

ACADEMIC RESPONSABILITIES: CHALLENGING  
ABLEIST PERSPECTIVES IN PUBLIC  
SPEAKING PROGRAMS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The introductory public speaking course is often the first time students are exposed to the Communication field and recruits students into the discipline. This creates an increased need to revise and update the public speaking course to be as inclusive as possible. Currently, around one in four adults live with a form of disability in the U.S., with that number projected to increase (Okoro et al., 2018), yet public speaking programs are not inviting to students with disabilities due to ableist norms embedded within the course. Ableist assumptions that all students can/will deliver a presentation similarly are problematic because it inadvertently centers able-bodied students. Inspired by my experience teaching students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in a public speaking course, this dissertation is an intervention to assess ableist assumptions and practices within public speaking programs and offers recommendations to reassess public speaking to reconsider the standards for what constitutes an effective speaker. Through my experiences, I found it important to explore the ableist and disablist viewpoints in public speaking curricula, instruction, and assessment tools.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to grandpa Joseph F. Rudinsky.

Although our last memory together was my undergraduate graduation,  
your accidental purchase of a graduate diploma frame encouraged me to keep going.

This degree is for you. I hope I make you proud.

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*Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord, and not for others.*

-Colossians 3:23

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have cited the former National Communication Association (NCA) president Steven A. Beebe's (2013) reference to the basic course being the "front porch" of the Communication field because it is generally most students' first experience with the discipline (Ashby-King et al., 2021; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020; Morreale et al., 2016). The front porch metaphor is instructive because at the same time that it connotes an inviting sense of comfort, it also raises important questions regarding access. If we begin from the premise that the basic course is the front porch to the Communication field, scholars must evaluate the accessibility to reach the porch and the adjoining house of knowledge. An example of how accessibility is often a taken-for-granted assumption can be viewed with the Capitol Crawl in 1990. During the Capitol Crawl, individuals protesting for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) crawled up the steps, abandoning their mobility aids, to publicly display their difficulty to access the building. Of course, the Capitol Crawl was not about gaining access to anyone building, but rather, breaking down physical, cultural, and societal barriers across the country experienced by people with disabilities. While much progress has been made since the passage of the ADA, consider the extent to which the metaphorical front porch to the Communication field remains inaccessible. The field needs to add a metaphoric ramp to the front porch to become more available to all, and to do so, public speaking programs should reassess the many ableist norms and assumptions currently present.

Public speaking instructors, coordinators, and directors often question the sometime ambiguous components of being an *effective* public speaker. Arguably, most public speaking scholars might state to be an effective speaker, it is necessary “to keep eye contact with the audience, to employ planned and controlled gestures and movement, and to exhibit good posture and a strong stance” and most (if not all) public speaking textbooks would concur (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 203). And although these expectations may appear entirely reasonable, consider how those with disabilities fit within this paradigm. Imagine the frustration of having your voice evaluated based on criteria that looks differently for you. The aptly titled television show *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2019) is a sitcom about a family with one member who has cerebral palsy, J.J., played by the actor Micah Fowler who lives with cerebral palsy. Although J.J. cannot speak, he has a board which he motions to, and his aid speaks his thoughts aloud for him. The normative criteria listed above for what makes effective speaking is meant for able-bodied individuals, and these criteria are often more complicated for people living with disabilities. For instance, should a student get graded poorly for not maintaining eye contact even though many individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) struggle with eye contact (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017)? Multiple sets of competencies have been established by scholars over the years to inform the learning outcomes for students taking the introductory public speaking course. Many of those competencies, however, unintentionally perpetuate ableist assumptions along with the assessment tools used to grade students.

Communication scholarship historically has included “demographic homogeneity among and within audiences as well as within arguers themselves—and more specifically, the presumption of a white, heterosexual, and usually male figure in both cases” (Beasley, 2021, p. 297). To break this cycle, communication scholars must realize their ableist biases (Beasley,

2021). It is clear that individuals with disabilities were not the central focus when developing public speaking foundations, a fact that aligns with the broader phenomenon of ignoring individuals with disabilities throughout history.

### **Defining Ableism**

Ableism, in general, is discrimination towards the disability community (Friedman & Owen, 2017). Ableism can be understood as “the compulsory preference and/or privileging of the nondisabled” and “the idea that some people are simply not worth serving, teaching, treating or saving” (Beasley, 2021, p. 293). Often ableist perspectives entirely ignore or dismiss the idea of differing abilities. Ableism is also a form of conscious and unconscious entitlement by denying specific individuals their basic rights—including access to education. Higher education often mirrors societal views, thus, ableism is present within higher education, as well as disablism (Dolmage, 2017). Disablism is the promotion of treating people with noticeable disabilities differently by punishing the person being discriminated, potentially through special treatment or unfair treatment (Dolmage, 2017). For example, disablism would attest that there “could be nothing worse than being disabled, and treats disabled people unfairly as a result of these values,” and ableism is where “instead of situating disability as bad and focusing on that stigma, positively values able-bodiedness” (Dolmage, 2017, pp 6-7). Disablism would be focusing “upon the issue of disability and, arguably, continues to focus upon the person with a disability as a contributing factor to the discriminatory act” (Harpur, 2009, 163).

Both disablism and ableism are problematic, but they occur from two differing vantage points. Disablism and ableism view disabilities as negative while “ableism renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default” and both terms cannot be disconnected from each other

fully (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7). Within academia, specifically higher education, disablism is often hidden beneath ableism. Ableism and disablism might include the assumption that a person in a wheelchair could not successfully give a speech so one might dismiss the delivery section of a rubric or give special treatment or unfair treatment, such as, full credit or a zero in the delivery section of a rubric.

For this dissertation, although ableism and disablism are both present in academia, ableism will mostly be used as it encompasses both terms. Ableism is more applicable than disablism because disablism “only focuses on those that society has labeled as disabled” (Harpur, 2009, p. 164). In comparison, ableism,

[H]as the potential to focus attention on all groups in society who act in a discriminatory manner to those who do not apparently meet a physical norm. Ableism is not focused on disabilities but on those acts and behaviours which assume a person must meet the physical standards set by a particular group in society (Harpur, 2009, p. 164).

Using the term ableism allows for focus on “the problem of ability discrimination rather than disability discrimination” to address the issue of the discrimination from an ableist act (Harpur, 2009, 165). Since ableism values able-bodies, “ableism makes able-bodiedness and able-mindedness compulsory” whereas “academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability, and this demand can best be defined as ableism” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 7). Able-mindedness sponsors normative thoughts of exclusion that values able-bodies (Forrest, 2020). Yet, as educators, we should not stop accessibility at physical access as that is not enough (Dolmage, 2017). Although society still needs to expand the understanding of accessibility outside of physical access, “when educators recognize physical inaccessibility, they can and should read intellectual and social inaccessibility

into this space” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 10). Valuing this perspective, able-bodiedness can respectfully address both physical and cognitive abilities.

The distinction between ableism and disablism is subtle but important given the large number of people who do not fit neatly within social categories. Around one in four adults live with a form of disability, with the highest numbers reported geographically in the U.S. coming from the South (Okoro et al., 2018). In 2011, the Institute on Disability found that 19% of the world’s population consisted of individuals with disabilities, making it the largest marginalized group in terms of numbers; however, it is not always identified or accepted as a marginalized community. This number has since increased, and the 2020 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium reported that in 2019, 28% people in the U.S. reported living with disabilities (Paul, et al., 2020).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020) recognizes that there are various types of disabilities which can affect vision, movement, thinking, remembering, learning, communicating, hearing, mental health, and social relationships. The CDC (2020) website also states that “although ‘people with disabilities’ (PWD) sometimes refers to a single population, this is actually a diverse group of people with a wide range of needs” (para. 3). Terms and labels to identify individuals with disabilities are often based on societal norms, stereotypes, and standards that are taught (Row, 2016), making the term misleading. Disability and impairment are not as interchangeable as the normative societal usage suggests. Disability can be an impairment, but an impairment does not always equate to a disability (Shah, 2014). Once an impairment becomes a barrier to living, that is when impairment might shift to a disability (Shah, 2014). The wider the conceptualization of ability is, the more we realize that able-bodiedness is actual the outlier.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2001) describes disability as having three dimensions: impairments, activity limitation, and participation restrictions in normal daily activities. Impairment examples include “loss of a limb, loss of vision or memory loss,” activity limitation, refers to, for example “difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving,” and participation restrictions are, for example, “working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining health care and preventive services” (WHO, 2001). The U.S. Department of Labor recognizes that individuals with disabilities are the largest minority stating that this includes nearly 50 million individuals (2021). Statistics supporting that individuals with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the U.S. have surged a growth for representation within the public sphere in recent years, but not always in a positive way.

### **Disability Portrayals in Film and Television**

Society often understands disability as a problem that needs to be solved (Mitchell & Snyder, 2014), and if we continue the refusal “to consider disabilities as outside the bounds of normality, then we refuse to uphold the social construction of disability is a problem to be fixed” (Rinaldi, 2015, p. 13). Ablenationalism is society’s way of patching up the “problem” without enforcing any major changes that would disrupt able-bodies. Ablenationalism, a term derived from Mitchell and Snyder (2015), “is an ideology of limited accommodation and partial inclusion” (Grue, 2021, p. 11). Ablenationalism overlaps strongly with capitalist values of productivity. To be accepted as a productive part of capitalist society innately means generated more wealth than the cost of care, but most people do not comprehend the value of disabled individuals beyond bluntly economic terms due to the stigma that disabled individuals cannot function without help from others (Grue, 2021), and drain the resources that working individuals produce. In politics, for example, people with disabilities are often referred to as the

“undeserving sick” by using language such as “tragic, passive, needy and vulnerable” (Hindle, 2021, p. 110). Human precarity means that everyone depends on others in life, not just individuals with disabilities (Dembsey, 2020). Projecting total independence as a value is dangerous as the “disdain for dependence can be linked to a disdain for disability” (Dembsey, 2020, p. 2).

Many popular superhero narratives perpetuate ablenationalism by establishing that “only exceptional disabled people are of value,” that disabled individuals should aspire to make adjustments to themselves to live in an ableist world while simultaneously featuring how disabled individuals being accepted and included by all is practically impossible but desired (Grue, 2021, p. 12). Ableist views are also visible within superhero narratives because their stories often consist of the protagonist trying to fit in and be accepted as “normal” (Grue, 2021). After accomplishing this, only then are they counted as valuable which is a direct form of ablenationalism by exhibiting the ideology that it is okay to be disabled if you also have super-abilities to compensate for the disability (Grue, 2021).

Society tends to showcase individuals who are what Stone (1986) prescribes as “able-disabled,” such as superheroes, especially in the public sphere. Able-disabled describes individuals who live with a disability but are considered *high functioning* which sometimes allows the ability to mask their disability. This is different from the example before from *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2019), whereas the main character is visibly disabled. Examples of less visible or invisible disabilities can be found in countless fictional TV shows and movies. For example, Netflix’s *Atypical* (Rashid et al.), which first aired in 2017, is a four-season show that shares the life of a high school boy with autism, Sam, overcoming many milestones that his parents and therapist never thought were possible. One of those tasks was graduating high

school, and you can imagine the level of shock when Sam was able to successfully deliver his high school graduation commencement speech. During this speech, Sam's cues and mannerisms went against what most would deem "good" public speaking etiquette, for example, he spoke to himself during some parts and stated, "I'm finished" at the end. However, while Sam's speech may not have satisfied traditional public speaking norms when evaluated with ableist assumptions, Sam's speech was eloquent, nonetheless. In the process of being undeniably rhetorical, while being at odds with many public speaking standards, Sam's oratory demonstrates a need to challenge disciplinary orthodoxy in order to be more inclusive and reflective of how persuasion occurs in the world. Using this example, however, has its pitfalls as the show failed to authentically represent autism in the first place. The main character Sam is played by non-autistic actor, Keir Gilchrist, although autistic actors auditioned for the role, and the show's creator Robia Rashid appears to have no connection or experience with autism. Sarah Kurchak, an autistic writer, wrote a TIME article critiquing *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2021) stating:

It was yet another story about a cisgender, heterosexual, white autistic man seemingly made with a largely non-autistic audience in mind. In terms of inclusion, it very meekly nudged the status quo by hiring one autistic person for the supporting cast and one for the social media team, but that was the extent of autistic inclusion in the show's autistic story (para. 4).

Kurchak's complaint was not an isolated thought, as many other reviews agreed with the lack of authenticity of using a fully-abled actor. Additionally, this actor was playing an ably-disabled person as Sam was considered high functioning and could complete many tasks without help or accommodations. This poses an even more significant concern for inauthenticity and questioning who the intended audience was. If the show was intended to represent the disability community,

it failed in all aspects, as the representation was manipulated by using an able-bodied actor.

*Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2021) aired its final season in 2021 after harsh criticism, yet there are other examples of authentic disability representation in the media that have had better reviews.

During the same time that *Atypical* (Rashid et al., 2021) first came out, other shows were gaining publicity for their autistic characters, such as, *The Good Doctor* (Shore, 2022) and although the main character is autistic in the show, once again, the actor playing him, Freddie Highmore, is not autistic. However, similarly to *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2019), *Everything's Gonna Be Okay* (Thomas, 2021) that premiered in 2020, does feature an autistic actor, Kayla Cromer, playing an autistic character. Kurchak (2021) explained that,

There still aren't enough autistic people who are enabled to tell their own stories, and not nearly enough autistic people reflected in the majority of stories greenlit for film, television and other media. Queer autistic representation has made some heartening strides, but autistic characters remain overwhelmingly white. Non-speaking autistic people and autistic people who have intellectual disabilities remain grossly underrepresented (para. 16).

Autism affects all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses, and Black and African-American children are frequently misdiagnosed or diagnosed later in life with autism (The Color of Autism Foundation). In addition to a lack of diversity, racially, ethically, and socioeconomically, Kurchak (2021) emphasizes a need for various representation of disabled lives in the media as well as that the disability community faces many challenges that are not always identical.

Another example of highlighting individuals with disabilities, but in a different approach, can be seen in the 2018 documentary *Raising Tourette's* (Greensfelder et al., 2018). This one-

season miniseries followed the lives of parents raising children ranging from 11 to 17 diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome and their challenging situations of everyday life. Ironically, one of the children decides to try public speaking and the show documented his experience presenting and allowing him to share how he felt about public speaking before and after. If this individual were to be graded by most public speaking rubrics currently used, he may not score high on delivery aspects due to involuntary, repetitive movements and vocalizations, yet that did not take away from his overall message that to inspire their peers to not let a disability stop them from doing something they enjoy. This again shows the need to reassess public speaking standards with ableist assumptions under scrutiny. Reassessing public speaking programs in higher education can help to address the stigmatization of disabilities by expanding public understandings of effective rhetoric.

