

Public speaking skills not just important for presidential debates



Mississippi school Davis IB Elementary, named after Confederate president Jefferson Davis, is being renamed Barack Obama Magnet IB Elementary, after former U.S. President Barack Obama. Photo: Yana Paskova/Getty Images/Getty Images

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By Ria Megnin



If you happened to watch the 2012 presidential candidates debates or followed the analysis afterward, you have a pretty good understanding of what can go wrong with public speaking.

President Barack Obama was dinged for showing lackluster energy and failing to engage with the audience in the first debate.

Republican candidate Mitt Romney earned criticism for making false statements during the debate.

Both vice presidential candidates were given bad marks for dubious facial gestures.

As the final debate approaches, we spoke with local experts on the art of the public speaking. What works when we try to share ideas with an audience? What inspires, motivates, persuades, transforms? And what makes a talk unsuccessful?

HIT THE BOOKS

Dr. Joseph Valenzano III teaches public speaking at the University of Dayton and has literally written the book on the topic. Two textbooks, to be exact.

His take on public speaking? It's not the words that really matter.

"Two thirds of communication takes place nonverbally," Valenzano said. "Human beings respond to tone before anything else. If your tone is bored, it doesn't matter what you say, people will lose interest. But if you're passionate, people will feel that passion themselves and really think about what you say."

Students in Valenzano's classes learn some common do's and don'ts for giving talks.

- Tailor your message and language to your audience.
- Know your goal and stay on topic.
- Research well, then practice delivery.
- Look at and engage with your audience.

“Rather than looking at it as a speech to 30 people, treat it as 30 one-on-one conversations, and make eye contact with each person one at a time,” Valenzano said.

Debates are challenging because they’re rapid-fire conversations on complicated topics, Valenzano said. He suggests treating each question as an opportunity to make a cogent, clear argument drawing on the sound facts and data you already know.

“The other (top debate tool) is civility, strangely enough,” Valenzano said. “People get turned off by nastiness. Speakers need to learn to wield information ethically and credibly, so the audience can make their own decisions.”

TAKE THE STAGE

After 15 years on Broadway, Scot Davidge, founder of Springfield’s Ohio Performing Arts Institute, agrees that body language is the most important element of delivering a message.

“As a public speaker, your tools are your voice, your face and your body,” Davidge said. “You have to be animated. You have to have self confidence, poise, and be able to glide through what you’re presenting.”

The goal, he said, is to show confidence and inspire trust in your audience.

Here's some of the tips acting students learn at the Institute:

- Eye contact is always important.
- Be “an honest con man.”
- Practice diction and clarity. Speak slowly.
- Practice improvisation, the art of thinking on your feet.
- Listen, listen, listen.

“I always tell students, ‘if you’re talking too fast, the audience only hears every third word,’ ” Davidge said. “It’s important to take a breath and just calmly present.”

TOAST THE TOWN

If the thought of getting in front of a crowded room and having to talk still terrifies you, you’re not alone. In fact, more than 13,000 Toastmasters International clubs exist worldwide to train people in getting over that all-too-common fear.

“Speaking persuasively and effectively is an acquired skill,” said Dayton Toastmasters Club 405 club President Pam Griffith, but one that’s important for all people, not just presidential candidates. “Speaking well for 20 minutes before the right group of people can do more for your career than a year behind a desk.”

Here's some tips from Griffith and vice president Scott Robinson:

- Start with a bang, not a whimper.
- Be passionate.
- Have a plan for dealing with nerves and relaxing yourself quickly.
- Don't memorize your speech word-for-word.
- Have a conversation, not a lecture.

People feel like they have to be polished and perfect when they speak to an audience, Griffith said, but that's not true.

"If you have a good message, people will be interested and want to hear it," Griffith said. "You don't have to apologize for every little thing."