It’s in the Bag: Connecting Storytelling to Public Speaking

Goal:

This exercise has several goals:

1. To provide students with a first opportunity to speak in front of the class helping to start reduce their anxiety.
2. To provide instructors with a first opportunity to assess the speaking skills of the students.
3. To illustrate the similarities between the important and memorable elements of public speaking and oral storytelling.

Rationale:

Students often say that they are deathly afraid of public speaking but that they have no trouble talking to others one-on-one or in small groups about everyday happenings. This exercise helps them to realize that, while different types of speaking events, both are oral performances.

Bauman (1992) states that folklore [storytelling] has its roots in social and cultural life. Walter Benjamin (1969) stated, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experiences—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.” Clearly, much the same thing is being done in the public speaking event; that is, speakers are “telling” information, testimonies, descriptions, examples, and even statistics derived by others. Bauman (1992) goes on to say that oral storytelling is a “performance event,” the major component being a responsibility to the audience for a display of communicative skill. From the audience’s perspective, the performer is judged by their relative skill and effectiveness of such performance. Instructors of public speaking and audiences of such evaluate speeches upon much of this same criteria. Oral storytelling, like public speaking, has the potential to rearrange the structure of social relations within the performance event and perhaps beyond it (Limon, 1983).

Oral storytelling is an activity situated in form, meaning and functions; public speaking is similar in this respect. Effective stories have characters, settings, a problem and some type of resolution. Additionally, the prototypic story possesses a specific type of introduction and a conclusion which brings closure to the story (Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999). Speeches also contain characters, settings, problems and resolutions, and also contain specific features to their introductions and conclusions. Effective and memorable storytelling involves vocal fluctuation, eye contact, gestures, and descriptive word choices that help to create mental images for listeners; indeed, effective and memorable speeches focus on these elements as well (eg., Lucas, 2004). While storytelling and public speaking are clearly different genres of communication events, they maintain significant similarities that can be illustrated to students in an easily understood and grasped manner.

Description:
This exercise should be completed in the beginning of the semester. Instructors bring in a bag of objects and place the bag in front of the room. Students are told that they need to reach into the bag (without peeking!) and select an object. They then must tell a two to three minute story in which this object plays a role. Discussion of these stories can take place after each story or at the conclusion of all stories. The discussion should focus on what was good about the story (humor, plot, descriptions, relevance to audience, method of delivery, etc.) and relate those elements to how they will also function effectively in the public speaking format.

**Explanation:**

Instructors use the ideas generated by students regarding what they thought was memorable about the stories and illustrate how those elements are connected to the same types of elements used in public speaking. (See Rationale above)

**Typical Results:**

Students enjoy this activity because it is a non-threatening chance for them to begin practicing speaking in front of an audience. Many of the stories are humorous and students like that. The objects are incorporated into the stories quite effectively at times, but other times, it is a definite stretch. This provides instructors with a great opportunity to bring up using visual aids and how the aid should do just that and not be merely used to satisfy a requirement. Students are generally very clear about their likes and dislikes with regard to the stories, and their likes are usually clearly connected to the concepts of effective public speaking that we will be discussing throughout the semester.

**Bibliography:**


