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Ceremonial Speaking Within the Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT
As citizens we encounter ceremonial speaking occasions throughout our lives, from wedding toasts to retirement dinners to eulogies. While many textbooks offer guidelines for the various types of speaking occasions, these occasions are difficult to create within the classroom environment. Often instructors skip assigning a full ceremonial speech because of this. This activity is designed to provide students with an opportunity to practice some of the basic elements of ceremonial speaking, such as writing a thesis statement, providing supporting materials, and using magnification. Students are paired together, interview each other, and then present original award speeches to each other, thus achieving an in-class ceremonial speech that is not pretend and that creates a positive classroom environment.

Objective

To help students develop an understanding of what constitutes a well-developed ceremonial speech and to provide students with an opportunity to practice writing and delivering such a speech.

Courses

This assignment can be used in a public speaking course or a hybrid basic course where students are required to give presentations.

Rationale

As citizens we encounter ceremonial speaking occasions throughout our lives, from wedding toasts to retirement dinners to eulogies. While many textbooks offer guidelines for the various types of speaking occasions (e.g. Lucas, 2004; Osborn & Osborn, 2000; Zarefsky, 2005), these occasions are difficult to create within the classroom environment. For example, the mock wedding toast often falls flat in the public speaking classroom, since the audience is not the “real
audience” and has no idea who the bride and groom are. Often instructors skip assigning a full ceremonial speech because of this. Yet, the ceremonial speech in the form of a eulogy, wedding or retirement toast, etc. is the kind of speech most likely to be given by everyone at some point in their lives, as opposed to a formal persuasive speech, for example. This activity is designed to provide students with an opportunity to practice some of the basic elements of ceremonial speaking, while enabling them to do so without having to venture out of the classroom (where it may be difficult for the instructor to gauge their success) or having to make student audience members role-play someone other than themselves.

**Activity**

This activity requires approximately two 50-minute class periods, or portions of two class periods. The instructor provides an explanation of ceremonial speaking, which can be done on the same day or during an earlier class period, depending upon the length of the class periods. Then, students are paired up with each other. Ideally, they will be paired with another student that they do not know as well or speak to regularly during class, so that they will have to find information out about this person. I often pair students from opposite sides of the classroom. The goal in pairing them in this manner is to encourage them to do “research” on the other student (as explained below) rather than writing a speech with just their opinions about the friend they already know.

The students then are instructed to interview each other in order to come up with an “award” to present during the subsequent class period (e.g. “Most Embarrassing Moment,” “Funniest Reason to Get Fired,” “Best Mom, Sister, Brother, or Dad,” “Being a Friend when Needed”). Students are told that they should start with general questions to get to know each other, but that once a preliminary idea for the award is discovered, they need to do further probing to solicit stories, examples, and quotations from the student they are interviewing. I circulate around the room, so if pairs are having trouble generating an award, I may help them brainstorm by suggesting interview questions to ask about each other’s interests, activities, or family or by helping them take their answers and formulate them into an award name. While I do not provide final ideas for awards, I do give direction if a pair is struggling so they can move on to the heart of the activity.

The instructor should stress that speeches should still have an introduction, body, and conclusion, and that the introduction should contain a brief attention-getter, a thesis, and a preview. Generally, statements of credibility are left out of the introduction in this exercise because by this point in the semester students already know each other fairly well, the audience knows that the speaker has interviewed the other student, and any further statements of credibility would require make-believe on the part of the speaker which is counter to the purpose of the exercise.
Specifically, three concepts about ceremonial speaking are highlighted to the students:

1. **The unique nature of the thesis statement or central idea.** While the thesis in this speech may be different from other types of speeches, a ceremonial speech still has one, as opposed to the speaker merely stating what the occasion is (e.g. “I’m here today to present the Most Improved Employee award”). Instead, a better thesis illustrates why that person is receiving that award (e.g. “Jill’s hard work and dedication make her deserving of the Most Improved Employee award”).

2. **The use of supporting materials.** Unlike what students might see on television, an artfully crafted award speech does not contain just a list of accomplishments or activities. Providing an opportunity for students to come up with a particular award to give a peer provides a starting point to think about what kind of support can be used to justify why the student deserves this award. As the instructor explains the assignment, he or she should stress that a more interesting or developed ceremonial speech provides specific supporting materials, e.g. examples from that person’s life, quotations from them on their activities, quotations from others about their contributions or personality, rather than “everything the person has ever done” (Lucas, 2004, p. 467). This concept can be used to reiterate the idea that supporting materials should directly relate to and support the thesis.

3. **Magnification.** An award should stand for values (Zarefsky, 2005, p. 431). Students should be encouraged to select certain features, distinguishing the other student, and focus on those so they “characterize the subject in terms of the values they represent” (Osborn & Osborn, 2000, p. 423). Osborn and Osborn suggest that this also stresses the use of language such as metaphors, similes and parallel structure in order to achieve this magnification, so these techniques would help reinforce prior class discussions about how students might use vivid imagery and dramatic language in their speeches.

The rest of the class period is spent with students interviewing one another. If time is limited, one option is to have students exchange email addresses with each other for any follow-up questions that might arise while writing the speech. This option should only occur if both students are comfortable sharing contact information.

During the second class period, students give their speeches which they were told in the prior class period should be approximately 2-3 minutes long. Both students come up to the front of the room together and present one after the other.
Debriefing

Students are provided with written feedback from the instructor on their presentations. I generally limit this to “strengths” and “areas of improvement” rather than a more detailed list of criteria given the abbreviated length of the speech and its role as a class exercise rather than a full speech presentation. Instructors may decide whether or not to assign a grade to the speech. I allocate some homework points for this exercise, in part to ensure that students take it seriously and prepare for the presentation on the second day.

Time permitting, following all the speeches, the class can discuss what some common characteristics of better award speeches were. The instructor then may choose to draw parallels to other types of ceremonial speaking occasions and which of these characteristics may transfer over, such as how a thesis statement might be constructed for an eulogy or a speech of introduction, or how the principle of magnification might also function in a speech of introduction or an acceptance speech.

Appraisal

Students find this activity a fun and creative way to practice ceremonial speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom. Some, on their own initiative, have even made tangible certificates or objects to give as part of the award ceremony. The majority of the students do take the exercise seriously, and are willing to engage with their peers. They enjoy finding out more about each other, which further builds community in the classroom both in terms of the students who interview each other and for the entire audience who learns unique and positive characteristics about their classmates. Additionally, the exercise provides a chance to praise and be praised, which everyone likes, and which is always a bonus in building a positive classroom environment and helping students overcome communication apprehension.

References