

SPEAKING FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLS

PUBLIC SPEAKING IN SCARSDALE

by Paul Schwarz

"I never took a course like this until I got to college!" "I'm terrified to do what you've got my twelve-year-old doing." "I wish I'd had a class like this when I was in school."

These are routine reactions from people who hear about or visit the public speaking classroom at Scarsdale Middle School. Though we take it for granted, we're often reminded that our students are getting something special.

Speech for All

We decided about thirteen years ago that skill in public speaking was important enough that every student in our school ought to take a speech course. We are a modern middle school, with three "houses", each with teams of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, roughly 90 students on a team. Each of these teams comes to my classroom in place of their regular English class for three weeks. (This, incidentally, frees the English teacher for many other projects, chiefly interdisciplinary team teaching units.) The result is that every student takes a mini-course in speech in each of the three years.

I've made a normal classroom as different as possible, with a podium, a lectern, and arena seating. I work for a balance between a relaxed atmosphere, to reduce stagefright, and the formality of a real speaking situation. To that end, I utilize "theater games" and improvisation, leading students to the podium in stages.

My chief goal is to make students comfortable with extemporaneous style speech, using careful preparation and practice, and minimal notes. Early assignments are as short

as 30-60 seconds, allowing for 100% participation in a period. The longest assignments are no more than three to five minutes.

The room is fully wired for video, so that everything can be taped. Shorter work gets "instant replay" and critique. With longer presentations, a second VCR gives the speaker a personal tape for self-evaluation at home.

Students learn the vital role of the audience: to respect, support, and applaud one another. They take an increasing role in peer evaluation, at first informal, later written. My own evaluations of the longer speeches are on a printed form, rating specific qualities of content and delivery, and avoiding letter grades. I work on positive reinforcement of each speaker.

I work with student on the all-important delivery techniques: voice level, energy, eye contact, body language. Here the use of videotape is vital. Often a short speech can be done and reviewed twice in a period.

If I were to condense my approach to five key points, they would be these:

1. **Outline your speech.** Don't write! Don't read! Don't memorize!
2. **Rehearse** - and use note cards with key words. Practice with props and visual aids.
3. **Begin and end well** - it's half the speech!
4. **Speak directly to your audience.** Speak conversationally, as you would to friends.
5. **Speak with energy and**

enthusiasm. Use plenty of physical movement and gesture.

I use a sequence of the classic speech forms. Sixth graders do several short speeches. Their most formal assignment is a one to two-minute speech to introduce an honored "guest" - a classmate.

Seventh graders, after a couple of short warm-ups, do speeches of experience and demonstration, in the first choosing a significant event, in the second devising their own topics, from braiding hair to caring for a pet lizard to playing the trumpet.

Eighth graders deliver an informative speech, in a unit which includes library research and formal outlining. Topics are randomly assigned. I precede it with a round or two of impromptu speeches, and suggest that this is no more than another game: A good speaker, I insist, can make a speech about anything!

There is nothing revolutionary in any of this. Our innovation is in giving this program to all students who go through the district, and giving it to them in the middle school.

Speech Contest

For three weeks each spring, my program and all regular English is suspended, and the annual Speech Contest takes center stage. Here we have instituted a classic contest with five categories. The innovation once again is that we've made it part of the basic curriculum. For three weeks every seventh and eighth-grade English class takes up our Integrated Speech Unit. In the weeks preceding the contest every student must choose one category, prepare a presentation, and deliver

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it in English class. The contest itself follows, and is optional. Nearly one-half of the students, almost three hundred, go on to enter the contest.

Students choose Original Oratory, Dramatic Interpretation, Poetic Interpretation, Humorous Presentation, or Personal Experience. Because every student has labored through all the stages of preparation, there is a marvelous enthusiasm in the student body when the winners finally deliver their speeches in an assembly.

Preliminary rounds of the contest place six or seven students in a room with two or three judges. This has involved up to 100 members of the community, including parents, school board members, interested civic leaders, and has, needless to say, given the program a rather high visibility in the community. Follow-up reports in the local paper and on the cable channel further raise the level of consciousness about what our middle school students are doing. The contest has really become a defining event for the school.

Our students have taken to the unit with great spirit and enthusiasm. Whether or

not they enter the contest, the fact that they are all engaged in the same project in¹ their English class for three weeks lends a great cooperative feeling to the work that each is doing. They rehearse together, encourage one another, and, as with a marathon, most enter for the thrill of participating and completing the event. All contestants receive the judges' written critiques, which are invariably supportive and encouraging.

Emphasis on Speech

In short, Scarsdale has decided to give great emphasis to speech in the middle school curriculum. We have put in place a sequential program giving each student formal instruction and experience in public speaking. Our students learn that they can do it; that solid preparation, practice, and practical experience will help them overcome normal fears, and that being in front of an audience can even be fun!

Yes, our students go on to Scarsdale High School, where there is a debate club and a debate team. So a small percentage will do a great deal of what *Rostrum's* readers are quite familiar with. To me, however, it is far more significant that every student who goes through the Scarsdale Schools is given, in middle school, a grounding in those basic public speaking skills which are virtually a requirement for success in later life. The carry-over is seen in other classes, in the high school, and elsewhere. This fall, a group of our students gave a presentation at a nearby corporate headquarters, explaining a project using computers and the internet in the classroom. The audience of corporate executives and educational administrators were amazed, not only with the project, but with the ability of these students to speak to such an audience. No one here was surprised!

We think we've developed

a great program. Students, parents, and administration agree. We hope what we've done can serve as a model for other middle schools in communities around the country.

(Paul Schwarz, a member of the NJFL Advisory Board, teaches at Scarsdale Middle School.)

