

LESSON-15

YOU AS AN ETHICAL SPEAKER

We can hardly open our mouths without our words affecting others in important ways. The topics you select, the supporting materials and arguments you use, the way you structure your thoughts, and the words you choose can all have ethical consequences. When we speak of ethics we mean the moral dimension of human conduct, how we treat others and wish to be treated in return.

Because it is so important, you can't simply bottle up ethics in a chapter and then forget it. We shall return to ethics time and again as the book develops. Here we will develop two central themes: (1) *Ethics in public speaking emphasizes respect for the integrity of ideas*, and (2) *ethics in public speaking requires concern for the impact of our communication on listeners*. Listeners also must be willing to assume an important ethical role in the speaking situation. We shall examine this role in Chapter 3.

Respect for the Integrity of Ideas

Respect for the integrity of ideas means meeting the demands of responsible knowledge, carefully using communication techniques, and avoiding plagiarism.

Acquiring Responsible Knowledge. In another of his dialogues, the *Gorgias*, Plato launched an attack on the public speakers of his time. He charged that speakers, especially politicians, typically are ignorant of their subjects, but that they shamelessly parade their ignorance before the public anyway. Second, Plato charged that speakers pander to public tastes, making listeners feel satisfied with themselves when actually they should be made aware of the need for improvement.

The growing cynicism of Americans toward public affairs and politicians suggests that things haven't improved all that much in the last two thousand years. In October 1992, during the presidential campaign between George Bush and Bill Clinton, a poll conducted by *Time* magazine and CNN revealed that 63 percent of voting Americans "have little or no confidence that government leaders talk straight." "It is not a time of great faith in the spoken word.

"Great," you may be thinking. that's all I need, a skeptical audience, adding more altitude to Interference Mountain. Besides, I'm no expert on many of the subjects I'm interested in, and my listeners will know I'm not. So how can I get them to listen to me with any respect at all?"

Fortunately, you don't have to be an expert on all the topics of public life - to speak effectively and ethically about them. If you speak from responsible knowledge, your audience will listen to you with respect, especially if you are able to show listeners that they will benefit from your message.

What is responsible knowledge and what does it require of speakers? As we describe it in more detail in Chapter 5, responsible knowledge of a topic includes

- knowing the main points of concern.
- understanding what experts believe about these points.
- being aware of the most recent events or discoveries about these points.

- realizing how these points directly affect the lives of your listeners.

Responsible knowledge requires that you know more about a topic than your listeners, so that your speech has something to give them. *Responsible knowledge is adapted, useful knowledge that takes into account the needs and interests of your listeners.*

Let's consider how one of our students; Stephen Huff, gained responsible knowledge for an informative speech. Stephen knew little about earthquakes before his speech, but he did know that earthquakes were on the minds of his listeners after some recent disasters in California. He also knew that Memphis was sitting right on top of the New Madrid fault, and that this was not good news. Finally, he knew that a major earthquake research center was located at the University of Memphis.

Stephen telephoned the center and scheduled an interview with its director. During the interview, Stephen asked a series of strategic questions: Where was the New Madrid fault, and what was the history of its activity? What was the probability of a major quake in the near future in the Memphis area? How prepared was Memphis for a major quake? How extensive might damage be in the event of such a catastrophe? What could his listeners do to prepare for it? What readings would the director recommend that might shed additional light on such questions?

Notice that Stephen avoided such general questions as "what are earthquakes?" and "what makes them happen?" Such questions might well have prompted long, rambling answer that would simply have exhausted the time available for the interview. Rather, all his questions were designed to gain knowledge that would be of particular interest and value to his listeners. Armed with knowledge from the interview, Stephen was prepared to visit the library and track down the readings suggested by the director. He was well on his way to giving the good speech that appears at the end of Chapter 12. Acquiring responsible knowledge requires time and effort, but it is well rewarded when you are able to bring the gift of such knowledge to your listeners.

Carefully Using Communication Techniques. Respect for the integrity of ideas also requires that you handle the techniques of oral communication very carefully. For example, one frequently used technique is to quote respected authorities in support of your position. Used ethically, this technique helps establish the credibility of ideas by demonstrating that they are not just the dream-children of the speaker - that they are authenticated by experts. You must be careful, however, to avoid abusing this technique by quoting out of context. This unethical use of a quotation distorts its meaning. In effect, it is a form of lying and deception. *The New Yorker* describes an all-too-typical example:

When Net Gingrich's historical science-fiction novel, "1945" goes on sale this summer, potential buyers will no doubt be impressed by the ringing praise offered up for the Speaker's maiden literary effort by luminaries of Gingrich's nemesis, the establishment press. "An instant classic!" Sam Donaldson says. . . . Gingrich's publisher, Jim Bean, of Bean Books, says that he intends to build a national advertising campaign around [such] quotes. . . . Bean happily admits that the quotes "may be taken a tiny, tiny bit out of context."

