
The Audience

The second critical element in our model of communication is an audience. Without an audience of others gathered for the purpose of listening to the presentation, a speaker can certainly give a speech but we would refer to the performance as intrapersonal communication – i.e. speaking to oneself. (Intra=within)

For the speaker, an audience has two dimensions: the first dimension is how the speech should be constructed and performed by the speaker to meet audience needs. The second dimension is whether the audience knows its collective responsibility to the speaker and will respond appropriately from the speaker's perspective. An effective speaker will cast their rhetorical net as widely as possible to capture the largest possible potential audience. An effective speaker manages to strike an identifying chord in the minds and hearts of as many members of the audience as is possible. And a responsible audience helps the speaker by listening actively and engaging in the speech process.

Audience Analysis

A good speaker finds out as much as possible about the audience. In the classroom, it's obvious that the audience values education. Students in college classrooms are not required by law to attend school, so they've made a choice to enroll. In addition, there are even research results showing that college students are often on limited incomes, have part-time jobs, are likely to be living away from home for the first time, or conversely, have families and outside pressures. Topics of interest to a college audience might include scholarship opportunities, strategies for making better grades, and information on the professional job market. But college students represent a variety of ages and religious beliefs and income levels and personal experiences. How can a speaker even begin to figure out how to reach such a diverse group of people with a speech that is meaningful to everyone?

Demographics

Through research, a speaker can find out what is interesting to people who fall into different groups. This is called demographics – information about people that can be counted and reported statistically. These include age, income level, number of college degrees, sex, race, religion, and just

about anything else that can be categorized. For example, the entertainment media depends on reports from viewers to find out who is tuning in to television shows. In addition to keeping a log of what they watch on television, viewers have to report their age, their income level, their home address, and other information that allows the rating companies to group responses. Television stations can sell advertising to those companies hoping to match the viewer demographics. Take the Super Bowl, which draws a huge audience and created the opportunity for the station to charge \$2.4 million per 30-second slot in 2005. Advertisers knew who would be watching and which segment of the viewer public had disposable income, so ads targeted those audiences.

In addition to information about individuals, a speaker should have some idea of the sorts of group affiliations that might influence audience thinking. In the rural South, most speakers can assume that audience members will have strong religious views. The U.S. Census asks for this sort of information, so the speaker could even double-check to find out how large a percentage of the audience claims a church affiliation. In the past, the South has been strongly Democratic politically but that may be changing. Again, the speaker can check census data to find out how groups of people are making political decisions.

Finally, a speaker should have a good idea of the social and cultural backgrounds of people who will be sitting in audience. What sorts of job might they have? What kinds of leisure pursuits might be popular? What is important in the daily lives of your listeners? All of these questions can be answered generally by checking polls and looking at government data, reading the local paper and listening to local radio stations. The speaker wants to cast a wide net in capturing information about what is important to the audience. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to find a topic that will meet many of the audience's needs.

Attitudes and Values

More difficult to measure is what people believe. Demographics can give us some idea of whether people have religious affiliations, but what this means is open to interpretation. Attitudes are feelings unique to individuals – what we like, approve of, or care about. We've learned our attitudes over time either from personal experience or through enculturation. Someone who has been bitten by a dog is going to have negative feelings toward dogs in general. In fact, that person will avoid dogs which means that attitudes can influence our actions. We can even learn to

react in a predictable manner through cultural pressure even without direct personal experience. If we've been taught by friends and family that snails aren't good to eat, then our reaction to *escargots* on a fancy menu may be negative. No matter how tasty, our attitude toward a plate of snails is to avoid them. Attitude=action.

Attitudes, though, can be shifted. They are learned through experience and story-telling, so they can be modified with different information and illustrations of different experiences. For example, someone terrified of dogs might think differently about the "sniffer" dogs that searched for human remains of the Twin Towers in New York City after 9/11. These dogs were clearly well-behaved and helping people. If the fearful member of the audience can accept that some dogs are not scary, there has been attitude shift. This doesn't mean that the speaker expects to shift audience attitude so profoundly that everyone rushes out of the classroom to adopt a dog. All the speaker wants is common experience with which the audience can agree.

