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Laura Dickinson

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The Danger Room

LAURA DICKINSON

Seminole State College of Florida

Abstract: This essay describes how an honors classroom introduces public speaking and active listening to encourage heroism and social justice among students. Asserting that people often look for a hero in times of crises, the author suggests that honors programs can become safe places where students learn the skills necessary to advocate for those in need and demonstrably help their communities. By cultivating essential skills in rhetoric and oral presentation, honors students identify with heroic, altruistic aspects of themselves and others.

Keywords: public speaking; heroes; courage; community & college; Seminole State College (FL)—The Grindle Honors Institute

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Like all heroes, I have a secret identity. Outside the classroom, people see me as a mild-mannered, absentminded professor. In the classroom, I am still a mild-mannered, absentminded professor, but this is not just a perception of me: it is my real hero persona. When I walk into my classroom, I face people who, through my course, will become empowered to be the same thing I am: a hero. I will change their hearts and minds. I will empower them to change the world around them with their secret powers of drive, eloquence, and intellect. Just like the graduates of Professor Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters, when they leave they will be able to save the world from villainies large and small for the betterment of society and themselves.

Professor Xavier and I have a lot in common: baldness (I’ve had cancer twice, though I now have some short luxurious locks), academic training, and the need to expand within our honors students the nascent powers they possess but might not recognize in themselves. I teach the dreaded public speaking course—the one where students would rather be in the coffin than

give the eulogy. I know that they would sooner sit on a plane full of snakes, have life-altering surgery, or do practically anything other than taking my course. Glossophobia is ranked among the most common fears in the world, and students bemoan the unfair fact that the course is required. I explain to them that public speaking is required in honors because it is required in life. I tell my honors students that within them lies the ability to change the world and make it a better place both locally and globally. By learning to give effective speeches, they can talk bosses into giving them raises, school boards into rezoning their children, communities into supporting Black Lives Matter, Habitat for Humanity or other civic causes, and the world into changing policies that benefit everyone. If they don't bother to learn this skill, their message, ineptly delivered, will be drowned out in the cacophony of other unintelligible rubbish that gets posted on Facebook or TikTok, gets a few likes, and then fades into digital oblivion.

Professor Xavier and I share a common arch-nemesis: society itself works against us as we create and train our heroes. My honors students have been taught to hate public speaking to the depth of their souls. They are told to be silent; their words don't matter; their thoughts and feelings are irrelevant, fake news; they are too "snowflake" to deserve a voice. Hearts and minds are muffled when they fear the forum from which to voice their passions. Try to think of a movie, television, show, or book in which a character is joyful in anticipation of giving a speech; none comes to my mind, yet every day students are bombarded with images of people giving poor speeches that make them objects of ridicule.

Students see speeches by purported leaders that are meaningless gobbledygook, one minute making a statement that a few seconds later they contradict. They hear voices of people who are knowledgeable silenced by bombastic "influencers" who are seen as smarter than the learned experts who have the intellectual knowledge. At the same time, they see great speeches that they can't possibly imagine giving themselves. Students come to believe that there are two types of people who give speeches: heroes and zeroes. Heroes, of course, give perfect speeches the first time they open their mouths and move people to heights of great achievement and honor. Heroes—leaders, lawyers, activists, politicians—change people's lives and make the world a better place. Zeroes—also leaders, lawyers, activists, politicians—give terrible speeches that, regardless of rhetorical eloquence, make the world a worse place. Our students, as mere mortals, feel they can't compete and so live in constant fear of opening their mouths and letting their voices be heard.

So my mission is to change these mere mortals into, as Dr. Phil would say, “heroes in their own lives.” Like the Professor, I have a training plan. My Danger Room doesn’t have evil robots or mutants. It has sample speeches, verbal activities, games, and lessons that help my mortals find their superpowers from within. I let them know my classroom is the safest place in which they will ever give a speech. Here they can make mistakes, open up their hearts and minds to explore their passions, watch others to learn from them both the right way and wrong way to speak, and find their own voice as a citizen of the world. I address their fears and let them know that failure here can mean success out there, where the words they use can make or break a situation, a relationship, or a crisis. I teach them informative speech styles so they can instruct others about vital skills they will need in their jobs and their lives. I give them persuasion tactics that will help them get that raise, raise money for their cause, and cause them to start, stop, or change policies that directly affect them and those in their community. I enlighten them about special occasion speeches so they can give a Mother’s Day tribute, offer the toast at a wedding to celebrate a community’s joy, and preside at a funeral with a eulogy that will unite the community in their sorrow. By teaching these skills, I empower my honors students to become their own heroes, failing and stumbling in practice in order to become successful in reality.

As every hero knows, the greatest gift is a prodigy who takes up your mantle in the cause of justice. I have students email me, write me, and call me, letting me know how their words have made them heroes in the real world. A young woman, who shook terribly giving her first few speeches in class, let me know that she easily breezed through her presentations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington on a weekly basis. Another student, who competed on my speech team, ran communications for an international corporation with their headquarters a few blocks from my school; she now works for an influential resource group in D.C. One student claimed that along with getting over her fears of public speaking, she is no longer afraid of snakes either. (I am still afraid of snakes; every hero has a weakness.) Every semester I get to see my mere mortals transform themselves into their own individual hero and, in turn, transmogrify the community they serve. Perhaps my greatest achievement is to see former students go on to become hero teachers. My greatest pride is knowing a former student of mine sits contentedly in my old office at my previous school, a published author and a professor of speech as well.

My work in the classroom shows how education can empower our honors students and make them heroes. Chadwick Boseman, a strong free speech

advocate, gave the commencement speech in 2018 at his alma mater, Howard University, and said, “I don’t know what your future is, but if you are willing to take the harder way, the more complicated one, the one with more failures at first than successes, the one that’s ultimately proved to have more victory, more glory, then you will not regret it.” No longer are my students’ hearts muffled; they are out in the open forming their own hero teams from Z-Men to Next Gen Avengers to Guardians of (this) Galaxy. From teaching them “What Not to Wear” to “How Not to Speak,” I give them a voice and the conviction to use their words and ideas to make the world a better place. We don’t need just another hero; we need many if we are going to have these honors students succeed and make the world a better place. We need heroes with big hearts, big minds, and big hopes that they can change the future; helping them find their voices makes these hopes and dreams a reality. I relish my opportunity to be a part of their growth, to watch them put on the cape and soar in their own lives.

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The author may be contacted at
dickinsonl@seminolestate.edu.