but one important problem. He is to present his problem in a series

of speeches for clearness, impressiveness, belief, and action. He is thus to avoid diffusion of his efforts over a half dozen miscellaneous topics; he is to gain a reasonably thorough knowledge of one question. The practice he will get in this study will acquaint him with the methods of getting speech material and of organizing that material. More, it will give him a real insight into the question he studies.

In assigning the term subjects, the instructor may well take into account the interests and preferences of the individual students. Through a series of conferences early in the course, it should be possible to assign subjects in which the students will take a real interest. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive list, let us examine a few of the possible topics. Take the general field of Public Finance—one of broad appeal. Some of the semester subjects that might be assigned are tariff reform, sales tax, excess profits tax, property tax reform, corporation taxes, excise taxes, the budget system, the German indemnity, cancellation of allied debts, and so on. Take the field of Foreign Trade—and where can one find more fallacious popular discussion?—and we find as possible topics ship subsidies, reciprocity, ocean shipping, the St. Lawrence canal project, coöperation in export and import trade, and the like. Take the labor question, and you have the open shop, arbitration, use of the injunction, and a host of others.

The great gain from such assignments would be that each student would be definitely scheduled for special investigation in a comparatively limited field, and that in that field he would be enabled to produce some worth-while speeches.

Here is a list of term subjects, selected at random from sociology, political science, and economics. It suggests more fully the type of subjects that could be assigned:

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| 1. Open and closed shop. | 10. Social service. |
| 2. Industrial arbitration. | 11. Housing. |
| 3. Strikes in basic industries and their remedies. | 12. Religious organization and the community. |
| 4. Child labor laws. | 13. Public health. |
| 5. Women in industry. | 14. Public recreation. |
| 6. Labor unions and employers' associations. | 15. Study of some one immigration group. |
| 7. Employers' liability laws. | 16. Problems in public opinion. |
| 8. Restriction of immigration. | 17. Rural education. |
| 9. Americanization. | 18. Problems in rural sociology. |

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| 19. Problems in urban education. | 36. Russian question. |
| 20. Education, national supervision of. | 37. German reparations. |
| 21. Consumers' coöperation. (England.) | 38. Cancellation of allied debts. |
| 22. Coöperative movement. (Europe.) | 39. India's movement for independence. |
| 23. Coöperative marketing. | 40. Irish situation. |
| 24. Municipal government. | 41. League of nations. |
| 25. The coal problem. | 42. Turkish situation. |
| 26. The railroad problem. | 43. Chinese situation. |
| 27. American merchant marine. | 44. Tariff reform. |
| 28. American foreign trade. | 45. Primaries and conventions. |
| 29. St. Lawrence canal project. | 46. Unemployment. |
| 30. Excess profits tax. | 47. Regulation of trusts and corporations. |
| 31. The sales tax. | 48. Radical movements in America. |
| 32. Property tax reform. | 49. Conservation of natural resources. |
| 33. The single tax. | 50. Mexican situation, 1910-22. |
| 34. Our pan-American relations. | 51. Our intervention in Haiti and Santo-Domingo. |
| 35. Philippine question. | |

III. HOW MAY THE ACCUMULATION OF SPEECH-MATERIAL BE SUPERVISED?

Obviously the next step, after term subjects have been assigned, is to see to it that each student makes a general acquaintance with his field, that he discovers what the sources of material are, and that he decides upon the topics for his several speeches. To this end, he should arrange for two consultations, one with his public speaking instructor, and one with an instructor in the field from which his subject is drawn. He should prepare for these consultations by doing some general reading in his subject and by trying to decide what his various speech-topics might be. He might well come to consultation with a general bibliography and a provisional list of topics.

The subject of the consultation with the public speaking instructor would be to discuss his list of topics, and to arrange them in reference to the various general ends, from clearness to action. In the second consultation, the purpose would be to get a list of authoritative books on the subject involved, and to get oriented on the question as much as possible. The value of this second consultation would be great. In the writer's experience, men teaching in the social sciences have always been willing to give assistance of this kind.

To illustrate the progress a student should have made up to this time, let us suppose that he has been assigned to the subject of tariff reform. His list of speech-topics might run as follows:

<i>Subject</i>	<i>General End</i>
1. History of U. S. tariff laws	Clearness.
2. Economic purpose and effect of tariffs	Clearness.
3. The tariff burden	Impressiveness.
4. Are protective duties now justifiable?	Belief.
5. Excessive control of tariffs	Belief.
6. American valuation system	Action.
7. Reciprocity with Canada	Action.
8. The dyestuff industry and protection .	Action.
Original Consultation with—Instructor in Public Speaking.	
Second Consultation with—Instructor in Public Finance.	
Authoritative books suggested—	
<i>Taussig</i> , "The Tariff, Free Trade and Reciprocity."	
<i>Hunter</i> , "Public Finance." (Chapter on tariff.)	
<i>Adams</i> , "Finance."	
<i>Seligman</i> , "The Shifting and Incidence of Taxation."	

