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Joshua N. Westwick

South Dakota State University, joshua.westwick@sdstate.edu

Kelli J. Chromey

North Dakota State University--Fargo, keli.chromey@ndsu.edu

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Exploring the Canons of Rhetoric through Phil Davison's Campaign Stump Speech

Joshua N. Westwick¹⁰

Assistant Professor
South Dakota State University
Joshua.Westwick@sdstate.edu

Kelli J. Chromey

Doctoral Student
North Dakota State University
kelli.chromey@ndsu.edu

Abstract

A common learning objective of many communication courses centers on speech criticism and evaluation, and the classic canons of rhetoric (invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery of the speaker) have been used to help communication students achieve these learning outcomes. This teaching activity provides a creative and meaningful way to explore the canons of rhetoric—through assigning students to perform critical evaluation of a popularized YouTube video, the campaign stump speech of Stark County, Ohio, treasurer candidate Phil Davison. Students have responded favorably to the activity and demonstrated an increased awareness and understanding of the rhetorical canons and their use in speech criticism/evaluation.

Courses

This instructional activity was designed for a basic public speaking course based on the classical frame of public speaking. However, the activity could also be utilized in Human Communication, Public Speaking, Argumentation and Debate, and Rhetorical Studies.

Student Learning Outcomes

- To increase students' understanding and awareness of the canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.
- To apply the basic principles of the canons of rhetoric to critique a public speaking presentation.

¹⁰ Joshua N. Westwick, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Theatre and Director of the Basic Communication Course at South Dakota State University. In addition to teaching the basic course, he teaches General Communication, Small Group Communication, and Instructional Methods. His research interests include instructional communication, communication apprehension, and the basic course. His research has been published in *Communication Education*, the *Basic Course Annual*, and several state journals.

Kelli J. Chromey, M.S. (SDSU, 2013) is a doctoral student and Assistant Basic Course Director at North Dakota State University. Her research areas include the basic course, organizational communication, and impostor phenomenon.

- To improve personal perspectives on invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery through oral and written criticism.

Activity Background

The spectacle of Stark County, Ohio, treasurer candidate Phil Davison's speech that led to its viral dissemination was due to the fact that this speech, unlike many of those recorded and archived, demonstrates both the speaker's weaknesses and his strengths. Before completing this activity, students should have a preliminary understanding of the classic canons of rhetoric (see Cicero, 2001). After a brief review of the canons, the students will apply their knowledge of the rhetorical elements by watching Phil Davison's speech on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsCe2LIYkNo>). The students will then extend their understanding of the canons by orally describing examples from the speech in a classroom discussion.

The activity requires access to the YouTube video and the discussion questions outlined in this manuscript. It may be completed in 25 to 30 minutes of a standard 50-minute class. After watching the video, a group discussion regarding Davison's speech and a debriefing of the activity will occur. The discussion allows students to apply the principles of the canons of rhetoric to another individual's speech, and the debriefing questions connect the activity to the content and the student learning objectives.

Introduction and Rationale

Evaluating public discourse is a central aspect of day-to-day communication. The merits of using classical rhetorical principles to help students achieve learning outcomes have been noted for some time. Erickson (1968) stated, "the comprehension and application of rhetorical theory is the beginning of purposeful speech-making and criticism is at once the beginning and the end of rhetorical theory" (p. 173). The significance of this evaluation stems from great communication philosophers. With influence from Cicero, Quintilian, and Aristotle, the canons of rhetoric have remained an important rhetorical tool for analysis in our present public speaking instruction. The five canons, which are designed to evaluate public discourse, include invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. According to Charlesworth (2010):

Invention deals with the content of a speech, arrangement involves placing the content in an order that is most strategic, style focuses on selecting linguistic devices (such as metaphor) to make the message more appealing, memory assists the speaker in delivering the message correctly, and delivery ideally enables great reception of the message.

(p. 122)

Although numerous methods exist for speech evaluation, we have found that analysis of the five canons of rhetoric provides a useful and meaningful method of peer speech evaluation. First, through analysis of invention the critic explores the various methods that a speaker uses to influence an audience through the content of the message, such as: Did the speaker appear to care about the topic? Did the speaker adapt the message to meet the needs of the audience? How did the speaker use evidence and

reasoning to support the points they were making? Second, analysis of arrangement asks the critic to examine the organization of the oral presentation. For example: Did the speaker provide clear development of their content? Was there an appropriate attention getter or hook? Did the speaker provide a summary of the main points in the conclusion? Third, through analysis of style the critic analyzes the choice and arrangement of the speaker's language. For instance: How did the speaker use language to convey their message? Did the speaker use vivid or emotive language? Did the speaker use metaphor or simile to illuminate their point? Fourth, through analysis of memory the critic investigates how well the speaker knows their message. For example: Did the speaker seem fluent in their delivery? Did the speaker seem prepared and rehearsed? Finally, by exploring delivery the critic examines the speaker's ability to disseminate their message. Sample analysis questions include: Did the speaker maintain eye contact with the audience? How did the speaker use para-language to reinforce their message? These rhetorical elements, outlined above, provide a useful framework for speech criticism and evaluation.