### **Public Speaking Intervention**

In the U.S., about 1.3 million students take the basic communication course every year (Beebe, 2013). Public speaking programs are prominent in higher education due to public speaking being the focus of 87.8% of introductory communication courses taught in the U.S. (Morreale et al., 2016). Public speaking courses are an integral part of higher education because they can have a significant impact on student success in college and beyond. Oral communication skills are the most sought after by employers, yet employers also find that is the skill most lacking by college graduates (Lieberman, 2012). Many organizations often highlight the need for students to showcase good communication skills after leaving college (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016; Flores, 1997), so introductory communication courses can greatly benefit students in their professional pursuits (Hunt, & Simonds, 2002; Morreale et al., 2006). Two common understandings of the introductory course are either public speaking or the basic course,

which is usually a combination of courses that include interpersonal, group, and public speaking (Broeckelman-Post, & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). The basic course is often referred to as the introductory course of the Communication field, although some argue that what qualifies as the “basic” or “introductory” course are not mutually exclusive because one unified course does not exist within the Communication field (Ward et al., 2014). For the purposes of this dissertation, the emphasis will be on the introductory public speaking course solely. I agree that if the basic course is the front porch to the Communication field (Beebe, 2013), then the courses should be designed to be inviting, inclusive, and appealing to all students. The public speaking course recruits students to the Communication field and can impact whether or not students remain in the field (Morreale & Arneson, 2008), making it very important to the discipline, yet it is not particularly active in recruiting and retaining students with disabilities currently.

For public speaking programs, and public speaking instructors, directors, and coordinators, an ethical responsibility exists to design and assess courses with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront. Additionally, public speaking courses should offer the opportunity for students to share their experiences and voice their opinions on various topics, but the lack of inclusivity within student assessment may limit instructors’ ability have to create a safe space for these conversations to happen. As instructors, “we see ourselves as instrumental to student learning and we often fail to acknowledge the possibility that our behaviors can be detrimental to students’ academic success” (Bolkan, 2017, p. 86). Instructors may not realize how impactful their teaching efforts may be on students. Lack of training and disciplinary support can make the task of providing safe spaces for students to speak openly in response to societal controversies a difficult one for any instructor (Waymer, 2021). If there are vast differences in curriculum and

assessment in public speaking courses, diversity and inclusivity within the curriculum and assessment will most likely vary as well because the standards will likely vary as well.

Public speaking scholars “often unknowingly participate in the social construct of disability by uncritically accepting hegemonic expectations of what makes an effective speaker” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 206), thus, this dissertation consists of an intervention to assess ableist assumptions and perspectives within public speaking programs and the academic programs that help support them. Diversity is a fluid concept, but with regards to diversity within public speaking programs, this dissertation will focus specifically on diversity qua physical and cognitive ability for two reasons. First, focusing on the spectrum of human ability allows for a more precise conversation within broader academic discourses on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Considering how many individuals live with a disability, reassessing ableist perspectives can help to address how to adequately support students with disabilities. Second, deconstructing the social norms that have driven the Communication field for years allows for updated and more inclusive considerations for a range in abilities. For example, the coveted Grice’s maxims which refer to the acceptable patterns, or *rules*, of a conversation that all should follow include four categories: quantity, quality, relation, and manner (Grice, 1975). With specially attention the category for manner, Grice (1975) emphasizes the “HOW what is said is to be said” by adding a supermaxim: be perspicuous (p. 46). To be perspicuous, one must “1) avoid obscurity of expression, 2) avoid ambiguity, 3) be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity) and 4) be orderly” (p. 46), but again, this might look much different for someone who is living with a disability. Grice (1975) fails to consider other ways to communicate and labels the maxims as “the standard type of conversational practice” and thus disregards the opportunity for a range in abilities (p. 48). Grice’s maxims prescribe to many of the same ableist assumptions that are

within public speaking programs. This idealized interpretation of disability has an effect on educational aspects as well. For example, “higher education has been the place where the dividing lines of this discrimination have been decided” because of ideologies created and maintained in higher education that enhance an ableist reality in society (Dolmage, 2017; Davis, 1995). By breakdown the ableist assumptions and perspectives in public speaking programs, we can begin to dismantle the ideologies in society.

### **Pedagogical Significance**

Knowing that I cannot separate my personal lived experiences from my academic experiences as an instructor and as a speaking center associate, I approach this dissertation through an intersectional rhetorical perspective in addition to an instructional perspective. As a woman of color, I have been aware of discrimination within public speaking, but I came across the particular problem of public speaking programs lacking diversity, equity, and inclusion in terms of the disability community when I taught a public speaking course that included students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Having students with and without IDD in the classroom was not a new concept to The University of Alabama’s (UA) campus. UA has a program that allows students with intellectual disabilities to earn a certificate in postsecondary education, titled the CrossingPoints Certificate in Occupational Studies (CCOS).

The public speaking program had prior experience working with CCOS students, but in a different capacity as the CCOS students would take the course in the summer with smaller classes and at a much quicker pace. In 2020, the decision was made to have the CCOS students integrate into the fall and spring semesters to allow for more students to participate in the course with the option of larger classes in subsequent semesters. I was assigned to teach one of the

mixed sections, and during my experience, I started to reevaluate my own preconceived notions or rhetorical effectiveness. I began to scrutinize the speech rubrics being used, which the entire public speaking program uses, and that led me to more closely reevaluating the overall course objectives, which often seemed subjective and inconsiderate towards the CCOS students. In addition, I wanted to make sure that the CCOS students in my course were receiving the support that they needed outside of the classroom.

One place that many public speaking students on campus often turn to for additional support is our university's speaking center, the Speaking Studio, with which I am also involved with. Speaking centers are usually free resources on campus where students can receive help from another student (trained consultants) on any oral communication assignment. Another graduate student and I quickly realized that further training was needed to prepare consultants in helping CCOS students since they were now integrated into the public speaking program could potentially come to the Speaking Studio for help. It was important that mentors and staff received additional training and were aware of the possibility of working with CCOS students. My peer and I created a diversity workshop training focused on addressing differing abilities and how to address working with diverse students, but that still did not seem like enough to prepare the consultants. After further consideration, I propose that the problem truly stems from many of the unwritten rules and disciplinary norms that constitute most public speaking courses. This dissertation explores ongoing initiatives and new strategies that can expose ableist assumptions and also identify ways to address the broader problem of public speaking programs lacking disability perspectives since training consultants does not address overarching issues.

It is also important to address that as someone who has first-hand experience of how discrimination can negatively impact a student's well-being in higher education, I strive to be an

ally for students with disabilities. I have multiple family members who have been diagnosed with disabilities, and yet it was not until I taught the course with CCOS students that I learned just how ingrained ableism was in my own pedagogy and within the discipline of communication. Growing up as a multi-racial Caribbean-American, my family did not discuss mental health and has always been reluctant to accepting any of our own as disabled. The family members that were diagnosed are not necessarily recognized as disabled within my family. My uncle, for example, is considered disabled by the government and he has been very open about it whereas my family tends to not talk about it. He struggled with school but currently has three degrees. My family dynamic is very similar to the definition of ableism insofar that my family ignores the possibility of a family member having a disability which in turn is privileging abled people.

I want a better world for my family members and for all individuals living with disabilities, and through my experience working with students who are IDD in the public speaking course that I taught, the need for this dissertation research came into focus. I do not want to disregard or diminish the experiences of PWD; rather my intention in sharing my experience is to create a sense of solidarity in the hopes that others will feel comfortable in working toward the creation of a more inclusive academy and society. It is also important for me to disclose this information so that readers can understand my perspectives as I share them. Moreover, I have strategically chosen to include when possible, citations from scholars, writers, and individuals who either identify with the disability community or who also have family members and or friends who are PWD. While beginning this dissertation, I aligned with a quote from Dembsey (2020), “I do not identify as disabled at this point in time, I am not an expert in ableism, and I still have much to learn. Even still, I have made an effort to notice the impact of ableism around me” (p. 10), and I would like to do the same with the following chapters in this

dissertation. However, my circumstances have changed during the writing process, which I will discuss in later chapters, and I align more with the disability community than I had suspected before. Nonetheless, and maybe even more so, I would like to address the ableism around me and call attention to the ableism not only in public speaking courses but also within society.

During the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many challenging conversations were occurring, specifically surrounding racial injustice, and now is the time for communication education scholarship to contribute to this elevated focus of diversity, equity, and inclusion (Waymer, 2021). Current efforts “call for a reexamination and increased commitment to the role that communication instruction and the basic communication course play in the academic lives of all students” (Morreale et al., 2016, p. 352). Essentially, academics must inspire students to unlearn problematic habits socially established, where the process for us instructors require something, we request from our students: “stepping out of our comfort zones” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 208). This dissertation attempts to answer this call by exploring how public speaking courses should be revised, specifically by reexamining the assessment tools and materials being used, to be more inclusive and accepting of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

This dissertation begins with the premise that one over-arching factor that communication scholars and practitioners have underappreciated is the incorporation of diversity, equity, and inclusivity in general, and disability in particular. Ableist assumptions that students can, or should, deliver a presentation in roughly the same way, physically, mentally, and verbally, are problematic in many ways. This also assumes that all students who are taking public speaking are able-bodied (whether visible or invisible). The expectations and assessment

in public speaking programs should become more self-reflective of biased presumptions undergirding disciplinary understandings of competency.

Public speaking faculty need more tools to be considerate of differing abilities and to uphold the ethical and moral standards of educators so that all students have an equal opportunity in the Communication field. In this dissertation, I forward two main arguments. First, that public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs and exclude students with disabilities. Second, that public speaking programs need to be more considerate of and sensitive to disability perspectives. To understand how to begin reframing public speaking programs to be more inclusive of disability perspectives, it is first important to conceptualize the historical background of the Communication field, disability studies and the introductory public speaking program, as well as an explanation of the specificity of the problem and how that can be addressed in the case studies. Next, research using autoethnography and rhetorical methods are explained through an autoethnography of my experience teaching students with IDD and how my identity has changed, a rhetorical content analysis of public speaking rubrics, and a rhetorical content analysis of public speaking textbooks. Finally, a closing chapter will discuss the pedagogical and practical implications with recommendations, limitations and directions for future research, and a final reflection.

## CHAPTER 2:

### REASSESSING RESPONSABILITY: CONNECTING COMMUNICATION STUDIES & DISABILITY STUDIES FOR PUBLIC SPEAKING PROGRAMS

The TV show *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2019), although only producing three seasons, received rave reviews in part due to the realistic, yet humorous, approach to what reality should look like. *Speechless* (Gernon et al., 2019) is focused on the character J.J. who lives with cerebral palsy and is played by Micah Fowler who lives with cerebral palsy. At one point, a school function is canceled because the school cannot find a way to accommodate J.J. who uses a wheelchair. The students begin to express their feelings of frustration which leads to them pondering whether or not they should be mad at J.J. The students come to a census that if the event was canceled for any other student, everyone would be mad at that student, so they should also be mad at J.J. He simply wanted to have the same high school experience as everyone else, so in an attempt to provide J.J. with that via social ridicule, his classmates agree to not treating him any differently and to be mad at him. The show explained that the other students care about J.J. so much and see him as another peer that they display this with how much they resent him. The school's creation of the event and failure to consider that it was excluding J.J. is an example of ableism. The students would not be mad at J.J. if it were not for the school failing to consider students with disabilities in the first place. Although this is meant to be a humorous approach to ableism, it does respectfully provide examples for the term.

Similarly, to this example, the ableist assumptions and perspectives within public speaking programs have also been overlooked, although canceling public speaking programs is

unlikely. The Communication discipline relies on the public speaking course to recruit new students in and often relies on public speaking courses for departmental funding. This alone should cause high concern since the program is frequently evaluated being that it carries such weight. This chapter will outline the groundwork to situate the dissertation's overall intervention into. To begin, a brief history of communication studies and disability studies are necessary to gain an understanding of those areas before detailing more about public speaking programs and speaking centers.

### **History of Communication**

In 1879, two individuals, Thomas Clarkson Trueblood and Robert I. Fulton created a school for speech instruction in Kansas City that led to many requests from other institutions to create a speech course, but it would not become credit-bearing until 1887 (Kitzhaber, 1990). After an increase in departmental demand for more speech courses ensued, Trueblood developed a department for public speaking in 1892, which could be the first permanent department of speech in the country (Kitzhaber, 1990). There was an extended period (about 1878-1890) where simultaneous courses were being offered alongside speech which was housed primarily in the Communication department (such as elocution and oral discussion, both housed in other departments), but these courses did not supply much instruction on delivery, thus a divide of "separate instruction in speech" arose (Kitzhaber, 1990, p. 43). Since then, the Communication field has transformed tremendously, but has repeatedly returned to this tension between theoretical and pragmatic approaches to speech.

Rhetoric is a flexible term (Smit, 1997). A common understanding of rhetoric from Aristotle is that of a means for persuasion. Most scholars, in fact, are more concerned with how rhetoric is used rather than defining it. The art of rhetoric, which is the foundation for

speech/public speaking education, involves the use of symbols to create and represent social reality (Foss, 2009). Kenneth Burke (1969) expands this idea of rhetoric to “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” with the goal being to change another person’s attitude or actions (p. 43). Whereas Covino and Jolliffe (1995) thought of rhetoric as a primarily verbal art form that gives life to texts and is situation specific.

Rhetorical history includes numerous models and definitions to explain the process of communicating. Four philosophers often recognized for the development of public speaking theory included Aspasia of Miletus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Unfortunately, this quartet, while certainly influential, represents only a small portion of the total theory and practice of rhetoric over the centuries. The centrality of Western men in rhetorical studies is not simply a problem for the ancients, indeed, most widely known contributors or influencers of rhetoric in recent decades have been White men. Additionally, many rhetorical scholars “trained in the study of rhetoric typically learn in and/or work at institutions that reproduce white settler assemblages” (Lechuga, 2020, p. 384). Instead of continuing to teach these perspectives and uphold the problematic values, rhetoricians should reimagine a future of the field that “combats antiblack and anti-indigenous ideologies by aligning with activists to cocreate a political future outside and beyond the settler imaginary” (Lechuga, 2020, p. 384), and I would add that this also needs to include the intentional opposition to ableist ideologies.

There is much room for diversity within the established speech cannon, as well as the scholars who have developed the competencies to be used for public speaking courses, and this addresses the need to reassess public speaking programs. It is contradictory to assess students’ ability to “utilize communication to embrace difference” (see table 1 from Broeckelman-Post &

Ruiz-Mesa, 2018, p. 9), when the Communication field as a whole is not adequately implementing this idea into the curriculum and assessment tools. This also should not end with reassessing curriculum, classwork structure, instruction, training, assessment tools etc., but should also extend to assessing programs that help the success of public speaking programs.

Public speaking instruction has been around for centuries and has been housed in many different fields and disciplines (Kitzhaber, 1990). There have been various debates over whether or not public speaking, sometimes referred to simply as “speech,” should be the intellectual and pedagogical domain of the Communication field, or if it should be tailored from within all separate departments (Kitzhaber, 1990). This tension led to consistency concerns within the Communication field, whereas “some scholars treated speech as a synonym for oratory, while others used the term as a reference to the physical voice” (Gunn & Rice, 2009, p. 216). A majority of public speaking programs are currently found within Communication departments, but the growth of courses and degrees in “business communication,” “science communication,” and “technical communication” has placed new demands on Communication departments to articulate their particular institutional role and pedagogical contributions.

