A Course On Stage Fright

Goal: To help students manage their stage fright.

The greatest fear Americans experience next to fear of dying is the fear of public speaking.

For the past two years I have taught a workshop at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in controlling stage fright. Below are some of the ideas I shared with the students, followed by some assignments used in the workshop.

The course is called controlling the fear of public speaking, rather than conquering that fear, because you never really eliminate stage fright nor should you. Naomi Graffman writes in Horizon, September, 1981, "Stage fright is the result of the 'flight or fight' syndrome." In other words, stage fright is the result of a sudden shot of adrenalin that enables one to be able to meet the challenge of difficult situations. This is the same kind of charge experienced by athletes and musicians that causes them to be at their best, at the "cutting edge" of their ability.

Five suggestions for controlling speech tensions are in the form of the five "p's" for easy remembering. They are: pick a familiar subject on which to speak, practice frequently, picture the audience as friends, position oneself to be free from tension, and pace the rate of speaking more slowly than in previous speech experiences.

One of the best ways to control stage fright is to pick a familiar subject on which to speak. The subject that most interests the students will always be the one with which he or she is familiar. Encourage students to brainstorm on those topics they know best in an initial preparation session. They might try presenting short impromptu speeches on their two or three favorite topics to detect which is most effective. Speaking on a subject one likes will not only be more relaxing, but it is easier to locate supporting materials on a topic which is both familiar and enjoyable. An added dividend is that the audience will be more apt to be interested in the subject which the speaker finds interesting.

Practice develops confidence. Once the student has prepared a phrase outline, he or she should practice twenty or thirty minutes, six or seven times over a four-to-five day period. Be sure to caution students to practice aloud standing as if delivering the speech to the audience. If possible, at least one of the practice sessions should be in the room where the speech is to be delivered. Even if one is going to make a challenging proposal from the floor at a meeting, it will build confidence to attempt a trial run in the room where the student will do this.

Urge students to be a friend to the audience and picture them as friends. The audience members want every speaker to succeed. Every major text on speech advises the speaker to pay attention to feedback from the audience in the form of laughter, applause, intense silence, and facial expression. The speaker should use expressions of interest to bolster self-confidence.

How can one be free from tension? The speaker needs to assume a position in which tension is less apt to develop. One physical manifestation of too much adrenalin is a tendency to stiffen limbs. If the speaker can remain in the hall outside the room where the speech is to be delivered, some stretching exercises to unwind will be helpful. If the speaker is sitting in full view of an audience, he or she can still relax arms and legs as well as take a few easy breaths.

Finally, if tension occurs while delivering the talk, the speaker should pace the speech more slowly. When adrenalin shoots through our systems, we tense our inner vocal folds which create a higher pitch as they are tightened. As the pitch goes up, timing accelerates and volume increases. Conversely, if a speaker purposefully reduces the rate of speaking, the other vocal characteristics tend to become more relaxed. Michael Motley in "Taking the Terror out of Talk," Psychology Today, January 1988, also reminds us that a slower rate benefits the audience. "People in an audience," writes Motley, "have a tremendous job of information-processing to do. They need your help. Slow down, pause, and guide the audience through your talk by delineating major and minor points carefully."

One doesn't learn how to swim, type, or play a musical instrument without doing it. Students should be taught to welcome speaking opportunities. The student should start by asking for invitations to speak before small groups. Speaking more frequently during meetings at one's place of employment is a good way to start.

During the course of the workshop I ask the students to role-play situations that are fear-producing in real life such as job interviews, introducing celebrities, visiting with supervisors, and negotiating an argument between two upset people.

A speech communication class should deal with life situations. The approaches described above may be used with students particularly ill-at-ease in a speech fundamentals course, as well as in a public-address class dealing with stage fright.

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