With such a beginning, the student might well proceed as follows:

1. Read two or three leading books in the field.
2. Read a reasonable amount of periodical literature on the general subject, and later, in preparation for the individual speeches.
3. (Requirement). Write to the appropriate governmental department, or private agency, for pamphlet material. (Pamphlet material should be insisted upon. It is often the most specific and valuable.)
4. Keep an adequate card index.
5. Hand in the brief for each speech at least a week before the speech is due. (Criticism should be especially close on the analysis of issues, and special consultations may be necessary to insure good analysis. The use of so-called "stock issues" should be prohibited.)
6. Use charts, pass around pamphlets, and make use of similar concrete material whenever possible.
7. Arrange with other students for a group rehearsal of each program. (The instructor should occasionally visit rehearsals.)

IV. METHODS OF CONDUCTING THE CLASS

We now come to the actual delivery and criticism of speeches in the classroom. We have made provision for such investigation and reading as would tend to promote thorough and competent discussion. Our final problem is how to conduct the class in order that emphasis may be put on subject-matter and interest in it aroused.

During the first few speeches, of course, much of the criticism

will deal with the technique of speech organization—on whether or not the speaker attained his general end, and how effectively he used the principles of reference to experience and cumulation. This technical criticism, however, could well be subordinated to criticism of content after the first few speeches. And even during the first speeches, the instructor might deal with the analysis of issues and students might be required to take down brief outlines of speeches.

During the latter part of the course, considerably more emphasis on content should appear. Several devices may be used to vary the method of criticism and to stimulate the interest of the class. Direct criticism by the instructor must of necessity continue to be prominent. His larger background requires that he guide the discussion more or less.

The "open forum" class has proved highly interesting. After a speaker has concluded, he remains on the platform and responds to questions from the floor. Another method is to call for two-minute impromptu speeches by volunteers. After several such speeches, the original speaker makes a three or four-minute reply.

The lively interest in these discussions, and their real value in developing student interest in public questions, cannot be overestimated. Students who at first show not the slightest interest in the questions they are required to discuss, state at the end of the term that they have gotten more real information out of public speaking than out of any other course on their program. Allowing for all exaggeration on their part, it is certain that in many cases the interest is sincere and the gain permanent. Students like the freedom of question-and-answer and impromptu discussions. Moreover, the nature of the previous preparation makes for more than superficial discussion, even in the impromptu speeches.

Somewhat apart from the actual conduct of the class in the matter of the type of periodical literature which students read. Needless to say, the average student is not acquainted with the more worthy publications dealing with public questions. His narrow background is one reason for the general superficiality of his discussions. The instructor in public speaking has an opportunity to interest his class in the more authoritative magazines, and it is an opportunity he should not neglect. If he can induce students to read regularly one or two standard periodicals, he will have done much toward fostering a vital interest in speech content.

CONCLUSION

To summarize: Instruction in speech content is necessary because of the general triviality of speech subjects and the superficial treatment usually accorded them. If each student is assigned a semester topic from the field of the social science and is guided in the accumulation of speech-material, better speeches will result. The class should be conducted in such a way as to put emphasis on content rather than on form. Whatever methods are followed, the guiding principle should be a narrow limitation of subjects and intensive study in one field. The general results of such a course should be:

1. Each student has gained a knowledge of some one public question.
2. Each student has had valuable training in investigation and analysis.
3. The class in general has gained an interest in public affairs.
4. Superficiality and scattered effort have been avoided.
5. The class has had exactly the same amount of training in speech organization and delivery as if no restrictions on subject-matter had been imposed.
6. The academic standing of public speaking has been raised.
7. The course has met its obligation to the public interest.

Such a program makes heavy demands upon the time and patience of the instructor. He must allow ample time for consultations, not only at the beginning of the course, but throughout the term. He will find it necessary to do a considerable amount of reading on current topics in order to be able to make intelligent criticisms. Finally, he may find it desirable to make, on his own initiative, a special study in some one field of the social research and investigation, and be able to speak with some authority in that field. The objection may be made that the instructor in public speaking has no time for such work, but if instruction in content is to be given a place in public speaking, there is no good reason why some teachers of the subject should not specialize in content. For those who do not care to specialize in English or psychology for their doctor's degree, the social sciences offer an inviting field. The presence of a few men who have attained distinction in economics, sociology, or political science might do much to raise the intellectual level of courses in public speaking.