With the growth of the field, Communication scholars have been working to analyze and revise introductory communication courses, through joint efforts with NCA. The organization that would eventually become NCA was formed in 1914 by public speaking educators from English departments. Eventually, an entire new field shifted from English and was formed as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking around 1914 (Gunn & Rice, 2009). Because the NCA is concerned with the promotion of communication scholarship and pedagogy, multiple communication faculty within this leading disciplinary organization created standards for the basic course and continue to revise and assess necessary changes.

The growth led to departments and majors having title changes as well (Agyeman Asante, 2019). Around 1930, most departments switched to Speech from titles such as Elocution, Oratory, and Public Speaking (Ryan, 1918; Kitzhaber, 1953), and eventually many switched to Communication Studies. A growth in intellectual diversity also led many Communication departments making a shift or name changes to keep up with the field's overall national changes (Agyeman Asante, 2019). This in turn also led to individuals questioning if the same material is taught between the various titles (Ryan, 1918), and scholars became concerned with the education of speech referencing that it was insufficient (O'Neill, 1918). In 1918, scholars of the newly formed discipline became concerned with the "aims and standards" within speech scholarship in the U.S. and referred to them as "very unsatisfactory" (O'Neill, 1918, p. 345). Accurate assessment tools can be used, and the results can be compared between institutions to determine this. When a department completes an assessment of students among the same courses, student learning outcomes can be tested to evaluate retention levels, thus with those assessments, one can determine what is actually being taught to compare that to the other courses of its kind. But what will the future of public speaking courses look like if there is not proper analysis and adjustments that include disability perspectives? The field has constantly been changing and evolving, but more change is needed given that there is still so much room for improvement.

It is vital that public speaking instructors adapt to their key audience, which are the students. The growing number of diverse students in higher education will increase the chance of diverse students within public speaking courses. Scholars have suggested further discussion of the diversity range (or lack thereof) in the Communication field (Waymer, 2021), and the diversity in students increasing, the need to prioritize underrepresented groups within academia

is vital. Currently, public speaking programs are not adequately addressing diversity in part because the Communication field, in general, is lacking the consideration of diversity.

In 2019, Wanzer-Serrano explained that the NCA members started a campaign once diversity issues within the Communication field were exposed by Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain labeled “#CommunicationSoWhite.” This exposed the lack of racial diversity within the Communication field that have been present as far back as the 1960s and is explained through the authors’ research of past journal publications between 1990-2016 (Chakravartty, et al., 2018). Shortly after, more debates began that ultimately revealed many issues of race in regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion that the Communication field needs to work through (Wanzer-Serrano et al., 2019; Waymer, 2021). Without resolving these issues, public speaking will continue to mirror the same issues and, in the end, may lack effectiveness (Orbe, 2016). The subtle underlining of Whiteness has increasingly been exposed and it affects diverse racialized groups within society and academia (Marom, 2019). Research on diversity, equity, and inclusion in public speaking, instructional communication, and Communication Studies, in general, is necessary as the conversation of inequality continues (Waymer, 2021). Sowards (2019) stated that the problem articulated with #CommunicationSoWhite “extends far beyond the color of one’s skin and what kind of research scholars of color engage in and what kind of work is taught in classrooms” (p. 477), and explained that self-presentation, identity, and the work one does are all connected. Diversity alone includes many facets, including cultural diversities, ethnic diversities, accessibility and or ability diversities, and many more (Kantanis, 2001). In fact, disability tends to overlap here because “disability is a political and cultural identity, not simply a medical condition” (Dolmage, 2014, pp. 19-20). The critical shift to focus on Whiteness in Communication studies should also

be applied to disability issues with an interdisciplinary approach with Disability Studies. With an emphasis on disability and identity, Disability Studies can be understood as a political movement interested in “claiming disability, owning disabled identity, and the right to define this lived experience” (Dolmage, 2014, p. 94).

### **Disability Studies**

During the 1970s, protests and self-advocacy was on the rise and Disability Studies allowed for scholars with and without disabilities to express complaints about living with disabilities (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). The Society of Disability Studies traces the field back to 1982, although its origin date is unclear. In 1980, a newsletter which turned into what is now known as Disability Studies Quarterly was started and is considered to be the oldest academic journal to represent the interdisciplinary field (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012). Disability Studies is considered interdisciplinary because it pulls from various research and theory to create a cohesive structure for viewing “disability as a social phenomenon, a perspective largely ignored or misrepresented in the curriculum” (Linton et al., 1995 p. 4). Disability Studies aims to “weave disabled people back into the fabric of society” and “to work to naturalize disabled people” (Linton, 2005, p. 518). Additionally, Disability Studies challenges current curriculum of “the idea that the social and economic status and assigned roles of people with disabilities are inevitable outcomes of their condition” (Linton et al., 1995, p. 5), which is part of the argument here with the public speaking course. The term disability holds various positive and negative meanings and refers to invisible or visible disabilities. Being considerate of all individuals also calls for an examination of definitions and terms being used thus far and throughout the dissertation.

## ***Defining (Dis)Abilities***

There are various ways to define disabilities; however, the concept itself is based on societal norms, stereotypes, and cultural standards (Row, 2016; Oliver, 1996; Procknow et al., 2017), making the term disability misleading (Shah, 2014). Understanding disabilities framed from a social perspective respects differences in the bodily, sensory, neurological, and mental capacities rather than the medical understanding, which perceives such differences as a problem (Daniels et al., 2016). Additionally, the term “disorder” differs from disability, whereas one is a medical term, and the other is societal based but social norms and cues. Disorders can affect vision, movement, thinking, remembering, learning, communicating, hearing, mental health, and social relationships and are often broken into functional categories. These categories can include but are not limited to physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment, and mental illnesses. Having a disorder diagnosis does not necessarily mean that a person is disabled; instead, one might not fit the standards created by society for what is “normal.” Society has determined standards for what is considered normal instead of thinking about abilities on a continuum (Procknow et al., 2017). Furthermore, the normative societal use of *disability*, *disorder* and *impairment* are terms often used interchangeably, though these are not conceptually the same. A disability can be an impairment, but when an impairment creates a barrier to everyday living, it can become a disability (Shah, 2014).

Thus far, I have used the wording *individuals/people with disabilities*, but this statement is broad and contentious because “a label of disability itself has frequently been perceived as an automatic disqualification from both rhetoric and public affairs” (Beasley, 2021, p. 295). This disqualification could come from cultural discomfort formed from societal issues due to ableism. The Ability Institute, initiated by Saint Louis University in 2010, explains that when referring to

disabilities, inclusive language should be used which can come in two forms, person-first, and identity-first. The preference depends on the person, but both have been accepted and rejected in society. I consciously have used the term “disability” when referencing individuals (e.g., *a student with a disability* vs. *a disabled student*) to acknowledge that we are all human before anything. I use the term “disability” to respect different individuals, but it is not meant in a derogatory way. Respectfully, we are all different, but to speak about one specific minority group in this research, the term “disability” is used to distinguish this community.

I have and will also use the term differing abilities, or (dis)abilities, to discuss disabilities as well because of the range in human abilities. There are numerous categories of disabilities, some that are considered hidden and some that are not, such as, a learning disability versus more visible disabilities (Friedman & Owen, 2017), such as dyslexia which is a learning disorder that can make it difficult to read versus Spina Bifida which is a condition that affects the spine and often leaves individuals immobilized. In using such language/terminology, I aim to highlight differences as a positive as opposed to a negative or pitfall. Abilities can be understood as a spectrum, and societal and educational challenges can occur depending on the nature of a disability or where it lands on the spectrum. For example, there are criteria that an individual must meet to receive disability benefits in the U.S., if the government decides that one is disabled *enough*. This could be the opposite of able-disabled (Stone, 1986) whereas one might not be able to mask their disability, or if a disability makes it increasingly difficult to live everyday life whereas it could become difficult to maintain a traditional job to earn a steady income.

Cooper and Simonds (2003) explained that students with special needs [sic] in education can fall into the following categories: students with learning disabilities, students who are

intellectually gifted, students who are mainstreamed, students with physical disabilities, and students at risk (although all other groups are considered at risk too). Mainstreaming refers to the practice of having students who were previously enrolled in special education courses become integrated into classrooms of nonspecial education courses open to all students (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Often, the struggles that individuals with disabilities have faced, and still face, are related to what other minorities have dealt with in the U.S. where “marginalized people have long been concerned with how they are depicted” and have considered themselves inferior due to societal constructs and discrimination (Krentz & Sanchez, 2021, p. 125). Grue (2021) is an academic who uses a wheelchair for mobility assistance and argues that too often there is minimal association linking intelligence and disabilities, meaning that a person with a disability is often not deemed as intelligent. Grue’s experience reminds me of my uncle who, despite having three degrees, still struggles with stereotypical discrimination.

Society tends to replicate the idea that disability equates to unintelligence. The fact that during the last general election, four out of five people with learning disabilities were unable to cast their votes due to being turned away is an example of how pervasive social disdain for people with disabilities weakens our democracy (Hindle, 2021). In addition to casting votes in elections, public speaking has long been associated with civic virtue and democratic health (Ohl, 2019), but ableism threatens to disenfranchise people with disabilities by restricting their voices. Additionally, the government chooses to regulate disabilities with the power to name people disabled, and others not, which has many implications for can receive the help they deserve through economic and health benefits (Forrest, 2020). These labels, which are used as identifying factors, are embraced by some individuals, and become a part of one’s identity, but in other cases, they can also be rejected.

Disability, culture, race, and identity tend to overlap. Identity from a communication perspective is the “communicative articulation of one’s combined personal, cultural, and historical positionalities” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 4). Sophia Maier explained on *Communication matters: The NCA podcast* hosted by Parry-Giles’ (2021) that once an individual is diagnosed with a disability, they can then establish a sense of identity that is informed by their diagnosis. For example, a person with Tourette Syndrome, once diagnosed, can take on that identity rather than being labeled *disruptive* or *insubordinate*. A person’s identity cannot be separated from most situations or discussions. Instructors cannot detach their identity from how they teach, and students often cannot, and arguably should not, detach their identity from their schoolwork. Our identities as human beings are linked to most of what we do, so it is important that to consider all aspects of one’s identity and not separate different parts of one’s identity. As instructors, we should embrace the incorporation of students’ identities within their work.

There are overlaps between disability identity and emotions that have been deemed *crip feelings/feeling crip* (Forrest, 2020). Krummel (2021), who lives with multiple sclerosis, explains the importance of disclosing their disabled identity to students during COVID-19 since they were not teaching face-to-face anymore. “‘Invisible disability’ unsettles the visible boundaries between crip and abled-bodied people,” (Krummel, 2021, p. 248), where crip is a shorten word aiming to reclaim the word cripple. The term crip feelings/feeling crip acknowledges the blurred line between how a person feels and their disability identity (Forrest, 2020). An example of this is “psychiatric disabilities where emotional states can take the form of an identity category,” as well as chronic pain or chronic fatigue which are identified from feelings and categorized as a disability (Forrest, 2020, p. 78). Bipolar disorder and clinical depression are other examples when physical features may not exist, but emotion and identity may determine the disability.

### ***Societal Discrimination of Disabilities***

As mentioned earlier, representation in the media can sometimes be a negative thing for societal ideas on disabilities. It is not enough to view and present individuals with disabilities on TV to change societal perspectives. Crow (2014), who identifies as a PWD, explained that individuals with disabilities need to strategically be present in public places and actively visible. This is why it is so important for the media to accurately represent the disability community. Comedy Central's *South Park*, which originally aired in 1997, is an example of how race and disability are conceptualized in society, specifically being that the animated show features multiple characters with disabilities. Krebs (2020) argued that the show "interrupts hegemonic ideas of disability and race in ways that ask the audience to engage in intense self-retrospection often via alignment with counterhegemonic forces and ways of knowing" although the show tends to take a rather satirical approach that does not always advance the needs of marginalized communities (p. 307). *South Park* arguably does, however, strives for society to "critically, creatively, and differently" reconsider norms and stigmas (Krebs, 2020).

There are many examples of why it is important for society to challenge stigmatized ideals, with one area that has been highlighted recently: police brutality against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). One example is Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old, Black male, who utilized rhetoric by stating to police right before they killed him that "I am just different" yet it was not an acceptable persuasive argument for the police (Beasley, 2021). McClain suffered from asthma and was an introvert. Unfortunately, systemic discrimination adds additional barriers for individuals who have disabilities. Another example being Magdiel Sanchez, a Deaf individual, who was shot and killed for not responding to the verbal shouts from the police (Krentz & Sanchez, 2021).

### ***Intellectual And Developmental Disabilities***

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) as “disorders that are usually present at birth and that uniquely affect the trajectory of the individual’s physical, intellectual, and/or emotional development” (2021, para 1). IDD can be defined in many ways and can affect multiple body parts, or systems, such as the nervous system or sensory system, but they can also affect metabolism and be understood through degenerative disorders as well (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Disability research generally “has been conducted with able-bodied people in mind” (Row, 2016, p. 24), and this is also true for public speaking curriculum too as accommodations are usually made for students with IDD to fit into the curriculum, not with IDD students in mind in when creating the curriculum in the first place. The specific challenges that students with IDD tend to face in academia generally “stem from structures and teaching styles designed for students without disabilities” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 205). A change in pedagogical values and approach is necessary to include the consideration of students with IDD.

### ***Disability Studies and Pedagogy***

Higher education has acknowledged the need to become more inclusive, specifically towards students with disabilities, yet “there is a concern that the accommodations made for such students tend to be theoretical and that at the implementation and practical level much work remains to be done” (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 25). The public speaking classroom/course is one place in which logistical challenge sometimes complicate accommodations through the unexamined presence of ableist assumptions that can create barriers.

To be clear, efforts to accommodate built upon pity are themselves problematic, instead, it is important that everyone receives equal rights and fair treatment in higher education. Ableism

can occur when individuals overly accommodate for the PWD, which can be a negative because it underestimates a student's potential to grow and overcome difficult tasks. In the process of making public speaking more assessable, we must also avoid the mistake of over-accommodating for those with disabilities, which itself can perpetuate paternalistic assumptions that equate disability with deficit (Daniels et al., 2016). Instructional methods and planning in the public speaking course should be revised to consider the needs of all students, with a focus on underrepresented students, specifically students with disabilities to accommodate the circumstances by which they navigate the world. When considering accessibility, it is not only obtainability that needs to be considered, but also how easily the obtainable the information (such as webpage or textbook) is and how easily it is to navigate and understand (Dembsey, 2020). Parrey (2020), who teaches Disability Studies and identifies with the disability community, urges that scholars and researchers should utilize lived experiences to understand disabled points of view and ableism instead of fetishizing disabilities as something to study nor disabled individuals as objects. There is richness in including lived experiences in scholarly research because “genuinely centering people that have been historically excluded from public discourse produces new forms and enables novel kind of interaction between text and audiences,” thus providing new perspectives that are currently lacking in academic publications (Krentz & Sanchez, 2021, p. 129). Studies and research in this manner could be increasingly valuable for the public speaking course and student-teacher relationships in the classroom.