... Donaldson [and others] did say these things - more or less-but, they meant to mock Gingrich, not to plug him. . . . Donaldson uttered his remarks recently on the ABC television show "Day One," and they, . . . were meant to parody particularly purple patch of Gingrichite pros the speaker's description of a "pouting sex kitten. . . sitting athwart" the hero's chest. Donaldson's quote in its entirety was _'This is an instant classic which will be draped athwart the Speaker's neck by his opponents in every election he runs in from now on.'"²¹

In more serious policy arguments, quoting out of context can produce an entirely dishonest and misleading effect. In your speeches, quote people carefully and reflect the true spirit of their meaning.

As we talk about the use of supporting materials in Chapter 6 and then again about developing evidence and proofs for persuasive speeches in Chapter 14 we shall be especially attentive to the problem of the ethical, and unethical uses of communication techniques.

Avoiding Plagiarism. Finally, respect for the integrity of ideas requires that a speech must be the original work of the speaker and must acknowledge major sources of information and ideas. *Presenting the ideas and words of others as though they were your own - without acknowledging their contribution - is called plagiarism.* While preparing to revise this textbook, we found it depressing to discover the extent of such intellectual theft in journalism, literature, scholarship, and scientific research as well as public speaking. As writer Paul Gray said in *Time*: "An author's worst dream is to be accused of plagiarism, of stealing ideas and language from someone else and parading them as original. This charge is a lightning bolt to the . . . writer's reason for being. . . ." ²²

Given the shame and ruin that come when plagiarism is discovered, why do writers and speakers do it? Perhaps it is the pressure of time, of deadlines in modern life, of the terrible temptation to "cut a few corners" in order to win recognition - or improve a grade. Whatever the answer, you should avoid plagiarism - or even the appearance of it - at all cost. Beyond the immorality of the practice, which should be reason enough to avoid it, remember that colleges and universities consider plagiarism a major infraction of the student code and impose penalties ranging from grade reduction to suspension.

So how should you avoid any hint of plagiarism? The most gross form of such theft, simply presenting someone else's speech word-for-word as though it were your own, is easy enough to avoid. On the other hand, there are more subtle forms of intellectual looting, which you can escape by observing certain rules of conduct.

You should not summarize an article from a newspaper or magazine and present it as your speech. For starters, the speech will probably not be very good, because it will not have been designed for your particular audience. Because it does not bear the stamp of your own thinking and feeling, it will not seem authentic. And because the speech is not really a part of you, it will be hard for you to present it effectively. Instead of nourishing listeners with your ideas and feelings, it will seem as though you have simply opened a can and warmed up its contents. Do not cheat yourself and disappoint an audience this way. You should also be careful about relying too much on any single source of information. Instead, gather facts and ideas *from* a variety of sources, develop

your own thinking about what they mean to you and your listeners, and present them in your own words.

You should credit the sources of ideas in your speech. When you quote someone, directly or by paraphrase, let your listeners know. Also give credit to the sources of ideas and information in your speech. Rather than simply saying:

The dean of the college of Communication at Boston University resigned after he presented a commencement address that was plagiarized.

say instead:

According to the *Boston Globe* of July 2, 1991, the dean of the College of Communication; at Boston University presented a plagiarized speech

How to avoid plagiarism

1. Never summarize a single article for a speech. You should not simply parrot other people's language and ideas.
2. Get information and ideas from a variety of sources; then combine and interpret these to create an original approach to your topic.
3. Introduce your sources as lead ins to direct quotations: " studs terkel has said that a book about work is by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as the body."
4. Identify your sources of information " according to the 1990 information please almanac, tin cans were first used as a means of preserving food in 1811," or " the latest issue of time magazine notes that..."
5. Credit the originators of ideas that you use:" john sheets, director of secondary curriculum and instruction at Duke university, suggests that there are three criteria we should apply in evaluating our high school."

at the university's commencement ceremonies_ that year. Then *on July 15, the Washington Times* confirmed that the president of the university had accepted the dean's resignation, saying "It's the duty of all respon-sible scholars and writers to credit their sources."²³

By the way, this sad story is true. To make it even worse, a reporter for the *New York Times*, when writing a story about the plagiarized speech, him-self plagiarized from the *Globe* account and was placed on suspension.