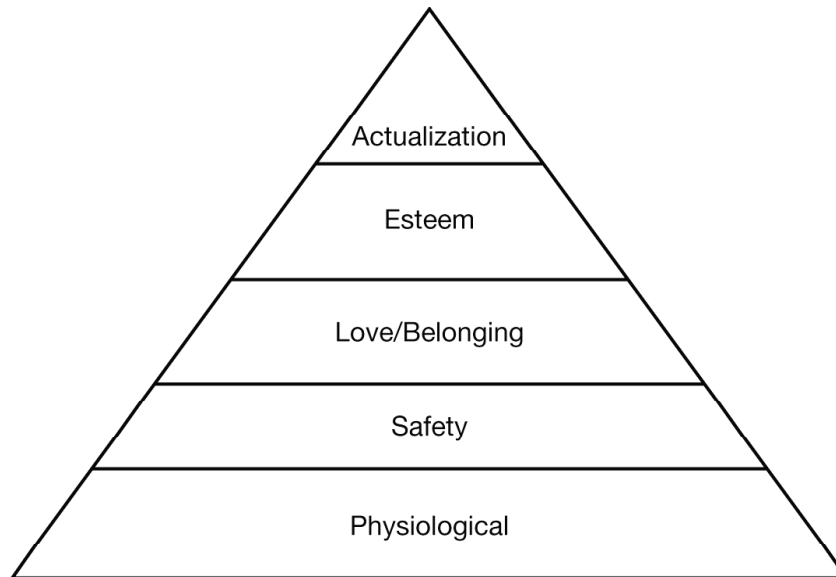
Attitudes are seldom reflective, meaning that audience members may not have thought about why they feel the way they feel. Once some thought is given to one's attitudes, they may shift on their own. They are merely predispositions to act, or react, in some predetermined

manner. More complex are values which are composed of groups of attitudes. Our values reflect our judgments and interpretations of the world around us. These values, which are also learned, are difficult to quantify and even more difficult to change. In fact, they may even be in conflict with some individual attitudes.

For example, every member of the class may think that education is important. Why? Getting a college education is a value made up of various individual attitudes toward prestige, potential income, family pressure, or simply because a loved one decided to come to college and the classroom is a way to spend time together. If a member of the audience is predisposed to react with feelings of lowered esteem when interacting with college graduates, then a college degree has significant value beyond becoming better educated and qualified for a better job.

A speaker should try to meet a variety of audience attitudes when preparing a presentation simply because there will be many different reasons for audience members to agree with the speaker's analysis. One way for the speaker to target those attitudes is to plan for arguments that motivate the audience to agree and take action. One way to think

about motivation is by using Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.⁵



The idea is that each person operates as a complex emotional organism with needs that are motivated by a variety of factors. At all times, humans must satisfy their physiological needs as these are both the basis of life and of the pyramid. Food, shelter, clean water, clean air – everything that it takes to sustain life falls into this category. At various times during the day, physiological needs can overtake even the wealthiest, best fed, most loved human being simply because we are living organisms. The skilled speaker always relates some part of the speech to meeting these needs. An audience

⁵ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

that is not hungry or thirsty or tired or homeless will always have some concerns about securing or keeping safe their access to basic needs. These are always related. Locking your car and keeping your backpack close at hand are security issues only because if you lose your car, your ability to replace it AND still get to work, pay your rent, and buy groceries may be impossible. You would have to choose. If you lose your backpack, your ability to replace textbooks, get information to replace lost notes, and re-write an entire term paper that was on the CD tucked into a pocket of your backpack is compromised. The cost of replacing the textbooks might wipe out your ability to pay rent. But without the textbooks, you may have to drop out of school, lose your student loan, and get a minimum-wage job that will drive you further into debt. It's not just keeping the backpack safe – it's about what the backpack represents on the hierarchy.

When audience members feel comfortable with their access to security and basic needs, they can make decisions about their actions based on somewhat more complex needs. The human need to be loved and to belong motivate individuals to join clubs, buy brand-name clothing, give gifts, and root for sports teams. Students in a general education speech classroom belong to a vast sub-culture of college

undergraduates. Some students are so proud of their school affiliation that they wear the school mascot on their shirts and buy notebooks emblazoned with the name of the school.

How do the folks in the bookstore know how many sweatshirts to stock? They have a good idea of whether their “audience” has enough disposable income to meet physiological and safety needs with enough left over to spend on items that reflect their choices.

Even further up the pyramid are esteem needs which are motives driving people to do more than just belong to an organization or a group. People who run for office or go to graduate school or work hard to excel in their fields are seeking recognition and success and respect. Speakers urging an audience to run for student government office or to spearhead a campus blood drive must be certain that all of the lower level motivators are satisfied, then provide good reasons for the audience members to move beyond belonging. Notice that the pyramid gets narrower as we move upward. This would reflect the shrinking number of potential audience members who might respond to appeals at the fourth level; this might explain why so few people decide to run for political office or take risks that might compromise their group status.

The top part of the pyramid, self-actualization, is almost unrelated to the rest of the motivational levels. At this level, audience members might sacrifice basic needs for a principle. For example, Bobby Sands, a member of the Irish Republican Army, died of self-imposed starvation in prison on May 5, 1981. To make a political statement, he went on a hunger strike and died. He believed so strongly in the principles of the IRA that he was willing to die for them; no outside motivation could dissuade him. However, it is unlikely that the average college speaker will run into an entire audience operating at the top of the pyramid. And it's also important to note that no speaker will ever be equally successful with every member of the audience. The speaker's task is to give the audience every opportunity to identify with the topic – to find common ground – and to make a decision about whether to agree with the speaker by the conclusion.