**Disability and the classroom.** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that around one in ten undergraduate students state that they have one or multiple disabilities (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Considering this shift in diversity is important to recognize various viewpoints, but we need to include diverse voices, such as individuals with disabilities,

in curriculum building because “by not empowering and listening to the voices of people with disabilities, we lack knowledge on how to interact and how to include their priorities into our classrooms” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 208). Students with learning disabilities need to be in a structured classroom with much attention to consistent and clear instructions (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Students with IDD, when instructed correctly, can learn and develop their skills in any classroom with proper support (Ryndak et al., 2013; Papay et al., 2018). Students with IDD who experience postsecondary education have much higher employment rates than individuals with IDD without that experience (Papay et al., 2018). Moreover, students who identified as having a disability who were in courses that integrated both students with and without disabilities into the same class “were almost five times more likely to earn minimum wage or above in their jobs” compared to students who took courses exclusive to students with disabilities (Papay et al., 2018, p. 459). Students with IDD are usually not just dealing with judgment about their visible or invisible differences, but they are often also facing additional judgments and or inequalities as well. For example, individuals with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, be socially excluded, and unfortunately fall victim to violence (Emerson, 2007). This intensifies the need to “unlearn our limiting expectations set by an ableist society, embrace our uncertainties and explore innovative approaches toward the goal of an inclusive and transformative public speaking classroom” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 217), and to go beyond the accommodations in place by law.

**Legal Accommodations.** The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 opened up many opportunities by directing teachers to “integrate handicapped students into the mainstream of nonhandicapped peer friendship networks and classroom life” (Johnson & Johnson, 1980, p. 90). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 established the

mandate that students with disabilities be granted access to general education with the least amount of restrictions (Papay et al., 2018). The American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2018) states that all individuals with IDD “have access to the general education curriculum and age-appropriate inclusive settings” (Papay et al., 2018, p. 458). The growing numbers of diverse students in postsecondary education could also be a result of Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Higher Education Opportunities Act of 2008 (Carter et al., 2019), which gives students with disabilities the opportunity to receive better financial support (Papay et al., 2018), and both state that educational institutions cannot discriminate against students with IDD (Chiu et al., 2019). With this legal framework in place, most institutions today have programs dedicated to diversity and helping achieve equal access for students who need additional support, whether that be through an office, division, or another alike resource. It was reported in 2017 that more than 260 colleges and universities included specific programs dedicated to supporting students with IDD (Hart, 2017; Carter et al., 2019; Think College, 2018; Papay et al., 2018). Although there are many laws and acts in place to help students with disabilities, this is not enough. Additionally, not all students may know about their disability due to accessibility. Personally, I was homeschooled between third to tenth grade, which are primal years for development and observing learning disabilities. Not recognizing a child’s struggle at a young age will prevent them from getting the help they need.

Aside from being aware or unaware of a disability, it is important to consider how courses are designed and whether they are inclusive of differing abilities since the disability community has often been “misrepresented in the curriculum” (Linton et al., 1995 p. 4).

Addressing how the public speaking course is ableist will call attention to the changes that need to be made that go beyond accommodations required by law.

### **Public Speaking Programs**

The Communication field has a moral obligation to adjust according to the needs of diverse students to improve the standards that were established centuries ago at the evolution of the field. Public speaking coordinators, directors, and instructors must consider ways to make the course better for all students, not just for some students. The diversity among college students is apparent, so the public speaking course curriculum, rubrics, textbooks, and lesson plans should reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion to welcome the diverse students of today, specifically students with IDD.

To look back at where the public speaking course originated, Trueblood made the first reference to the basic course in *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* in 1915 and suggested that the course needed to “offer a strong scientific, cultural, and inspirational course” (Trueblood, 1915, p. 160). Trueblood’s (1915) article included a list of public speaking courses with the primary course objectives for students to learn to accomplish the basics of public speaking (LeFebvre & LeFebvre, 2020). In 1956, Hargis conducted one of the first research studies on the basic course and submitted it to the Speech Association of America’s Committee on Problems in Undergraduate Study that was interested in examining the state of the course (Morreale et al., 2016). In 1970, the first study containing descriptive data on the basic course was published which focused more so on content, activities, and how to direct the course (Gibson et al., 1970; Morreale et al., 2016). Since 1970, nine studies have followed to examine the changes in the course throughout time (Morreale et al., 2016). Because this research is usually conducted every five years, another study is set to be published soon and reportedly will include more elements of

diversity. One of the case studies will focus on the assessment tools utilized in public speaking course (Morreale et al., 2016).

Taking a look at some of the most recent and well-known defined competencies that are the foundation for some assessment tools displays the need for broaden perspectives to become more inclusive to current student populations. Understanding a brief history of public speaking competencies shows the need for further revision to include Disability Studies. *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al., 2007), a common assessment tool, has been revised only once since it was first created in 1990 by the NCA Committee on Assessment and Testing (Morreale et al., 2007) (see table 1 for the list of competencies). Although the NCA has dedicated much time to evaluating what revisions need to be made to the basic course, there is not only a lack of consistency, but also the identifying framework for how the competencies were determined in the past is missing (Engleberg et al., 2017).

The NCA is constantly reevaluating the basic course, but it is not apparent if disabled perspectives are being considered. In 2011, the task force Core Communication Competencies Group was formed and later renamed the NCA Core Competencies Task Force that established seven competencies they believed should be the goal for any introductory communication course, different from the eight listed before (Engleberg et al., 2017; Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). This effort investigated better training and resources for public speaking courses and resulted in the proposition of a set of communication competencies applicable for the basic communication course (Ward et al., 2014; Morreale et al., 2016). The Core Competencies Group, which later became the NCA Core Competencies Task Force, determined that:

A core communication competency is an expected level of performance that

integrates appropriate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, is stated in general terms, and broadly applies to the majority of introductory communication courses in higher education (Ward et al., 2014, p. 153).

The seven Core Communication Competencies for introductory communication courses established by the NCA Core Competencies Task Force are shown in table 1. Also, around this time, Communication scholars were proposing future directions for the basic course with some suggesting a standard for all iterations and others suggesting that each instructor tailor their course accordingly, thus, confusion arose (Morreale et al., 2016). The NCA Core Competencies Task Force also determined five benefits that the competencies provide, with one of those being to “strengthen the rationales and justifications for diverse approaches to introductory communication courses” where they stated that,

Rather than refuting challenges and criticism for not offering a single introductory/basic course, core competencies demonstrate the plasticity of communication studies in meeting the diverse needs of communities, institutions, programs faculty, and students (Ward et al., 2014, p. 155).

This dissertation examines why it is necessary to consider Disability Studies within public speaking courses to unlearn ableist perspectives (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017). And although these competencies focus less on physical features, delivery/performance is incorporated within how to measure and assess students on these competencies which is similar to *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al., 2007).

After the work of the Core Competencies Task Force in 2011, a team of researchers set out to redefine and clarify the “core concepts, competencies, and outcomes that should be included in any public speaking course” (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018, p. 3;

**Table 1. Competencies for the Public Speaking Course**

<i>The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (Morreale et al., 2007)</i>	<i>Core Communication Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses (Ward et al., 2014)</i>	<i>Six Essential Competencies of Public Speaking (Broeckelman-Post &amp; Ruiz-Mesa, 2018)</i>
1. Chooses and narrows a topic appropriately for the audience & occasion	1. Monitoring and presenting your self	1. Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context
2. Communicates the thesis/specific purpose in a manner appropriate for the audience & occasion	2. Practicing communication ethics	2. Critically analyze messages
3. Provides supporting material (including electronic and non-electronic presentational aids) appropriate for the audience & occasion	3. Adapting to others	3. Apply ethical communication principles and practices
4. Uses an organizational pattern appropriate to the topic, audience, occasion, & purpose	4. Practicing effective listening	4. Utilize communication to embrace difference
5. Uses language appropriate to the audience & occasion	5. Expressing messages	5. Demonstrate self-efficacy
6. Uses vocal variety in rate, pitch, & intensity (volume) to heighten & maintain interest appropriate to the audience & occasion	6. Identifying and explaining fundamental communication processes	6. Influence public discourse
7. Uses pronunciation, grammar, & articulation appropriate to the audience & occasion	7. Creating and analyzing message strategies	
8. Uses physical behaviors that support the verbal message		

Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020), by using material previously established, such as the competencies listed above. They determined six different competencies (see table 1). This team of scholars also set out to reevaluate the assessment tools being used to measure the core concepts, competencies, and outcomes of students. This project reviewed assessments tools that dated back to 1970 and established that assessments should be comprehensive, flexible, capable of use at one or multiple institutions, and easily comparable to assess results within departments and programs (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). They determined that for assessment tools to be comprehensive to accurately assess if students are achieving the learning outcomes, assessment tools should be guided by four things (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). The first being “a comprehensive set of assessment tools [that] should include: (1) quantitative self-report and/or knowledge-based measures that can be included in students pre/post surveys, (2) rubric-based assessments of student performances, and (3) qualitative assessments of student achievement of communication goals” (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018, p. 5). Additionally, those tools should also be flexible to “meet their program’s, student population’s and campus’ needs”, that the assessment tools should be applicable to a single institution or multiple and lastly that the “benchmarks should be established” to compare and assess the results (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018, p. 5).

From the first competency, “create messages appropriate to the audience”, an essential learning outcome labeled “present messages” listed that two *enabling objectives* for students in public speaking are “the use of effective verbal and nonverbal delivery techniques and the use of appropriate technology and communication modalities to present a message” (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020, p. 9), but it is not entirely clear what “effective” means or assumes. What does *effective delivery techniques* and the use of *appropriate technologies and modalities* mean for

someone with a disability? Broeckelman-Post and Ruiz-Mesa (2018) suggest that students should also be able to “utilize communication to embrace differences” and explain that as “[articulating] the connection between communication and culture and [respecting] diverse perspectives in the ways that influence communication” (p. 7). No set of evaluative competencies, no matter how carefully conceived, is completely devoid of biases. However, reflecting on the role of implicit and explicit biases can lead to more inclusive assessment sensitive to the many needs and capabilities of students. Of course, this process of introspection and growth is constrained when marginalized voices are excluded, and after many decades of entrenched ableism, the field has failed to attract and support faculty with disabilities.

Several controversies inside and outside of academia have brought intensified attention in the field of Communication Studies to the centrality of Whiteness and need for increased diversity in leadership at all levels. It is unfortunately the case that many committees tasked with developing fair standards in public speaking course have historically been composed predominately of White, able-bodied men, meaning that there is much room for diversity and inclusion, specifically in this case with respect to individuals with disabilities. Including individuals with disabilities into the conversation for developing the standards of public speaking is necessary and should be welcomed, but it is complicated by the historical exclusion of students with disabilities who are less likely to receive advanced degrees and employment due to cultural and institutional barriers. Research from 2015 showed that the basic course, in general, has not undergone much change in “instruction, content, or administration” (Morreale et al., 2016). For instructors to fulfill their goal in public speaking courses, students and instructors must critically evaluate the standards.

When considering the language surrounding delivery in the context of the NCA *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* eight competencies, number eight states “uses physical behaviors that support the verbal message” (Morreale et al., 2007). However, this does not look the same way for all students. The handbook continues to say that for a speaker to be “excellent” within the category, they must “demonstrate exceptional posture, gestures, bodily movement, facial expressions, eye contact, and use of dress” (Morreale et al., 2007, p. 15). Schreiber et al. (2012) published results testing the validity of the public speaking rubrics and suggested that new scoring tools are needed to assess the competency from the public speaking course. Consider, for instance, the subtle biases coming together to shape what is and is not good posture. In the medical realm, posture can be the difference between ill and healthy, and in Western culture, tests of *good* posture have been subjectively used to arbitrate citizenship (Gilman, 2014). Think of the long-standing test of balancing books on your head to assess posture—if you could successfully walk with books balanced on your head, this was a clear indication of *good* posture and an *upstanding* citizen—this is an example of the socially constructed definition of what is and is not good posture. What has been deemed *good* posture is typically *good* only for those in power.

Although each set of public speaking competencies serve as a guide for instructors (Morreale et al., 2007), there is no national standard for the basic course, and not having a standard in place for all courses is a limitation that can result in public speaking programs being excessively different which could result in substantial ableist views across the U.S. While differentiation often invites innovation and responsiveness to the unique conditions of each institution, too much variation can lead to different learning outcomes across universities and even between sections at the same school. There are some standards in place that can be

understood as the norm for public speaking programs, such as including a persuasive speech. A balance of similarity and uniqueness per program and institution is ideal, and this should also translate to assessment tools.

### ***Assessments in Public Speaking Programs***

Since many schools require an introductory course in public speaking and or include it under the core curriculum, it is imperative that communication faculty and departments can justify the course to administrators (Allen, 2002; Hunter et al., 2014; Morreale et al., 2010). To justify the course, an assessment is necessary, thus an increasing concern for assessment in the basic course has developed (Hunter et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2010; Morreale et al., 2010). Although higher education is currently in strong support of assessments, basic courses in Communication Studies have not followed in this shift (Hunter et al., 2014). This could lead to variations in the course nationally within the field, whereas most other disciplines are able to rely on one unified introductory course (Ward et al., 2014). Public speaking assessment tools should be revised and more research in pedagogy and instruction needs to be published to analyze their aims, accuracy, and bias (Pearson et al., 2010).

The majority of the pedagogical focus in basic course assessment is on public speaking probably because public speaking tends to make up most of basic courses (Morreale et al., 2015). *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al., 2007) is commonly used for introductory public speaking courses or at least used as a guide. The manual states that it should be used to assess public speaking competency within higher education, specifically to uphold departmental and institutional accountability (Morreale et al., 2007). Challenges with using this manual is that for one, it is over 14 years old now, and two, that it does not address the needs of students of today, specifically students with disabilities. Some scholars have critiqued it as being

insensitive, although *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al., 2007) attempts to be inclusive by stating that it,

Is free of cultural bias. Each competency is assessed with respect to the target audience and occasion. In other words, judgments are based upon the degree to which the behavior is appropriate to the “audience and occasion.” As long as the evaluator/assessor bases judgments on these criteria, cultural bias should not become a factor (p. 9).

Within Hugenberg and Yoder's (1994) reaction paper, the authors explain that there is clear discrimination within the determining levels of the competencies, that each competency is too generalized and based on the instructor's perspective, and that each competency is culturally narrow (pp. 12-13). Although a second edition has been made since Hugenberg and Yoder's (1994) critique, not much change was made to incorporate these concerns.

There is a need for communication faculty and administrators in higher education to question the instruction and assessment of public speaking courses (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994), specifically to ensure that assessment criteria are not perpetuating ableist assumptions. It is not only important to evaluate if a student is understanding the course concepts, but also whether the course outcomes are sound, and in this case, inclusive of differing abilities. Assessments can help determine where improvements need to be made in the instruction of public speaking courses (Allen, 2002; Hunter et al., 2014; McCroskey, 2007; Meyer et al., 2010).