It doesn't make sense not to credit the sources of your information and -ideas. As the above example shows, citing your sources can strengthen your speech. It helps your_ ethos by demonstrating that you have carefully prepared. And it provides borrowed ethos by associating your thinking with that of respected others - experts, well-respected publications, or opinion-leaders.

Concern for Listeners

recognizing the power of communication leads ethical speakers to a gen-uine concern ,for how words affect the lives of their listeners. We conclude this chapter by introducing two

related ideas: how the “other” orientation’ of public speaking requires us to be more ethically sensitive, and how applying universal values may help us overcome the problems of audience diversity.

Developing an “Other” Orientation. Mary, in our opening story, begins her public speaking class with a great deal of concern about her personal fate. During the class, however, as she becomes more confident about her competence as a speaker, and as she comes to know and grow fond of her classmates, she increasingly designs her speeches with her audience in mind. In so doing, Mary develops an “other” orientation. Her thinking has expanded from a concern for self to a concern for her listeners. In the process she will have grown out of egocentrism, the tendency to believe that our thoughts, dreams, interests, and desires are or should be shared by others. Jakska and Pritchard, in *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis*, offer a pertinent example:”

All too often we assume that others share our enthusiasm for a certain, topic of conversation. This was once humorously brought to the attention of one of the authors of this text. After offering a lengthy explanation of the importance of egocentricity in Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, he was greeted with this response from a student. “I think I understand what egocentric thinking is. Here’s an example. You’re interested in Kohlberg. So you assume we are, too.”²⁴

The double irony here is that the moral maturation from egocentric to other-centered thinking is the direction of the process that Kohlberg describes! The discipline of the public speaking class encourages this desirable growth into an “other” orientation, and into the expansion of the self that this growth implies.

Applying Universal Values. We have already noted that the public speaking class encourages us to counter ethnocentrism, which is the group parallel to egocentrism in that it holds up our own culture as the most desirable model. We learn to respect each other’s cultures and to look through different cultural windows on the world. But this also presents us with a problem. If your class represents many cultures, each offering a different outlook, then how can you frame a speech that will communicate and appeal across these many audiences-within-an-audience?

One answer to this perplexing problem has been offered by Rushworth M. Kidder, former senior columnist for *The Christian Science Monitor* and president of the Institute for Global Ethics. In his book *Shared Values for a Troubled World*, Kidder reports interviews with leading moral representatives of many cultures that indicate the existence of a global code of ethical conduct, centering on the deeply and widely shared values of *love, truthfulness, fairness, freedom, unity, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for life*.²⁵ If Kidder is correct, appeals to these fundamental values should resonate in any culture, and should be well received across the many audiences-within-an-audience which may make up your public speaking class. We shall say more about how to effectively engage such values in Chapter 4.

IN SUMMARY

You as an Ethical Speaker. Ethical considerations in public speaking are inescapable. Ethical public speaking emphasizes respect for the integrity of ideas, and concern for the impact of communication on listeners. Respect for the integrity of ideas means meeting the demands of *responsible knowledge* carefully using communication techniques, and avoiding *plagiarism*. Responsible knowledge is useful knowledge. It requires having up-to-date information on the major points of a topic, what the most respected experts have to say about it, and how these points affect your immediate audience. Plagiarism is intellectual theft. Being convicted or even suspected of such a crime can damage your ethos beyond repair.

Concern for listeners comes as you develop an “other” orientation in your public speaking class to balance the *egocentrism*, or excessive preoccupation with the self; that you may bring to such a class. You can solve the problem of adapting to the many cultures that may be represented in your class if you base your appeals in a global code of ethics.

TERMS TO KNOW

- Interference
- Decoding process transaction transformation
- Ethics
- Responsible knowledge quoting out of context plagiarism
- Egocentrism
- Ethnocentrism
- Stereotype
- Feedback
- Speaker
- Ethos
- Listener
- Message
- Encoding process
- Medium
- Communication environment

Ethical Considerations

Presentation aids can be powerful, but they can also deceive. They can raise challenging ethical questions. For example, the most famous photograph of the Civil War, Matthew Brady, rearranged bodies on the battlefield to enhance the impact of his pictures. Eighty years later, another American war photographer carefully staged the now celebrated photograph of Marines planting the flag at Iwo Jima.²⁸ Fifty years after that, *Time* magazine electronically manipulated a cover photograph of O. J. Simpson to “darken it - and achieve a brooding, menacing quality.”²⁹ On one hand, these famous images may be fabrications: they pretend to be what they are not. On the other hand, they may bring home more forcefully the reality they represent. In other words, the form of the photos is a lie, but the lie may work to reveal a deeper truth. So are these photographs unethical or are they simply artistic?

