The Classroom as a Learning organization:
Focus on Feedback Revisited

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Increasingly, post-secondary educators have recognized the value of, indeed, the need for students to have "hands on" experience. At my institution I conceive the public speaking classroom as a "learning laboratory" where we have an "exploratory attitude," that is, where students discover their own individual strengths and discover, usually by trial and error, how best to gain and maintain the interest of the class. The purpose of this paper is to show how I have combined the conceptual model of the interaction between speaker and audience using a system dynamics approach and recent literature on learning organizations to redesign my public speaking courses.

Course objectives in the learning laboratory

Like the learning laboratory discussed by Bakken et al., we use "context setting, conceptualization, experimentation, and reflection" (247) to encourage each student to: 1. know how to control state fright; 2. know how to choose a topic and mode of presentation appropriate to the audience; 3. practice the principles of effective planning and delivery of individual extemporaneous speeches and collaborative participation in panel discussions.
Note: An extemporaneous speech, unlike an impromptu speech, which is delivered on the spur of the moment, or a manuscript speech, which is read from note cards, is a prepared speech requiring research, the use of visual aids, and is delivered in a conversational manner.

As a facilitator or "enabler" (rather than a 'professor') I encourage students to: measure their own progress by analyzing and reflecting on (writing a written critique) of their speeches, all of which are videotaped; evaluate the progress, strengths and weaknesses of classmates; be responsible for time management so that each individual has enough time to present seven speeches, two of which are part of a three member panel that explores in depth a controversial issue such as violence in the media, or the danger of cults.

A conceptual model of public speaking based on system dynamics

Back in 1984 at the System Dynamics Conference in Oslo Norway, I argued that the interaction between the speaker and his audience is a subject requiring a dynamic method of analysis, namely systems dynamics. Working with Prof. Willard Fey, I sketched the feedback loops connecting the speaker's emotional energy—his mastery of stagefright and present of mind – to his ability to perceive and respond to the audience's interest during the actual presentation.

After 16 years of teaching public speaking at an undergraduate business school, I have refined the course, so that the public speaking class serves as a Learning Organization where students set

and define their own goals and measure their own progress by analyzing their videotaped speeches (they are all videotaped) and the progress of their classmates.

As the speaker learns from his own experience, and from observing his classmates, what happens between the speaker and the audience during the presentation, he learns better how to forecast audience interest, and how to prepare the content and delivery of the presentation.

Collaboration with 2 or 3 other students is required for 2 of the 7 presentations required of each student in a 16-week semester. For the collaborative presentations the group share a grade, motivating them to help each other do their best work.

Students see notable improvements in the quality of their presentations after about 9 weeks, and by the sixteenth week it is clear to everyone that the overall quality of their presentations is vastly superior to those of the first weeks of the term.

Causal loop diagrams and focus on feedback

To be effective, the speaker must be able to observe his performance, compare his goals with his results, and use the information to modify his performance in process, as well as to guide his future speeches. Successful speakers are skillful in gauging the audience's interest and degree of understanding of his message. They are also skillful in modifying the content and mode of delivery of their speeches (as for example by eliminating some points or simplifying explanations, or speaking louder or more slowly) in response to environmental conditions and to the response of their audience.

My approach, using causal feedback loops, can be used to improve almost any informative presentation; explicating new techniques or ideas of fellow professionals; explaining technical problems or processes to clients; or presenting an organization's policy in order to win the support of the community.

Description of diagram of control loops during presentation

The diagram, Fig. 1, is based on the idea that the key dynamic variable in a speech is the speaker's total performance quality at each instant of the speech, the complex combination of what is being presented (content quality) at that time, how it is being presented (eye contact, posture, voice quality, inflection, visual aids, etc. called "presentation quality") and "life," (the energy quality at that time. The variation of this total performance quality throughout the speech produces the dynamic pattern.