Analysis or Stereotyping?

Audience analysis is a form of stereotyping. To group any person based on general characteristics with others, and to speak to their needs as a group, is to stereotype. And it's impossible to craft an effective speech without doing

this sort of grouping. Otherwise, the speaker would have to engage each member of the audience in conversation, learn all about the individual, then create a message for each person. We expect to be stereotyped as consumers, as family members, as co-religionists, as Americans. What we object to is being assigned negative characteristics as part of a group and denied access to preferred groups or esteem positions.

Negative stereotyping assumes that one group is better than another or that we can have rigid expectations of any one person who is a member of some group. Stereotyping college students as hard-drinking members of Greek organizations who are irresponsible and dangerous is negative. This would presume that non-Greek undergraduates don't engage in the same behaviors or that Greek organizations are bad. Both conclusions are wrong; neither conclusion can stand up to analysis. A speaker who uses words like "all" or "every" is generalizing and probably stereotyping. "All" college students do not drink to excess. However, research does show that binge drinking among college students is increasing to dangerous levels. See the difference? One assumes a stereotype – any and all college students are heavy drinkers and therefore "bad". The other assumes that there is a problem afflicting some college students that might be a problem for everyone. That's not a

stereotype, but it is a discussion about a group of people who fit a demographic.

Perception

How does a speaker get the audience to see themselves differently? To think about and change their attitudes? To agree with his or her contentions?

We all interpret what we see and hear based on our perceptions. We choose among stimuli and decide what is important even if we're not aware of the process. The speaker reinterprets the topic for the audience, giving good reasons for thinking differently and feeling differently. The perception process has three steps: selection, organization, and interpretation. As receivers of stimuli, we have to choose what to see or hear or taste or smell or touch. Since there are sensory stimuli around us at all times, we'd be immobilized if we had to make a conscious choice about whether to attend to each stimulus. Instead, we subconsciously attend to what is important. Anything that stands out against the usual background of noise or color will "grab" our attention. In the workplace, the hum of doors electronically opening and closing, the buzz of telephones ringing, and the whirring sound of the elevator recede into

the background. And in the classroom, the noise of a window air conditioner recedes from our consciousness as we focus on the student presentation at the front of the room.

We select the aural stimulus of the student presentation from among all of the sounds in the public speaking classroom unless there is a sharp interruption of a cell phone ring tone or something heavy being dropped on the floor. As the speech progresses, we organize what we hear into what we already know or agree with. The analogy is that we sort incoming information into existing files to help us understand or interpret the meaning. Interpretation allows us to claim the new information and make it part of our ever-evolving reality.

If the speaker is wearing a piece of unusual clothing, that visual stimulus would be selected by the viewer, organized into the category of “strange clothing” and interpreted as clothing worn by a speaker who either doesn’t know how to dress appropriately for a graded speech or clothing that is totally outstanding. It’s all in the interpretation of the receiver. A speaker who is urging an audience to agree that donating blood is a great community service activity may be unable to get past audience perception where blood donation is organized into the category of medical procedures involving large, painful

needles. The interpretation would be that community service is not worth the pain and fear involved in the process.

Attitudes and values play into perception. If the audience agrees that helping others is a cultural value, individual attitudes toward donating blood might get in the way of enacting the value. The speaker might want to provide more than one way to assist with a blood drive to meet both attitudes: urging those who are able to donate and those who are squeamish to hand out cookies and juice. Both groups can agree that blood is needed, both can agree to donate time and effort, but individual attitudes toward needles can be respected.

Perception relies on the senses, so any interference with sensory perception will challenge the speaker to make better use of the remaining senses. Problems with visual acuity and hearing loss in particular will impact on how an audience member makes sense of the presentation.

Whenever possible, the speaker should check the room for visual obstructions or “dead areas” where sound doesn’t carry. If using electronic equipment, it is imperative that the speaker make sure that the equipment does not interfere with the speech process.

Theorist I.A. Richards explains that words have different meanings to different people.⁶ Richards wrote that a word can symbolize different real images or emotions or sensory reactions just as though the word were the object, itself. An example would be how the word “dog” elicits a reaction in the listener as though there were an actual four-legged furry creature in the room. The perceptual process kicks in when the individual uses as a *referent* their personal experience of “dog”; a large part of the perception process is what an audience member chooses to select about the message based on their prior experience. There is no dog in the room and the word “dog” only has meaning depending upon how the audience works through the organizing and interpretation process. Therefore, a speaker who wishes to have the audience react in a positive manner toward the work done by cadaver or rescue dogs will have to make clear early in the speech that these are special dogs and require a special kind of perception.