Perhaps we can agree that with today’s modern technology, the potential for abuse looms quite large. Video editing easily produces illusions reality. Consider how a recent movie

depicts Forrest Gump shaking hands with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Or call to mind the image of ten Shaquille O'Neals playing basketball at the same time. Or picture the Statue of Liberty putting down her torch to pick up and examine an American-made car, then smiling over its quality. In movies and television ads such distortions can be amusing. In real life, they can be dangerous. Major television networks and newspapers have "staged" crashes and other visuals to make their stories more dramatic.

All these practices may relate to the ancient adage, "Seeing is believing." We are taught by tradition to be vulnerable to the "reality" revealed by our eyes. Our position on these ethical issues is the following:

- As a speaker, you should alert your listeners to the illusion whenever you manipulate images so that they reveal your message more forcefully.
- You should be prepared to defend the illusion you create as a "better representation" of some underlying truth.
- As a listener, you should cultivate a healthy skepticism for visual images: for you, seeing should no longer be the same as believing.
- Whenever important claims are made, and visual images are offered in support of them, you should ask for further confirmation and for additional evidence.

DISCUSSION

1. Look for symptoms of ethnocentrism and egocentrism among news-makers of the day. What impact do these attitudes have on events and on the ethos of those who speak in connection with them? Share your ideas in class.
2. Identify some stereotypes at work in your own thinking and in your conversations with friends. Why do these stereotypes exist? What is the result of their existence?
3. Discuss how the ethics of communication might be applied to advertising. Bring to class an example of an advertisement that you think is un-ethical and explain why.
4. What personal and social benefits are lost in societies that do not encourage the free and open exchange of ideas?
5. Do you agree that it is better to think of American culture as a "chorus" rather than as a "melting pot"? What images of American identity do you prefer, and why?

APPLICATION

1. Develop your own personal statement of commitment. What do you hope to gain from your public speaking class? Plan time during your week so that you can work to achieve these benefits.
2. The Speech Communication Association has adopted the following code of ethics concerning free expression:

Credo for Free and Responsible Communication in a Democratic Society

Recognizing the essential place of free and responsible communication in a democratic society, and recognizing the distinction between the freedoms our legal system should respect and the responsibilities our educational system

should cultivate, we the members of the Speech Communication Association endorse the following statement of principles:

We believe that freedom of speech and assembly must hold a central position among American constitutional principles, and we express our determined support for the right of peaceful expression by any communicative means available.

We support the proposition that a free society can absorb with equanimity speech which exceeds the boundaries of generally accepted beliefs and mores; that much good and little harm can ensue if we err on the side of freedom, whereas much harm and little good may follow if we err on the side of suppression.

We criticize as misguided those who believe that the justice of their cause confers license to interfere physically and coercively with the speech of others, and we condemn intimidation, whether by powerful majorities or strident minorities, which attempts to restrict free expression.

we accept the responsibility of cultivating by precept and example, in our classrooms and in our communities, enlightened uses of communication; of developing in our students a respect for precision and accuracy in communication, and for reasoning based upon evidence and a judicious discrimination among values.

We encourage our students to accept the role of well-informed and articulate citizens, to defend the communication rights of those with whom they may disagree, and to expose abuses of the communication process.

We dedicate ourselves fully to these principles, confident in the belief that reason will ultimately prevail in a free marketplace of ideas.

Working in small groups, discuss how you would adapt this credo into a code of ethics for use in your public speaking class. Each group should present the code it proposes to the class, and the class should determine a code of ethics to be used during the term.

3. Begin keeping a speech evaluation notebook in which you record comments on effective and ineffective, and ethical and unethical speeches you hear both in and out of class. As you observe speeches, ask yourself the following twelve questions:

(1) How did the speaker rate in terms of ethos? (2) Was the speech well adapted to its listeners' needs and interests? (3) Did the speech take into account the cultural complexity of its audience?

(4) Did the speech make an effective connection with universal values?

(5) Was the message clear and well structured?

(6) Did the medium pose any problems?

(7) Was the language and presentation of the speech effective?

(8) How did listeners respond, both during and after the speech?

(9) Did the communication environment have an impact?

(10) Did the speech overcome interference to achieve its goal?

(11) Did the speaker respect the integrity of ideas by developing an original speech that exhibited responsible knowledge and a careful use of communication techniques?

(12) Did the speaker-exhibit proper concern for the impact of the message on listeners?