This instructional activity was created in order to develop an understanding and application of the rhetorical canons through use in speech criticism and evaluation. The activity allows students to evaluate a public presentation by exploring each canon individually. In order to create a unique classroom experience, we turned our attention to popular YouTube videos of public discourse for speech analysis. Previous research has illustrated that using YouTube in the classroom provides an opportunity to engage the students in important subject matter through social media (Lehman, DuFrene, & Lehman, 2010). Thus, this activity asks the students to apply and articulate an analysis of the canons to the popular political stump speech delivered by Phil Davison.

Although there are numerous speeches available for analysis online (see www.americanrhetoric.com), Davison's popularized video is particularly useful as a successful teaching tool (Mascarenhas, 2014) because it provides students an opportunity to dissect a presentation and explore both the strengths and weaknesses of the speech's content, language, and delivery. With this in mind, instructors are encouraged to use both *effective* and *ineffective* examples of public speaking in their courses.

Following this classroom exercise, students are asked to complete a speech criticism assignment using the classic canons of rhetoric. Public speaking scholars have suggested that having students evaluate their classmates is very beneficial within the public speaking course (Lucas, 1999). The benefits of peer evaluation include personal reflection of the evaluator's own skillset, enhanced speech delivery, and critical evaluation of others' arguments (Haleta, 2009). Through an examination of the classical canons, students develop the skills needed to speak intelligibly, competently, and convincingly to their audience.

Agenda

Prior to viewing the Phil Davison speech, instructors should provide the students with an overview of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. After reviewing the canons, have the students watch the Phil Davison campaign speech on YouTube. Students should take notes on the strengths and weaknesses of the speech with careful consideration of the canons of rhetoric.

Following the video, the instructor should pose the questions below to the class. If the class is rather large, instructors can break students into smaller groups to discuss their answers in a more intimate setting.

1. Considering each of the canons, which classic rhetorical strategies did Phil Davison use in his speech?
2. What elements of the rhetorical strategies were less effective in Davison's speech?
3. How would you provide both positive and constructive criticism to Davison? Be sure to cite specific examples from his speech which would allow him to improve this presentation.

Debriefing

The discussion questions and the visual artifact prompt a lively classroom discussion. Students are able to connect their prior knowledge on invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery to a humorous, real, and practical example of public speaking. Once the students have completed the classroom discussion of the canons, the instructor should pose questions to the class. The following questions tie the theoretical concepts to the interactive activity and offer the students an expanded perspective on the rhetorical evaluation.

1. How can you apply the elements of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery to a peer evaluation of your classmates' speech performance?
2. How can you apply the elements of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery to evaluation of other types of public discourse?
3. In what ways have your perceptions and attitudes about the classical rhetorical elements changed based on this activity?

Appraisal

The students became energized and excited to discuss the rhetorical canons based on the YouTube example. We have found that as a result of the in-class activity, the students become much more aware of the rhetorical elements when analyzing their peers through the speech criticism assignment. Moreover, the activity is a meaningful and memorable experience shared through formal and informal out-of-class communication with the instructors. The students demonstrated increased understanding and applicability of the principle foundations within the canons of rhetoric. Also, as demonstrated in the follow-up assignment, through peer-evaluation of the students' classmates' speeches, students demonstrated improved personal perspectives of the rhetorical canons through oral and written evaluation.

Using an example that does not depict a polished and effective presentation may seem dubious or unorthodox in any classroom. However, we have found great success in allowing the students to critically evaluate this particular speech by identifying areas for development and improvement. In fact, students in our course indicated that watching speech examples that are nearly perfect makes them more apprehensive as a public presenter. Most students agreed that the exercise made them realize the importance of speech development and rehearsal. In essence, the activity allowed them to become more

proficient public speakers and more critical evaluators of public discourse.

The classic canons of rhetoric provide a useful foundation for speech evaluation and criticism. Although specifically used in this exercise to evaluate Davison's speech, the rhetorical framework would prove useful for most types of speech evaluation. From the communicative foundation of rhetorical tradition to the presence of social media, this activity allows the students to engage actively in the classroom discussion of public discourse.

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