

For years, we have debated the merits of teaching public speaking online. The question usually focused on aspects of audience and immediacy, and the answer was frequently to request that students have live audiences, visible on their, unedited, *recorded* speeches. I attended my first workshop on teaching speech remotely in 2003, where one challenge discussed was the management of collecting dozens of VHS tapes containing student speeches. I attended my last *in-person* workshop about teaching speech remotely at NCA in Fall 2019, where challenges discussed included reluctant administrators and students' audiences of goldfish.

In between, I spent 11 years as "Oral Skills Coordinator" in a General Education Committee whose primary example of what a bad online course would be was always public speaking. When I tried to explain that online speech courses were actually a thing, and could be viable, they laughed and thought I was kidding them. I left that institution before the pandemic hit, but when it did, I couldn't help but think, "who's laughing now."

And even though I'd never taught public speaking online before, because one of my employers thought doing so was a joke and another prides itself on minimizing remote education, when NYS moved classes online in late March 2020, I was ready: armed with a library of resources, activities, and syllabi to guide me through the process. Based on the old, "mail a VHS" approach, I put together an asynchronous, minimum technology plan, to finish out Spring 2020 -not knowing what resources students who hadn't signed up for online classes would have available to them off campus and knowing that most of adjuncts didn't yet know how to even access, let alone use, the LMS.

In looking ahead to the Fall 20 semester, as Public Speaking Director, I assembled the materials I had and those being newly shared online among faculty to build [a web resource](#) to support all public speaking sections at my college, with plenty of pre-made asynchronous content for use by less tech-savvy faculty (and I'm happy to share that and to take suggestions for additional content with anyone today). But when the new semester began, the administration insisted that all online classes be taught as fully synchronous and that student speeches, in particular, be delivered live. -So all of the cool TikTok and YouTube-type assignments that others are discussing today simply weren't allowed.-

I had no ready arsenal for this, no models to look to for guidance. I was ready for fully asynchronous. I was ready for the, now-old, model of hybrid where lessons would be online and speeches would be in person. But not fully synchronous. And this introduced a new twist to the centrality of audience for public speaking in remote education: we have a live audience in theory, but one that can't quite be seen (and which, in fact, might not even really be there)

Despite reservations about it, I defended the format to dubious colleagues and students, arguing that this forum for speaking was legitimate – all they had to do was look at the lives they were living to see that presenting through webinar software it is something that professionals do. And I argued that it was a growing trend for job interviews, workplace training, and international business even before the pandemic. But it also added a number of stressors and meant that I had to cover more content in the course – because now delivery lessons had to also include production concerns of lighting and framing and discussions of both presentation skills in-person

and online, with different practices for eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, visuals, etc. You all know this.

And we were covering more in less time. As we all know, scheduling speeches during a semester is always a challenge. It became more of one when WiFi went out, bandwidth was insufficient, screens froze, etc. And my classes are large – set at 30 but often going up to 32 or 33. So technical difficulties could really eat up a lot of time and phrases like “you’re on mute” and “we can’t see your screen” became regular interruptions, enhancing speech anxiety for students. Technical difficulties in-person are hard enough on novice speakers, but when a student doesn’t find out until the end of their speech that they lost the connection or that the slides didn’t show up, it’s devastating.

When I replied to Nik’s call last February/March for this session, I was still teaching online and had been for a full year. Today, I’ve been back in the classroom for 12 weeks and so as I prepared for NCA, a different set of realizations and reflections for the online speech course emerged than what I sort of envisioned discussing back then. Without rehashing all the problems that everyone faced with online instruction and student engagement across the board – I realize that the online speaking class was for many of my students, as it was for my previous institution, something of a joke. It wasn’t “real” public speaking for them. It was just something, like wearing masks, they had to do because of the pandemic. It was hard getting them to perceive of online speaking as making a *public presentation* because the pandemic kind of normalized an anything-goes lifestyle. I mean, there’s even a Folger’s coffee ad I see on IMDbTV all the time that pokes fun at people attending work meetings in their underwear. So, the kind of self-awareness that needs to be engendered for speakers to reduce nonfluencies, to be more audience-centered, etc, just wasn’t there. And it was hard to get students to attend to things like camera angles that weren’t these awkward up-the-nose shots when culture was normalizing visible boxer shorts.

The main idea I want end on with my remarks, the main idea I want to enter into today’s discussion as we move forward, is that it’s one thing to debate the merits of face-to-face, hybrid, and online speech classes, but it’s really kind of another to talk about the *pandemic* online speech class. Television changed public speaking dynamics. Arguably, online speaking should have been little more than the transfer of those skills to the digital space – but we have yet to see what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be on public communication norms.