Listening

The audience has a specialized role in public speaking. The audience is responsible for attending or

⁶ I. A. Richards and Ann E. Berthoff. *Richards on Rhetoric : I.A. Richards: Selected Essays*. 1990. New York: Oxford University Press.

paying close attention to the speaker's message. The audience is expected to react to the speaker's ideas and proposals and contentions without interrupting the message or taking on the role of speaker. To do this effectively, audience members should be prepared to listen actively.

Listening is different from hearing. Hearing is a physiological activity that happens when air hits the eardrum and sets up a physical reaction throughout the middle and inner ear. Unless an individual has a physical impairment that impedes the progress of the vibrations set up by air striking the eardrum, hearing simply occurs just like other senses such as taste and smell.

Listening is choosing from among the sounds one hears, selecting those that one chooses to perceive. This is the discrimination phase. Active listening is deliberately making sense of the incoming messages and creating new meaning from those messages. These steps would include comprehending the words and content of the message, critically examining the speaker's evidence and conclusions, then constructing new meanings for oneself based on the information shared by the speaker. Active listening is work. It can actually make the listener tired after any sustained period of paying close attention.

Active listening requires a listener to be aware of the perception process and to make deliberate choices about their attitudes and interpretations of incoming information. The active listener works to control emotional responses to topics with which they might not agree and to keep an open mind about speaker credibility and the topic being presented. The active listener should be critical of the incoming information and fully aware his or her reaction to the information, analyzing the presentation for credibility, logic, sense-making, and clarity of purpose. A good speech might not match any of the listener's attitudes or values, but it can certainly inform the audience about how someone can rationalize or defend a stand different from their own.

Because most college students have not been taught to listen actively as a key element of a basic K-12 education, it's likely that most students have developed some bad habits that interfere with critical and constructive listening. First, the word "critical" must be understood to mean "evaluate" or "analyze" instead of the more popular definition of "finding fault". A critical analysis may focus entirely on the strengths of the speech, for example. Evaluation assumes that the listener can compare this speech with similar speeches; evaluation assumes a comparison between two or more items,

so it's important to pay close attention in all speaking situations and practice comparing one speaker to another.

The speaker must assist the listener by repeating key points, explaining through both example and narrative the important points, and using language that is colorful and precise. This assumes an active partnership between the speaker and the listener.

Communication Barriers

The most common barrier to effective communication is the inability of the audience to hear the speaker. If there is other noise in the room, or if the room is large and the speaker cannot project their voice, or if there is anything that gets in the way of the speaker's word reaching the listeners' ears unimpeded, then hearing becomes a problem. The speaker should always check the room prior to a presentation to make sure that audio equipment is available and working, if necessary; to turn off any noisy machinery or to be ready to adapt a louder delivery if the noise cannot be silenced. Finally, how a speaker actually "articulates" their words – forms and pronounces the sounds that we recognize as speech – is a form of noise. If the audience is distracted by an "L-W" substitution like Elmer Fudd of cartoon fame for

example, then there may be interference with receiving the message. A “wascally wabbit” gets a laugh from the cartoon audience, but can be a significant barrier to getting a job or closing a business deal.

Noise is a concept in speech that goes beyond sound created in the background. Noise refers to anything that gets in the way of effective communication. If the speaker has purple hair and that’s a distraction to any member of the audience, then the purple hair counts as “noise.” A speaker who fumbles with their notes, a member of the audience who blocks a view of the speaker, an overwhelming odor in the room – absolutely anything that gets in the way of active listening is noise. A skillful listener can, with practice, ignore much of the noise but it takes practice to develop that skill.

Poor listening habits create another barrier. Audience members may have developed bad habits such as jumping to conclusions or listening for individual facts instead of main points; pretending to pay attention by nodding at inappropriate times as though agreeing with the speaker or expecting all speeches to be entertaining and easy to understand. Some words or topics are laden with emotional meaning for some members of the audience. No matter how benign the speaker’s intention, those audience members will

have stopped listening to the message because of emotional interference.

Attitudes and values can become barriers if the message violates fundamental beliefs of the audience. Abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia – all of these topics are wrapped in values that trigger intense reactions from audience members who agree or disagree with the speaker’s stance.

A poorly prepared speech can also be a communication barrier. That’s why listening is a cooperative venture between the speaker and the listener. The audience members essentially agree to pay attention to the speech, sit respectfully and attentively while practicing their active listening skills, and avoid interrupting the speaker or creating “noise” that will interfere with listening. The speaker agrees to create a message that assists the audience to listen effectively with good organization, solid research, respect and attention to the attitudes and values that define the audience, a comprehensible delivery, and language that does not unnecessarily trigger emotional reactions that interfere with listening.