Instructional communication specific to public speaking classrooms gained formal recognition in the early 1970s with the approval of the (Instructional Communication Division of the NCA in 1972 which validated the need in the Communication field for instructional communication research and scholarship (Richmond et al., 2015). In 1975, the journal formally

known as *Speech Teacher* became *Communication Education* to demonstrate a newfound appreciation in the Communication field (Richmond et al., 2015). Gustav W. Freidrich was one of the founders of instructional communication scholarship and became the editor of *Communication Education* in 1979, where “instructional communication scholarship was recognized formally as an area appropriate for inclusion in the journal” (Richmond et al., 2015, p. 36).

Unfortunately, *Communication Education* has faced some criticism surrounding racial insensitivities and ignoring underrepresented submissions, similar to the criticism stated earlier within the broader Communication field (Hendrix & Wilson, 2014; Orbe, 2016; Waymer, 2021). Richmond et al. (2015) explained that when considering the future of instructional communication, change tends to happen slowly and become more difficult as time goes on. Further research in instructional communication is necessary as it is difficult the accuracy and consistency of public speaking curriculum across institutions. It should not come as a surprise then to find that the top reported problem in public speaking courses from both two and four-year schools in 1999, 2004, and 2010 dealt with “consistency across sections,” although in 2016 it dropped to the seventh reported problem (Morreale et al., 2016). What was surprisingly high in the Morreale et al. (2016) results were problems that included the “qualification of the instructors” (42.5), “evaluation of the instructors” (39.5), “training of the instructors” (35.3), and “assessment of student learning” (25.7) (p. 346). Again, with a lack of research in this area, it is difficult to understand how students with disabilities are succeeding in public speaking courses as well as how instructors are doing with teaching them.

Much research surrounding public speaking assessment is concerned with students’ self-report or self-assessments (see McCroskey, 1970), which has shifted with more recent scholars

suggesting that “public speaking and oral assessments are common assessment type in university, and serve to measure a student’s capacity to create and deliver an engaging, informed and persuasive argument” (Nash et al., 2016, p. 586). Additionally, the assessment across various areas in a public speaking course (such as a speech rubric) that an instructor completes may be more reliable than trying to determine the relationship between the curriculum or instruction from students’ self-reports (Pearson et al., 2010; Pfister & Robinson, 2010). Utilizing rubrics provides a direct measurement of student’s achievement of the learning outcomes while self-assessments are indirect measurements that may be less accurate at assessing learning outcomes.

With rubrics, instructors evaluate each student numerically with a rating system for each component to equate to an overall performance rate (Dunbar et al., 2006). It is important that instructors understand each section on the rubric to ensure similar rating processes (Dunbar et al., 2006; Mager, 1997). Rubrics can stimulate bias from instructors and often reinforce hegemonic norms (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Hugenberg and Yoder (1994) argue that the first version of the *Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (1990) was too ambiguous and that the levels of competence were not fully nor clearly defined, nor adequately defended (p. 12). There are appropriateness bias, cultural bias, and generalizations being made overall (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994). For example, “direct and frequent eye contact may be appropriate for the Westernized speech classroom, it would be counterproductive in many Oriental [sic] and Native American interactions,” thus determining the appropriateness of a speech is essentially a judgement call determined by the receiver (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994, p. 8). The same could be applied to abilities while speaking, where one public speaking instructor might value physically moving in the space and another may not. Additionally, assessment rubrics often include text similar to “eliminate distracting characteristics, increase eye contact, enunciate clearly/ naturally, eliminate

distracting mannerisms, gesture naturally, control your facial expressions, stand up straight and tall, movement needed and so on” yet, “these expectations also intrinsically pose challenges to students with disabilities and more often than not set them up for failure” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 206). It is appropriate to use rubrics as an assessment tool for introductory public speaking courses because they are often used to grade oral presentations in communication courses (Dunbar et al., 2006). Because the course is worth continued exploration (Morreale et al., 2016, p. 341), the rubrics should also be assessed regularly as well. This assessment process should also include consideration of disability perspectives.

### ***Disability Studies in Public Speaking Programs***

There is a need to include more insights of Disability Studies into public speaking courses. Public speaking courses innately possess dominant ableist perspectives and public speaking instructors are often unknowingly reproducing this (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017). The current way public speaking is taught suggests that students must follow rules “suggesting that the point of this scholarship is less to understand new ways or arguing but instead to put them into existing rhetorical structures that are legible as argument” (Beasley, 2021, p. 299). Disability research must become a part of public speaking courses to cultivate an inclusive classroom and “if the educational system aspires to continue embracing diversity, it is time to explore beyond vital issues of racism and sexism to interrogate ableism equally in class discussions and curricula” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 205). Public speaking courses often teach Greek and Roman traditions with omission to classical narratives that included other perspectives of rhetoric, thus a subliminal assumption that disabilities prevent or cannot create rhetoric is established (Dolmage, 2014). This in turn creates rhetorical disability.

Rhetorical disability is discrimination against a person because of their abilities whereas, “[just] as one can inquire into the conditions under which persons are granted rhetorical ability, one can also examine the circumstances under which that ability is denied” (Johnson, 2010, p. 461). Instead of assuming that a student cannot successfully complete a speech due to their abilities, a shift towards *why* they would be unsuccessful is necessary. Rhetorical disability focuses on the rhetorical environment rather than the disability or lack of rhetorical skill and “directs attention to the variety of barriers that prevent certain rhetors from achieving rhetoricity with certain audiences” (Johnson, 2010, p. 461). Rhetorical disability is much more inviting approach that challenges the exclusion of disability perspectives.

### **The Need for Disability Studies in Public Speaking Programs**

Incorporating individuals with disabilities into the public speaking course might frighten some educators due to the fact that “disability disorients,” meaning that the disability “implies, entails, or simply is, a disruption of conventional anatomical, sensory, cognitive, affective ways of being and knowing” (Parrey, 2020, p. 42). For this dissertation, the focus will be on students who are mainstreamed due to my personal experience as a graduate educator, which will be discussed more later on, but this cannot, and should not, be seen as generalizable to the experience of all students with disabilities. Students with disabilities have often reported negative experiences with faculty as a reason for not succeeding at the postsecondary level (Cooper & Simonds, 2003), and the mistake of collapsing ability into overly neat categories runs the risk of alienating students whose circumstances escape the perception of instructors. Even when students can find faculty that are willing to acknowledge them and make accommodations, the classroom culture is often less inviting because of the negative stereotypes that many able-bodied students have about students with disabilities (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Able-bodied

are hesitant to accept disabled bodies as equals from pre-conceived assumptions and ableist norms that theorize that PWD will “not be able to speak well in a performance sense” and/or “that they might also not be able to ‘follow’ (as in, cognitive track) the logic of rules or arguments in manner that could enable them to participate” (Beasley, 2021, p. 300). In addition to evaluating the public speaking curriculum and assessments to include more insights of Disability Studies, an analysis of programs that assist the course should be made as well in order to determine if the same standards and values are present. Speaking centers often support and help public speaking students’ success, thus it is fundamental to comprehend their contribution to this research as well.

### ***Support for Public Speaking Programs: Speaking Centers***

Speaking centers have multiple benefits for students and help their success in higher education (Fleuriet, 1997). Speaking centers can provide additional support to public speaking instructors and their students by helping students’ individual needs (Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Jones et al., 2004; Nelson et al., 2012). The NCA defines speaking centers, also known as communication centers, speech labs, communication labs, speaking labs, speaking studio, or similar names, as a facility on campus where peer-to-peer feedback can be provided to help students with any oral communication dilemma (LeFebvre et al., 2017). Often the peers who work within the center are referred to as tutors, consultants, or mentors. Speaking centers are not limited to student use, as faculty and staff and sometimes even outside community members may utilize the facility (Hobgood, 2015).

In 1945, at the University of North Carolina (UNC), the board of trustees approved the creation a communication center (Wynn, 1947), although the focus at this center was more media focused rather than communication processes (Liberman, 2012). Albeit this center no longer

exists, it provided valuable evidence for the need for communication centers that ultimately led to more than 70 centers across the U.S. (Von Till, 2012) (although UNC currently has a “Business Communication Center” dedicated to helping business students specifically). Speaking centers arguably started around 1980 and within the 10 years to follow, multiple centers were appearing (LeFebvre et al., 2017; Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Although there was a lull in the mid-1990s speaking centers started to gain traction again by the 2000s (Sellnow & Martin, 2010; Weiss, 1998). The need for communication centers developed out of research on providing timely feedback to student speeches (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Two major conferences happened for the speaking center world in 2001 with Linda Hobgood organizing the first conference at the University of Richmond and became the first of many “Excellence at the Center” conference and the second conference led by Sherry Morreale as the Associate Director of the NCA at the time titled “Engaging 21st Century Communication Students,” in Washington, D.C. with one of focuses being devoted to communication centers (Von Till, 2012, p. xii). At those conferences, they reviewed operational models, the development of new programs, and methods of assessment. Around that same time, in 2004, the NCA created a sub-conference for speaking centers known as the National Association of Communication Centers (NACC) which allowed a space for speaking center scholars to generate conversation and begin to establish common goals and best practices (LeFebvre et al., 2017).

Although speaking centers can be a major asset to public speaking courses, speaking centers, in general, are still battling to remain relevant, and their lack of stability in colleges and universities does not help (Sellnow & Martin, 2010; Weiss, 1998). Historically, many speaking centers have had to fight to remain open and adequately funded. The lack of research on speaking centers has led to many centers struggling with funding, dedicated spaces on campuses,

and a lack of administrative support (Sellnow & Martin, 2010; Weiss, 1998). Unlike writing centers that have a lot more research produced and published about them, speaking center success is often tied to the director or a particular person working with the center, so when someone leaves the center, it may be shut down as a result (Turner, & Sheckels, 2015). Speaking centers have long tried to follow the path of writing centers as they faced a similar struggle as well, with some writing centers still struggling (Hobgood, 2015).

Speaking centers allow for students who struggle to understand the material or strive to do better in public speaking courses to get a further understanding of this knowledge with one-on-one help (Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Depending on the size of the class and instructor availability, it is often difficult for students in public speaking courses to get one-on-one time with their instructors, unlike the personal, unique help that speaking centers can offer. This individuated instruction can also, in turn, empower students and promote student success (Bell & Morreale, 2015; Burton, 2012; Morreale et al., 1992; Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012; Quigley & Nyquist, 1992). Writing centers, which often speaking centers learn and aspire to become as established, deal with similar experiences.

After reviewing a brief history of Communication Studies Disability Studies, then establishing key factors in public speaking instructional history, and finally adding speaking centers into the conversation, we have now established a background that supports the need for the public speaking intervention that ableist assumptions and perspectives within public speaking programs and the academic programs that help support them need to be assessed and addressed. Thus far, a case has been made for ableist assumptions present in public speaking programs in addition to the same translating to writing and speaking centers. The rest of this chapter will establish the analytical lens and methodological foundation for this dissertation. Looking at how

disability and public speaking interact is relevant before describing the research in this area. Past research will influence the theoretical and methodological choices for the proposed case studies listed below.

### ***Speaking & Writing Centers Research***

As mentioned before, speaking centers often collaborate with writing centers and learn from writing center research. Speaking center research is lacking research that considers students with disabilities, therefore, a dive into writing center literature will be helpful as it does include such research. Since writing centers are usually always open to all students, the probability that they serve and help students with disabilities is very likely (Babcock, 2015). In 1980 and 1990, writing centers questioned whether or not their consultants were trained well enough to help PWD (Dembsey, 2020). During this time, there was a push to send students with a disability to other departments that had more experience, and during this same time segregated classrooms for students with disabilities were also being debated (Dembsey, 2020). The International Writing Center Association (IWCA) urges centers to be inclusive and recognize that there are multiple ways of learning and processing language and “inclusion in the writing center is closely associated with diversity—diversity of students, diverse writing concerns, and diverse ways of working with people” (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 22).

Writing centers, similar to speaking centers, are a place for students to get individual help from a peer, thus, the focus is on that specific student’s individual needs. The foundation of writing centers is “based on the idea of a conversation between two equals—a space in which we construct knowledge together as peers, not instruct from a position of power” through empowering students to uphold their agency (Rinaldi, 2015, p. 8). Unfortunately, though, when a “differently-abled or other-cultured” students enter these spaces and “when it comes to disability,

there is something amiss that provokes us to forget about—or at least muddy—these ideals” and discomfort often occurs for all (Rinaldi, 2015, p. 8). Current writing center scholars are promoting inclusion, specifically towards accommodating and considering PWD, to be implemented into pedagogy and training (Dembsey, 2020).

Instead of thinking about categorizing students based on their abilities, writing centers aim to consider diverse learning based on each individual student needs, yet “despite such inclusionary intentions, the reality is that some students are often acted on differently, depending on markers that include race, ethnicity, gender and disability” (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 21). Although inclusion does not necessarily equate to access, inclusion considers what barriers might lead to excluding some individuals and “considers space, place, and mindset as part of the process of challenging ableism and facilitating the incorporation of students with disabilities into university spaces” (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 21). These barriers have also led to some PWD internalizing ableist perspectives (Harpur, 2009). One way to view changes towards a more inclusive world is considering more inclusive spaces and environments versus trying to accommodate abled spaces for each individual with a disability (Daniels et al., 2016). This view also encourages action and puts pressure on universities to consider ways to be more accessible and inclusive through structural and cultural changes instead of relying on accommodation services (Daniels et al., 2016). The same should be considered for speaking centers as speaking and writing centers are very similar and have a similar structure with peer-to-peer work.

Student consultants often are unaware if a student has a disability beforehand because personal information is usually not asked or required, yet this could also lead to students not being optimally supported, specifically those with invisible disabilities. Instead of having access to student’s records to determine if they have a differing ability before a consultation, including

an opening questionnaire to allow for students to disclose this information could be just as beneficial (Daniels et al., 2016). An example of an opening question is asking students “whether there was anything specific that they would like the tutor to know about themselves or their writing” which allows students to disclose their disability if they feel inclined and are comfortable doing so (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 22). Asking questions such as “how would you like to work together?” or “what works best for you?” (Rinaldi, 2015, p. 13) are great ways to start the session and focus more on the person as an individual rather than trying to make assumptions about their needs by categorizing a person. Students often need to provide proof of their disability to receive specific services, which forces a student to disclose identity information unwillingly and that is assuming that a student has access to pay for the testing needed to provide the proof (Kleinfield, 2018), thus, asking opening questions is a unique way to provide accommodations regardless of their documentation. Furthermore, asking a student who has entered the physical space of a writing center where they would like to sit is a small gesture that has a huge impact on comfort levels (Babcock, 2015).

There should not be a difference between how a consultant approaches a consultation when working with abled students or when working with students with a disability because each consultation should be tailored to each specific students’ needs. This approach is key to Universal Design (UD) or Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Reports show that ratings of writing center sessions were lower for students with a disability in comparison to students who identified as not having a disability (Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 2007).

Writing centers’ research on consultant-to-client relationships while working with clients who are disabled shows the presence of ableist language and assumptions. Utilizing personal experiences or anecdotes is a method that writing center research has incorporated to report

experiences with Disability Studies (Babcock, 2015). One area that is persistent in writing center research is consultants deciphering whether a student is being manipulative or genuine when they need extra help (Dembsey, 2020). Research shows that students with disabilities that ask for extra help during their consultation, are often “labeled as aggressive and manipulative” (Dembsey, 2020, p. 6) by consultants. Adequate training in speaking and writing centers can help from mislabeling students as such. It is also important to recognize how robust writing center research is about considering disabilities and how much more speaking centers and the Communication field has to go.