The content quality, presentation quality and "life" are determined by three kinds of factors. these are 1. the speaker's skills and experience (which are constant during the speech, but develop from speech to speech; 2. preparations and plans for the speech, and 3. dynamic factors that change during the speech and are related to the speaker's emotions and conscious (rational) control of content and presentation style. The speaker's emotions and conscious controls are influenced by his perception of how well the speech is going based on his evaluation of his performance quality and his perception of the audience's reaction. However, the ability to

perceive and to evaluate is influenced by the speaker's emotional state. These relationships create the feedback loops which operate throughout the speech.
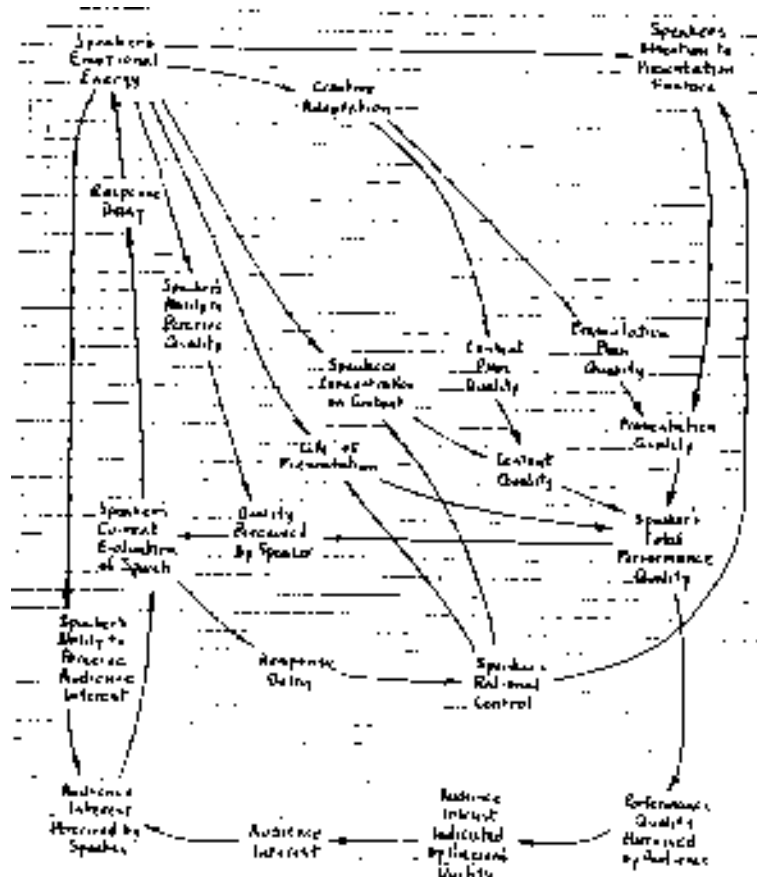

Figure 1. Diagram of Technical Presentation Control Loops

The operation of the loops causes the variables (for ex., speaker's concentration on content, or speaker's emotional energy) to change over time and create the patterns mentioned above. thus a declining trend in performance could be caused by the emotional loops (positive loops which tend to reinforce any trend once started), or by a plan that has used interesting material at the beginning, but failed to carry the audience's interest through to the end of the speech.

Conclusion

The application of system dynamics to the interaction of the speaker and his audience has resulted in a conceptual model that has helped me to redesign my public speaking course, and overcome my frustration with the inadequacies of models—generally linear—that are found in communication textbooks. the "textbook" for my course is the student's videotape of all presentations, along with the comments of the instructor and classmates on each performance, and the detailed, reflective essays the student writes on his speeches and those of his classmates

at mid-semester and as a final exam. A dozen or so public speaking textbook is are on reserve, and must be consulted and referenced in the assigned reflective essays. Using system dynamics as a lens to view the dynamics in the classroom has helped me find better ways to decrease speakers' anxiety—a major issue- and made public speaking more fun to teach and a better learning experience for may students.

References

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