Although some writing centers have decided to train consultants on best practices for students with disabilities through impairment-specific approaches (i.e., recognizing specific functions or cues that might suggest the “disability”), it is more important to fix the underlying pedagogical approaches in higher education rather than trying to bandage the issue by relying too heavily on best practices. This approach to train consultants on best practices for students with disabilities is also problematic as it motivates individuals to understand disabilities as an issue to fix or flex for (Rinaldi, 2015), versus as a part of one’s identity. At the end of the day, regardless of a disability, consultants are working with an actual person, and by instilling the mindset that we are *all* different, each consultation should adjust depending on the person, and this approach should be no different while working with students with disabilities. Instead of trying to name, categorize, or rely on disclosure, consultants should be more concerned with “learning about diverse student populations’ cultural differences and frames” (Rinaldi, 2015, p. 13).

Writing centers have established a call to action to find better ways to assist students with disabilities, one of those ways is through UD (Rinaldi, 2015). In addition to writing and speaking centers considering how they can better assist students with disabilities, centers should also

consider diversifying who they hire to enhance diversity, and this should go beyond gender, race, or ethnicity, but also include differing abilities. Although colleges and universities should also take responsibility here, one way that centers can help is that center directors “can strive to create an open, welcoming environment and can work to recruit, hire, and retain tutors with disabilities” and evaluate their hiring process to refrain from discrimination (Daniels et al., 2016, p. 24). Similar to speaking centers, more research is needed about disabilities in writing centers to be more helpful and useful for students with disabilities (Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 2007).

Even less research about disabilities and speaking centers has been published. Speaking centers usually help students by providing feedback on outlines and practice sessions to focus on supporting students’ communicative competencies in public speaking (Harrison & Myrick, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic forced speaking centers to evaluate their ability to function fully online (Garfunkel, 2020), which directly shows that accommodations are possible, although specific accommodations for diverse student populations has not been a focus in speaking center research. Speaking centers often support oral communication courses and are proven to contribute to “student success, retention, and gradation by providing pedagogical support for students” because of their peer-to-peer style of mentoring (Von Till, 2012, p. xi; Davis et al., 2017). Since “supporting full access to higher education for students with IDD requires a constellation of support—both formal and informal,” Carter et al. (2019) suggested that students with IDD can strongly benefit from peer mentors (p. 174).

With an understanding of disability and public speaking courses through a look at rhetorical research on disabilities, instructional research on disabilities, and speaking and writing centers research, I now examine how instructional communication theory, intersectional rhetoric, and critical disability theory will be used as the framework for the studies to follow.

## **Theoretical Lens**

### ***Instructional Communication Theory***

Public speaking, or rhetorical communication, is one of the most valuable skills students can learn (McCroskey, 2001), thus making the study of how and why we teach public speaking important as well, which is through instructional communication (Mottet et al., 2006).

Instructional communication and rhetorical studies are important definitions to clarify when discussing the basic course. Speech (or public speaking) is often used synonymously with rhetorical communication (McCroskey, 2001). Rhetorical communication can be understood as “the primary tool with which we influence and control the thoughts and actions of other people, as well as the environment in which we live” (McCroskey, 2001, p. 19). A majority of instructional communication research stems from rhetoric (McCroskey et al., 2004).

The first review of the literature on instructional communication was by Staton-Spicer and Wulff in 1984 after gaining traction in the 1970s, which began in the realm of communication education (Conley, & Ah Yun, 2017; Morreale et al., 2014). Instructional communication integrates multiple disciplines through educational psychology, pedagogy, and communication, making it interdisciplinary, but it is housed in Communication Studies (Houser & Hosek, 2018; Mottet et al., 2006). Instructional communication “refers to the study of the human communication process across all learning situations independent of the subject matter, the grade level, or the learning environment” (Myers et al., 2016, p. 13). Instructional communication often informs instructors from various fields and disciplines about communication best practices (Morreale et al., 2014; Simonds, 2001; Staton-Spicer, & Marty White, 1981), thus showcasing how communication instruction and pedagogy are complementary of one another (Goodboy, 2018). Instructional communication is concerned with

the process of how students and teachers simultaneously transfer information verbally and nonverbally to create shared meanings and understandings (Conley & Ah Yun, 2017; Preiss & Wheelless, 2014; McCroskey et al., 2004; Morreale, 2015; Mottet et al., 2006).

Two perspectives, or theories, that derive from instructional communication are relational and rhetorical perspectives. Morreale (2015) defines the two perspectives as separate theories that are “homegrown” from the Communication field (p. 454), whereas others have stated that relation and rhetorical perspectives are “opposite sides of the same coin” because they strive for the same end goal (Farris et al., 2018, p. 8). Although some scholars prefer one approach over another, they are not necessarily meant to be separated (Houser & Hosek, 2018). There is also some debate over the differences between the two perspectives with Morreale (2015) stating that “scholars interested in students’ processes of learning tend to use a relational perspective” whereas “scholars interested in what teachers should do tend to use a rhetorical perspective” (p. 454). Houser and Hosek (2018) suggested that,

[The relational perspective] is a process in which both teachers and students mutually create and use verbal and nonverbal messages to develop a relationship with each other. This differs from the message component of instruction—the rhetorical perspective—in that the focus is on the shared emotions of the students and their instructors (p. 95), which displaying a much different definition than the latter but is the most commonly understood meaning (see McCroskey et al., 2004). Regardless of the differences, I consider both perspectives in this dissertation. Pulling from Houser and Hosek’s (2018) definition, it will be important to evaluate the mutual relationship that develops within the classroom in regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This can be noticed through my understanding of Disability Studies evolving and reevaluating my own ableist bias when adapting to teaching students with

IDD. A rhetorical approach will also be necessary as it tends to be more teacher-directed versus most other qualitative and quantitative studies in instructional communication that are more relational based (Mottet et al., 2006), as I am concerned with training on assessment for public speaking instructors.

In addition to the relational and rhetorical perspective, instructional communication scholars believe that teaching and learning is a process (Mottet et al., 2006), so a set of three models are commonly used to theorize instructional communication research to view the communication process through action, interaction, and transaction (Beebe, Beebe & Ivy, 2004). Viewing communication as an action tends to fall more on the rhetorical perspective, whereas communication as a transaction is more towards a relational perspective, and communication as an interaction appreciates both perspectives equally (Houser & Hosek, 2018; Morreale, 2015; Mottet et al., 2006). Considering instructional communication as an action views communication as a one-way process that is teacher-centered rather than teacher-student-centered (Mottet et al., 2006). An example of this would be a teacher lecturing to students and not concerned with receiving student feedback nor communicating during the lecture (such as for questions, discussion, etc.).

Viewing communication as an interaction is concerned with feedback and making instructional modifications as a response to the feedback (Mottet et al., 2006). This process can be understood as being a continual loop of sending and receiving messages, which is similar to models of human communication (Mottet et al., 2006). An example of communication as an interaction would include feedback through an exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages between the teacher and students within the classroom to strengthen retention rates.

Communication as a transaction is similar to that of an interaction where communication is occurring between the teacher and the students, however, this model suggests that meaning is then co-created by both the teacher and students through all parties being the source and the receiver at the same time (Mottet et al., 2006). An example of communication as a transaction is when there is mutual respect of ideas and feelings thus inviting debates and group conversations to stimulate shared meanings (Mottet et al., 2006). I have witnessed this in the classroom when students with IDD joined the conversation and debate about various topics in class. I would describe myself as an educator who is respectful of both rhetorical and relational perspectives through viewing communication as an interaction. This is also what I teach in the classroom where communication is constantly happening between myself and the students, verbally and nonverbally, and I am receptive to this feedback in the classroom and adapt accordingly (Mottet et al., 2006).

Rhetorical/relational goal theory stems from the rhetorical and relational perspectives addressed above. Rhetorical/relational goal theory propositions that teachers have various relational and rhetorical goals and that students have relational and academic needs or goals as well (Mottet et al., 2006; Waldeck, & LaBelle, 2016), and that teachers and students mutually influence each other (Claus et al., 2012). Being considerate of both students' and teachers' competencies are rooted in the understanding of the rhetorical/relational goal theory (Myers et al., 2018). Utilizing a mix of relational and rhetorical perspectives is projected to have the most effective teaching outcome because it values both the student and the teacher (Beebe & Mottet, 2009; Myers et al., 2018). Rhetorical/relational goal theory asserts that an instructor should make accommodations to meet students' goals (Kaufmann & Frisby, 2017; Waldeck, & LaBelle, 2016), while simultaneously considering the rhetorical and relational classroom goals (Frisby et

al., 2013). After discussing the instructional approach, intersectional rhetoric and critical disability theory will be introduced before continuing to the methodology.

### ***Intersectional Rhetoric Theory***

Understanding the scope and purpose of intersectional rhetoric will clarify the methodological choices guiding this dissertation. Intersectional rhetoric connects both intersectionality and rhetorical praxis. Intersectional rhetoric is concerned with linking theory to personal experiences, or the body as evidence in referencing intersectionality as theory (Otis, 2019). It is similar to concepts of standpoint and body rhetoric but different because the physical body is not the focus, yet instead, the “multiply oppressed body” serves as justification (Otis, 2019, p. 372). Intersectional rhetoric supports diversity, equity, and inclusion aims to break traditional boundaries, and inspires multiple ideas and concepts (Enck-Wanzer, 2006). Intersectional rhetorical is where “the link between theory and bodily experience is written into the theoretical foundation of intersectionality and put into embodied practice” (Otis, 2019, p. 372), thus one could argue that intersectional rhetorical strives to embrace traditions and culture through rhetoric and “is a kind of rhetoric wherein one form of discourse is not privileged over another; rather, diverse forms intersect organically to create something challenging to rhetorical norms” (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 191). Intersectional rhetoric should be viewed from two angles, one being “a rhetorical theory of intersectionality” and the other as “a theory at the intersections” (Otis, 2019, p. 371).

Although this dissertation focuses on disabilities, the overlap, as referenced before, to cultural diversity, in general, is apparent and deeply interconnected. With intersectionality and intersectional rhetoric both seeking “to disrupt the hegemonic master narrative that only that which is White and male and wealthy have value, while also honoring the intersections of

seemingly disparate realities and ideas” (Morris, 2017, p. 243), it is apparent how difficult it is to disconnect one layer of identity from others. This is also the case for separating an author from a researcher, and I believe that this separation is not necessary. I cannot dismiss my own bias, created through my experiences and perspectives, from this research thus I need to situate myself to share that I am not detached as a researcher and an author. The ability to utilize intersectional rhetoric should be appreciated because “intersectional rhetoric gives rhetorical scholars a chance to expand upon our developing understanding of how marginalized peoples craft power through rhetoric” (Morris, 2017, p. 249). Critical disability theory is similarly concerned with power structures and is necessary to discuss to round out the theoretical framework.

### ***Critical Disability Theory***

Critical disability theory was originated from critical theory, but it now commonly known as an approach from Disability Studies that is often used within interdisciplinary studies about disability (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). Critical disability theory is positioned with power and realities in mind (Rocco, 2005). With the value that all individuals deserve to be treated with basic human rights, Critical disability theory aims to uncover issues with this by challenging societal ideals of disabilities (Gillies, 2014). Critical disability theory challenges disability discrimination to expose possible change in society by explaining what the issues are, who can change them, and what standards need to be reassessed for change (Sztobryn-Giercuskiewicz, 2017). Critical disability theory highlights political and societal power dynamics that lead to oppressing individuals through criticism and assumptions based on one’s disabilities (Hosking, 2008; Devlin & Pothier, 2006). By questioning the oppressed treatment of individuals with disabilities by non-disabled individuals, Critical disability theory calls out blatant societal issues. Where able-bodied American have the power to protect their privilege anytime, they feel

threatened, individuals with disabilities constantly battle for the same benefits, which Critical disability theory strives to call attention to (Rocco, 2005).

The insights of instructional communication theory, intersectional rhetorical perspectives, and Critical disability theory are utilized to examine the overarching arguments presented in the introduction. The use of qualitative and rhetorical methodological approaches will be used for the case studies. The case studies arguably present more questions than answers, but suggestions for future directions and research will be discussed in the closing chapter of the dissertation. I will offer recommendations for how public speaking programs can exhibit awareness, show consideration, and make changes to implement the disability community. Utilizing multiple theories creates a sounder foundation for exposing ableist perspectives within public speaking program. In addition to the theories presented, the use of autoethnography and rhetorical methods will be used for the studies.

### **Methodological Approach**

In instructional communication focused journals, both rhetorical and qualitative methods have been lacking. The results from Farris et al. (2018) study displayed that qualitative and mixed methodologies were the lowest categories of used methods in *Communication Education* journals published from 2006-2016, with quantitative being the highest (Farris et al., 2018). Adding research that extends beyond quantitative methods will lead to further avenues of research and new perspectives to explore as well as potentially influence methods aside from or complimenting quantitative methods in future instructional communication scholarship. Utilizing both autoethnography and rhetorical methods here pose a unique way to explore ableist assumptions. As shown below, mixed methodologies are not the norm for instructional research, thus there is an opportunity to review instructional research from innovative methodologic

approaches. Methodological approaches will be explained further before going into each study in the following chapters.

### ***Autoethnography***

Autoethnography is a qualitative method that focuses on “human intentions, motivations, emotions, and actions” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 21). Quantitative researchers are interested in the relationships between variables that can be measured and determined from an objective view, generally taking on a positivistic approach (Creswell, 2004; O’Neil, 1998; Boylorn, 2008; O’Neil, 1998); while autoethnographers tend to approach problems through exploration and desires for deeper understandings, which often leads to flexibility and interpretations of the results produced (Creswell, 2004). Autoethnography is a method that involves stories that incorporate the researcher, usually through a cultural lens, to engage others (Adams et al., 2015; Boylorn, 2008). Autoethnography also places value on the relationship of the researcher with others, is dependent on self-reflection, incorporates emotions, and typically involves the need for social justice (Adams et al., 2015). Autoethnography integrates emotion and reactions to dominance and privilege and “offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 21). It is important to note that the goal of autoethnography is not necessarily to provide direct answers to a problem, but this technique does promote awareness and aims to institute change. Additionally, some topics, such as anxiety and disability, can evoke undeniable emotions that autoethnographers embrace for a better understanding (Ellis, 2005).

Autoethnography stresses the need to position myself in this research rather than separating my experiences from my study. Alexander (1999) coined the term “instructional (auto)ethnography” as an appropriate way to discuss teacher-student relationships in the

classroom that positions both teacher and student perspectives. Through instructional autoethnography, stories are used as rhetorical devices to articulate and reflect lived experiences in the classroom (Alexander, 1999). Furthermore, autoethnography is historically used by researchers who connect with the individuals they study or write about in their research. I understand what it is like to live in a world where minority communities face extensive struggles daily; however, at this time, I do not consider myself a part of the disability community (Dembsey, 2017). I feel obligated to express and share my experiences as an instructor of students with IDD in a public speaking course. It is essential to share my perspectives to help dismantle the discriminatory practices within the introductory public speaking course.

### ***Rhetorical Analysis***

Since public speaking is a valuable skill that influences democracy and the ability to contribute to society (Keith, 2008; Fisher, 2010), it is important to observe the links between rhetoric, public speaking, and citizenship before detailing rhetoric as a methodological tool. Currently, the U.S. faces a crisis with rhetoric at the core because it is,

Confronting these crises and more broadly the failure of our system to represent the nation as a whole and craft policy to continue the process of building a more perfect union (Rowland, 2020, p. 245).

Rhetoric serves as a “the voice for the voiceless,” albeit “dangerous rhetoric” influenced the current crises it can also be the guide for a solution (Rowland, 2020, p. 245). Generally, when we think of being an active member in society, we do not think about privilege as being “the ability to stand and move about as we please, or even something as fundamental as being able to talk and communicate with others,” but this is an important component to fully participating in society (Moscozo, 2017, p. 41). Without the opportunity to participate in the real world, people

with disabilities “live in a separate reality, one whose borders are delimited by exclusionary language and social practices” (Moscozo, 2017, p. 42). Thus, the disability community is forced to create their own citizenship where they can be appreciated and valued (Moscozo, 2017).

Flores (2016) suggests that “rhetorical criticism is concerned with politics and publics, with cultural discourses and social meanings, with rhetors and audiences” (p. 6). Although Flores (2016) is pushing for the intersection of rhetoric and race in rhetorical scholarship by stating that if we’re questioning “impact, influence, or circulation, or questions of argument and audience, or questions of affect and materiality, we cannot ignore race,” I argue that disabilities must also not be ignored (p. 7). Flores (2016) is not the only scholar who values the intersections of rhetorical scholarship as Scott and Edgar (2021) also include the need to reexamine oppression. Yes, rhetorical criticism has evolved from where it was in the past (Flores, 2016), but this evolution must continue with disability scholarship included (Scott & Edgar, 2021). Scott and Edgar (2021) stated that,

By reaching beyond the demands of race to consider the intersecting axis of (dis)ability, we push the fields of rhetoric, sound studies, and critical/cultural communication studies to consider embodiment as a whole condition of rhetorical reception (p. 225).

Rhetorical research has often followed societies understanding of the disability community by excluding them (Harpur, 2009, Krentz & Sanchez, 2021), however, “rhetorically disabled does not mean rhetorically unable” (Johnson, 2010, p. 475). Rhetorical disability, which focuses on the rhetorical environment rather than the disability, has not been a concern for most rhetoricians, specifically surrounding less visible or invisible disabilities such as mental health disorders (Johnson, 2010).

Rhetorical analysis is a critical methodology shared by many disciplines but is often used in speech, writing, literary, biblical studies, and more recently, in culture studies (Zachry, 2009). Rhetorical analysis, often known as rhetorical criticism, “offers scholars a principled approach to describing how communication worked in a given instance” (Zachry, 2009, p. 68). Rhetorical analysis is useful for considering language use in academic texts because it focused attention on the particular logics and emotional content embedded within symbols, and past research has explored the utilitarianism of rhetorical analysis to support its use in academic texts (Nørreklit, 2003). Additionally, rhetorical analysis can “elucidate whether any general rules for making claims or drawing conclusions have been violated in the academic text under consideration,” such as fallacies, contradictions, or changes in concepts (Nørreklit, 2003, p. 615).

Society creates text for practically every part of life, and textual analysis aims to disrupt the social and ideological conditioning that influences the production and the interpretation of texts (Weninger, 2018). There are many different types of analyses, but the systematic analysis of text can be traced back to the 17th century, and most analyses are similar (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis is a vague term, but is similar to rhetorical analysis (Zachry, 2009) insofar that both are concerned with how an artifact is being interpreted (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis is systemic in nature because it extracts words from an artifact into categories based on specified coding rules (Berelson, 1952; Igbaria, 2013, Assaly & Igbaria, 2014, Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis can be used in many different ways, such as “specifically for investigating any problem in which the content of communication serves as basis for inference” (Holsti, 1969, p. 2). Content analysis explores data, text/print, or images and what they mean to individuals to predict what they authorize or prohibit (Krippendorff, 2018).

Additionally, content analysis is particularly interested in how culture plays a role in what is being analyzed (Krippendorff, 2018). Like rhetorical analysis, a content analysis examines symbolic matters such as texts or images from the critic's perspective (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis is often quantitative in nature, but when the rhetorical aspects of content analysis are foregrounded, interpretative social phenomenological perspectives are valued, which allows for the appreciation of the connections between rhetoric, public speaking, and citizenship. By using a rhetorically inflected content analysis to read public speaking textbooks, the results can reveal ableist perspectives. Moreover, past research has determined that "results of textbook content analysis research have the potential to inform teachers on how to design their curriculum to provide students an equitable, powerful education" (Chu, 2017, p. 231; Young, 2013).

The way in which society discusses "disability in negative, inaccurate, and oppressive ways" is influenced by rhetoric (Moscozo, 2017, p. 44). Historically, rhetorical approaches have not been inviting to the disability community by valuing the able-bodied as the perfect, ideal speaker (Brueggemann & Fredal, 1998). In general, there is a lack of representation in society in addition to barriers in favor of able-bodies that both effect the stigma of disabled-bodies, thus making being associated with a disability a negative thing (Moscozo, 2017). Rhetorical critics are concerned with explaining how rhetoric works in the world to shape audience perception, attitude, and behavior and what an artifact is teaching about strategies of persuasion (Foss, 2009); thus, examining textbooks using rhetorical criticism is necessary to understand the scope of ableist perspectives presented within them. Utilizing rhetorical analysis allows for the opportunity to respond to multiple facets of diverse rhetorical experiences (McKerrow & St. John, 2005). Rhetorical studies can be an ally for Disability Studies providing new perspectives when linked together (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001), as mentioned earlier by Maier (Parry-

Giles, 2021). Often American society has lived on the notion that if it cannot be observed, it cannot real, but this incentivizes homogeneity of identity (Moscozo, 2017). When this view is disrupted, specifically marginalized communities, there are negative consequences, such as “lack of employment, poor academic performance, and low social status” (Moscozo, 2017, p. 47). With this in mind, it is no wonder that many individuals choose to hide their differences to avoid hardship when possible and able to do so (Moscozo, 2017). A rhetorical content analysis of public speaking textbooks used in higher education expands the argument that the disability community is not considered in the introductory public speaking course.

Moscozo (2017), who is a disabled scholar of communication studies, discussed in their rhetorical criticism article that after struggling with learning disabilities throughout grade school, they eventually made it back and one college public speaking course changed their life. Moscozo (2017) stated that this course “was the best class I ever took because it provided a safe space to be heard, and it encouraged me to find my identity” (p. 49). Through Moscozo (2017) work that conceptualizes citizenship as a process, they encourage professors to “find new ways of talking about disability that challenge the present discursive practices (p. 49). The case studies present in the next three chapters will begin by addressing instructor responsibilities and why creating a safe space is essential.

In the next chapters, the following studies draw from the foundational background of Communication Studies, Disability Studies, and public speaking programs to justify the argument that public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs and exclude students with disabilities, and public speaking programs need to be more considerate of and sensitive to disability perspectives. Through the theoretical and methodological approaches from this chapter, each study will attempt to provide evidence and offer suggestions and recommendations

before summarizing in the closing chapter. The next chapter will recall my experience teaching students with IDD and how my understanding, identity, and teaching philosophy has since changed. After that, an analysis of public speaking rubrics is explained and followed by an analysis of public speaking textbooks before reaching the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 3:

### INSTRUCTOR RESPONSABILITIES: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CALL FOR CHANGE TO THE PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

#### **Introduction**

Speaking confidently and persuasively in public is a valued skill that most people strive to possess. However, what makes a speech/speaker *effective* is a dynamic cultural assessment that often sneaks in discriminatory judgements latent in society. There is a societal understanding that “notions of power generally equate speech with power and silence with weakness” (Jackson, 2012, p. 1000). However, unfortunately, many individuals are silenced and without the opportunity to express themselves through speech solely based access. Public speaking courses sometimes naively assume that prejudice can be overridden by hard work, nevertheless, learning to shape and express an opinion is emancipating. In addition to courses designed to instruct public speaking in higher education, various organizations exist to promote public eloquence, one being Toastmasters International. Toastmasters, which held the first official meeting in 1924, brings people together to work on their speaking skills. One of the manuals used in Toastmasters International (1996) has a list of mannerisms that are common signs of “inexperienced or ineffective speakers,” which include,

- *gripping or leaning on the lectern*
- *tapping the fingers*
- *biting or licking the lips*
- *jingling pocket change*

- *frowning*
- *adjusting hair or clothing, and*
- *turning the head and eyes from side to side like an oscillating fan* (p. 10).

To be fair, if asked, most people would likely agree that such mannerism are antithetical to rhetorical performance, but such conclusions are not necessarily based in truth, but rather, are a product of inculturation that elevates certain ways of speaking and being. This quote came directly from the book that I used while in Toastmasters, and a revise copy from 2011(which appears to be the latest version) states the exact same thing. Additionally, the manual includes other statements similar to the tone presented above, explaining how appearance plays an important role in public speaking with statements like, “[you] can’t change your age, height or facial features, but you can enhance your appearance through proper attire, grooming, and physical conditioning” (p. 26). In recent years, instructors have become more flexible about requiring students to “dress up,” cognizant of the classist norms it perpetuates, but in other areas, more progress is needed. This is one example of the keen focus on physicality with public speaking. Another example in the manual includes the following statement:

Audiences like speakers who reflect good health and physical vitality. Research has shown that an audience associate a speaker’s well-being with the soundness of his or her verbal messages. So watch your diet and exercise regularly (Toastmasters International, 1996, pp. 26-27).

The shocking passage above is not one that you are likely to encounter with such carelessness in public speaking textbooks, but upon closer inspection, even though the “research” isn’t cited, it is clear that the sentiment remains. The display of physical and mental health is based on norms from society meant for able-bodied individuals. Scholars and educators involved with the public

speaking course instead must embrace differing abilities and uphold ethical and moral standards so that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in the course. In this chapter, I provide an autoethnographic account of my role as an instructor as well as my perspective as a student to reassess my academic responsibility. Through using autoethnography as a method, I am able to use my experience to locate ableism within myself and the public speaking course. I am arguing that currently, public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs and reject the rich complexity of human ability. Public speaking programs need to be more considerate of and sensitive to disability perspectives, and by describing my experiences as a student and instructor, I will share my personal encounters with and to ableism.

### **Disability Studies and Public Speaking**

Reconsidering what the mythic ideal speaker looks like to include differing abilities is essential to the growth and sustainability of public speaking programs. Freire (2010) warns of the colonization of the imagination of the oppressed, and there lies within us all a sight and sound for rhetoric that may not be our own. For example, eye contact is something that most public speaking programs teach and assess in their evaluations of student speakers. The generally accepted rules and standards for an ideal speaker include maintaining eye contact with the audience to communicate comfort and confidence. Critically, eye contact can be difficult or unfeasible to perform for some students with disabilities, but this in no way means they are fewer *effective* speakers. Considering the larger goals of public speaking pedagogy, such as informing, persuading, or entertaining, eye contact is a predominately Western value for achieving communication competency and transparent communication with an audience, an assumption that of individual abilities. A student presenter can effectively reach their communicative goals without eye contact, especially if audiences grasp the message from an unbiased opinion. For

example, although many speech assessments value eye contact at high rates, most adults only make eye contact up to half of the time they are having a conversation with someone (Shellenbarger, 2013), and despite media representations to the contrary, eye contact is not an accurate reflection of respect or truthfulness.

Another example is the reliance on a full-functioning body to be an effective speaker. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who is referenced as an exemplar public speaker in many textbooks, often used a wheelchair. Although, the former president was mostly unable to stand without assistance, Roosevelt's disability was usually hidden from the public to uphold a certain perception, and this fact is mostly excluded in public speaking textbooks. Having a disability does not hinder Roosevelt's ability to be viewed as a great public speaker.

### ***Defining Disability***

Defining disability is challenging because society often considers some disabilities genuine and others inauthenticity. A friend explained to me their perspective on what constitutes a disability. They shared that a disability could be anything that impacts how one lives their everyday life; in using an example of wearing glasses, they explained how individuals who cannot see clearly are disabled without glasses because they have difficulty functioning without glasses. However, society has made such tremendous strides to accommodate vision differences that we no longer conceptualize those with a visual need that can be corrected with glasses as having a disability. Yet those who live with vision problems may often feel and believe the lack of accommodations, such as glasses, to be disabling.

In The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association standards (2020), psychologists have accepted the same value that I display by using person-first language, that is, placing the term *disability* after addressing an individual (e.g., *a student with a disability* vs. *a*

*disabled student*) to respect that having a disability is not the leading factor of a person. I use *disability* to acknowledge physical and cognitive differences of individuals associate with how they live life (Dunn & Elliott, 2005; Wright, 1983). Additionally, I recognize that I am using the *disability community* broadly, but other groups share common differences. Respectfully, we are all different, but the term disability community will address a specific group in this research.

Higher education is becoming increasing more inclusive by integrating students with various (dis)abilities into the same courses (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Because of this, there is an ethical responsibility to design, teach, and assess courses with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of the best pedagogical practices for students, especially for public speaking programs and public speaking instructors (Goodboy, 2018).

### ***Ableism in Public Speaking Courses***

The procedures and language choices commonly used to teach public speaking are problematic because they are exclusive of differing abilities. Public speaking curriculum typically assumes by default that students are orally speaking or receiving information from the audible voices of others, and they often do not address the fact that not every student fits into this assumption. Erevelles (2000) argues that discriminatory educational policies often omit disabled bodies entirely, which uncovers “the historical practices within American public education that continue to marginalize the issue of disability by maintaining two educational systems—one for disabled students and one for everyone else” (p. 25), which is excluding a large student population. Keeping this in mind, I want to focus on the responsibility of instructors to promote change, rather than by speaking for the disability community.

Maria R. Palacios (2017), who identifies as a member of the disability community, wrote a poem titled “Naming Ableism,” where they express that “ableism is our story told by

nondisabled voices captured through a nondisabled lens.” Palacios expresses the issues of having able-bodied individuals describing the struggles faced by individuals with disabilities in this poem and in many of their other work. By sharing my experience through an autoethnography, I must approach the topic of disability from a vantage point respectful of Palacios’s critique. No one asked me to write this dissertation, and none of my students expressed that I should reexamine the public speaking course to become more inclusive. But upon many conversations, specifically with students who have disabilities, it is evident that a revision is necessary to become more accessible. In this autoethnography, I am speaking from my perspective and using my voice to confront an area in academia that promotes ableist and disablist views, one that I have participated in for years as an instructor. It was not until I taught a course of neurodiverse students that I became cognizant of the ableist perspectives within the course. Ableism fails to consider the disability community by privileging able-bodies (Beasley, 2021).

Ableism is present throughout public speaking curriculum in a multitude of ways, most notably by referring to the ways in which to be an effective speaker because there is an assumption that all students taking the course will be able-bodied students. Thus, ableism involves not considering that there are multiple ways to be an effective speaker aside from one able-bodied perspective. Disablism presents special or unfair treatment based solely on one’s abilities (Dolmage, 2017). Disablism in this sense would be assuming that a student could not give a successful speech because they have a disability, so an instructor might provide special or unfair treatment. Public speaking programs showcase both ableist and disablist perspectives in many ways. Specifically, the idealistic conception of a *great* public speaker often includes a physically abled, neuro-typical individual. My goal here is not to represent the disability community but to interrogate my own experiences in ways that problematize my own complicity

in an educational system that has marginalized those who challenge normativity. I am also coming to this project as a multi-racial woman that has been diagnosed with mental health and learning disorders. In doing so, I aim to identify standard modes of exclusion that need to be corrected and generate opportunities for allyship and growth in higher education through an autoethnographic approach.

### ***Autoethnography***

Autoethnography poses a chance for researchers to explore deeper understandings to personal experiences (Creswell, 2004). This method often uses a cultural lens to captivate new perspectives through stories (Adams et al., 2015; Boylorn, 2008). Through self-reflexivity, autoethnography methods aims to explore the relationship of the researcher in connection with others (Adams et al., 2015). Although it is not the goal to provide answers with autoethnography, this method is still valuable as it can shed light on marginalized individuals lived-experiences and or privilege (Adams et al., 2015). By utilizing this method, I am embracing my position in this research instead of separating my experiences from the research. Self-presentation, identity, and the work one does are all connected (Sowards, 2019). Furthermore, I am dedicated to learning more about disabilities, ableism, and how to better incorporate differing abilities into my teaching and have sought out this information since teaching students with IDD. Through my autoethnographic writing, I will provide recommendations for future scholars and address the ableist strategies used in the discipline to teach the introductory public speaking course.

### **Revisiting My Experiences**

Using autoethnography as a methodology can be complicated, as any interpretative research highlights resistance by critiquing problematic issues (Boylorn, 2008). However, it is essential to share my perspectives to illuminate how ableism is communicated by educators and

dismantle the discriminatory practices within the introductory public speaking course. Through my teaching experience, explicitly teaching students with IDD, I have become aware of critical perspectives that should be challenged within public speaking programs. I have since realized that many aspects that I thought defined public speaking and frequently took for granted are more applicable to able-bodied students.

I have had to reconsider many foundational ideals that I was taught in order to redefine inclusive perspectives within speech pedagogy. The following recalls my experience which led to a realization and shift in perspective. In revisiting and exploring my experience teaching students with and without IDD in one section of a semester-long public speaking course by analyzing six themes: 1) voice; 2) (non)advocacy; 3) regretful guilt; 4) classroom atmosphere; 5) and support, supporting, and training. A final reflection concludes each theme.

### ***Voice: Mine & Theirs***

Growing up, I stopped getting the urge to voice my opinion due to the circumstances in my household. Coincidentally, as an adult, I may have transferred this need towards speaking out for others instead, which I began expressing through public speaking. I was first introduced to public speaking when I was twelve years old at a Gavel Club, I joined in my homeschooling group that facilitated Toastmasters International; this is where I learned the foundations of public speaking, and my passion for communication developed. I thoroughly enjoyed researching, crafting, and delivering speeches because it was my opportunity to be heard. My friends in Gavel Club were writing speeches about typical pre-teen stuff, such as their favorite animals, while I was writing speeches about Achondroplasia, a type of dwarfism. At that time, I found myself drawn to documentaries and television shows based on individuals living differently than what society deems to be normal, possibly to make myself feel *normal* in comparison.

While in Gavel Club, I also focused on figuring myself out. My struggles as a child led me to a fascination with learning about other individuals who challenged the norm. I was the outcast. I not only struggled with physical identity issues, but I also struggled with internal identity issues and mental health. I was diagnosed with Social Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as a child. While writing this autoethnography and receiving proper testing for these diagnoses as an adult, I later found out that I also have other disorders. The evaluation confirmed the disorders above and determined that I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and learning disorders that include impairments in reading and mathematics. I decided to get tested for learning disorders because I noticed a lot of similarities to the struggles the students, I was teaching experienced. Based on my diagnosis, the severity of my mental health diagnosis alone qualifies me for academic accommodations, and this made me reassess how I have been handling accommodations as an instructor.

I have been seeking direction from doctors about my mental health for nearly half of my life, and not a single professional suggested that I seek accommodations as a student. I often expressed how difficult school was for me, but the only recommendation provided to me was to utilize medication and treatments, and I wonder how much of this repeated dismissal is due to the fact the women of color are less heard by medical professionals. In fact, during my undergraduate program, my psychiatrist strongly encouraged me to withdraw from school and admit myself into an in-patient program due to my mental health. She had the paperwork prepared and waited for me to agree to the stated conditions. When I pushed back, I was told that there was no way that I would be able to graduate from college due to my condition.

Accommodations for a disability were never suggested or realized in my process of seeking therapy.

Growing up in a multi-racial household added further challenges for me. Discussing problems was not customary in my family; doing so caused more tension than leaving things unaddressed. In addition, I had family members who were struggling with mental health and those who had disabilities. Again, neither were discussed or addressed openly as a family. We operated on the motto that something could not be valid if we did not talk about it. What I have been through has primarily shaped who I am as a teacher because I drew inspiration from the things I have experienced in my upbringing and personal life.

But *who am I as a teacher?* I ask myself this question fairly often. Every semester, before classes begin, I like to go through information from past semesters that I have kept from the same courses. I have taught public speaking enough times that preparing the course no longer requires spending hours preparing for lessons. At this time, we were almost a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, but still, I was comfortable with the changes to my usual instruction of this course. However, I had to spend more time preparing for this semester because I was teaching a course with students with IDD enrolled in the course. The public speaking program director told me before the semester began that I would have some students in my course from the CrossingPoints Certificate in Occupational Studies (CCOS) program. This program is for students with IDD to earn a certificate for completing college courses. I knew some information about the program beforehand from sitting in on various meetings, but in hindsight, I should have learned more about these students before becoming their teacher. I was not prepared enough to teach students with IDD—I had not even come to terms with my own disorders and abilities. As I prepared for my course, I had a few brief meetings with my supervisor and a

contact from the program. These meetings were not as helpful as they could have been if I had known the questions to ask or what to expect having students with IDD in my classes. A common phrase said to me was, “we know you can handle it,” and that was not very descriptive, nor did I fully understand the impact these students would have on the traditional classroom. In reflection, I now know that I was absolutely not ready to handle the experience of teaching students with IDD—however the exposure to this new teaching experience changed my life.

I grew up in a society where stereotypes and stigmas are everywhere, and false information gets passed around like wildfire. I was oblivious of my bias toward the disability community, although I knew that discrimination, in general, existed. I knew that some individuals were different from others and that *different* individuals often got treated poorly. I understood that society treated the disability community as a whole worse than they do the able-bodied community, but I did not realize to what extent. Consequently, I did not know that I, too, contributed to the unfair treatment of the disability community.

As mentioned, we did not discuss personal health in my family. I grew up very close to one of my uncles, who is classified as disabled by the government, but my family never referred to him as disabled and never acknowledged his disabilities. It was rare to talk about mental health disorders in my family. He has mental health disorders, and the stigma attached to this experience may have caused the family to avoid accepting or discussing his disability. At that time in my life, I thought I had experience being around the disability community, more so in distant settings, incognizant that I was living with someone with a disability. Additionally, I did not realize that I, too, have differences that some people might classify as disabilities later in life.

In my experience, I have noticed how being different can make it challenging to navigate through higher education. Discrimination based on culture, race, and gender that hinders

academic performance is something that I have experienced far too many times. I remember the day that someone pointed out that I was different. I was eight years old, and this was my first experience with racism. My White childhood friend was explaining to me that a specific boy in our class had to be my boyfriend and not hers because he is Black, and I am Black too. All the while, her parents listened to the conversation and laughed. The conversation made no sense to me at the time because my mother is a White-passing woman, and my father is Black. It was also the first day that I ever saw skin color as a way to categorize people. Sure, I noticed that individuals varied in skin tones, but I never thought to link that as an identifying factor of someone. Since then, I have been concerned with inclusion and connecting differing perspectives/experiences among people. I thought overall that I was reasonably self-aware through my lived experiences and constant yearning to learn about other people's perspectives. It is interesting to reflect on how my self-awareness while preparing for this course was quite naïve.

As a teacher, I pride myself on being considerate of my students' needs and co-creating meaning in the classroom. My teaching philosophy follows the transaction model from instructional communication theory. Instructional communication focuses on the process of how students and teachers simultaneously transfer information to create shared meanings and understandings (Conley & Ah Yun, 2017; Preiss & Wheelless, 2014; McCroskey et al., 2004; Morreale, 2015; Mottet et al., 2006)—respecting communication through transaction values shares meaning because is it co-created by both the teacher and students through all parties being the source (or sender) and the receiver simultaneously (Mottet et al., 2006). Instructional communication merges educational psychology, pedagogy, and communication (Houser &

Hosek, 2018; Mottet et al., 2006), and provides a meaningful way to construct an understanding of people and shared meanings in the classroom context.

As I was creating my lesson plans and considering ways to alter assignments for my incoming students with IDD, I did not consider scheduling a meeting with individual students to assess their needs or specific accommodations. I had students before who required accommodations, so from the very beginning, I was treating the students with IDD differently by not meeting with them as I would any other student requiring accommodations. I was already assuming their abilities without knowing anything about them. My bias was already showing before they even knew who I was as an instructor. At the time, I believed what I was doing was adequate and that I was a good teacher, but I failed to understand the complexities of this new teaching situation. In reflection, I was unprepared and unaware of my own biases and shortcomings.

### ***(Non)Advocacy***

Discovering that I would be teaching students with various abilities pushed me to think differently about public speaking. The standards and etiquette of public speaking suddenly seemed very dated and close-minded. I decided in the planning process that I was going to make a few changes to my usual public speaking course to make it more inclusive and accessible.

I thought that I had tailored the course to be more inclusive, but unfortunately, I was wrong. I missed a lot of detail that in reflection is needed to be successful in meeting my goals. I was told before the semester began that I should not announce that there were IDD/CCOS students in the class because that might make them feel uncomfortable and less like other students in the class. One of my core beliefs as a teacher includes striving to create a community in each class that I teach which correlates with the transactional model. I try to start the semester

off indicating that the class is a safe space for all students to learn and grow with each other and with myself. With this model in mind, I explain that to create this atmosphere, we have to get to know each other and, in doing so, disclose information about ourselves. I explain that this will naturally happen over time but will seem forced at first. I tend to utilize icebreaker games to allow students in my classes to get to know me and one another. One game I use includes each person introducing themselves with their preferred name, preferred pronouns, major, classification, and sharing something that will help the class remember them (e.g., my name is Ms. Rouse—like house and mouse, or I make light of the fact that I have OCD with odd numbers and explain that I obsessively count things such as how many pieces of gum I hand out in one day). Usually, playing this game is rather fun, and students start to notice some similarities with others in the classroom, such as commonalities like major of study in college. Well, this time did not go as I had planned for it to go.

Once the class started to play the game, and it came around to one of the students with IDD, they ended up disclosing not only that they did not have a major because they were earning the CCOS certificate, but they explained what the program is and announced their disability to the class. My heart dropped, and I immediately gasped because I thought this student had disclosed information that they did not feel comfortable confiding. Luckily, this particular class was over Zoom that day, so no one heard me, but I tend to wear my emotions on my sleeve, so I can only imagine my face. I felt inconsiderate for not thinking about the students with IDD before playing this game since they did not have a major to disclose. I did exactly what I was told not to do on the first day of the course. I felt like I forced this student to share personal and sensitive information they otherwise might not have ever shared with the class. I felt immense guilt right away. When the student disclosed this information, though, they did not seem

bothered by it at all. I assumed that they felt uncomfortable about this situation and felt forced to reveal personal information, and that is the source of my guilt. I began to wonder if I had forced a student to disclose or was it possible that they were more comfortable with their identity than I was as an instructor.

From that day forward, I knew I needed to rethink my traditional teaching styles and reexamine my class activities and curriculum. I did not mean to force the student into discussing their disability, but on the other hand, the game may have given them the opportunity that they wanted to share. I am not sure if they had a problem telling this to the class, so although I was uncomfortable, they may not have been. When it came to stating a major, the student could have said they did not have one. It is also possible that since I use my OCD as an example, the student also felt comfortable disclosing personal information. Some scholars have found that self-disclosure helps students to feel comfortable enough to do the same (Daniels et al., 2016).

Soon after the semester started, I decided that it would be beneficial to have weekly check-ins with the students with IDD. The course was set up rather unconventionally because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was teaching this course as a hybrid with zero to minimal face-to-face interaction. There was an optional weekly class in person that the students with IDD seemed to enjoy attending. The weekly meetings would allow me to assess how things were going and help each student as much as possible.

Unfortunately, the meetings were infrequent. I could not meet with all students with IDD each week as I planned for various reasons. Sometimes it was my fault, sometimes it was due to the students' not showing up or having technical issues, and sometimes the students were working without a mentor. Each student with IDD or class is paired with an upper-level student mentor who has previously completed the course; however, my students had issues with this

accommodation and were often not joined by their mentors. Usually, the process includes pairing students with a mentor at the beginning of the semester, and this mentor remains with the students for the course duration. The students with IDD, however, went through multiple mentors. This issue was not anything I could control, but it was frustrating because we were supposed to be in communication, but I could not keep up with the changing mentors. There was one point in class when I thought we had a new student (I did not know every student by memory yet). When I went to partner the class up, I partnered the mentor with another student in the course and had them do the activity rather than helping the students with IDD that they were supposed to be assisting.

Although the situation was out of my control, I still felt guilty that I could not do anything to help. The mentors were supposed to be supporting the students with IDD through the course, and I could tell that this was not happening, so I tried to pick up the slack, but I was not adequately trained to work with students with IDD. Overall, the course appeared to be going fine, but I felt very helpless and frustrated on behalf of my students with IDD because I thought they were not receiving fair treatment. It did not dawn on me until the last part of the semester that I could communicate directly with the students with IDD without including a mentor in the conversation. I do not know why I did not consider this option earlier. Was I afraid that meeting with them would expose my weaknesses as a teacher? I again assumed what they were able to do without allowing them to share this information with me. I thought that they could not advocate for themselves. I am still assuming that now. I think that they needed additional help, but they never told me they did. And there it was again—guilt. The guilt never left me. Not even after the semester ended. I could have done more, and I should have done more, and I still feel guilty about that experience.

## ***Regretful Guilt***

Talking about my personal guilt is difficult, mainly because most of my regret comes from the action of feeling guilty. I even feel guilty for the experience of feeling guilty after teaching this course. Dunn (2020) explained that the pandemic created a powerful combination of professor guilt with other kinds of guilt, and for me, the professor guilt eats away at me. However, there is such pressure to push down and not express guilt in academia (Willer et al., 2021). The inability to showcase grief or guilt in the classroom creates a barrier between students' and teachers' lives outside of the shared teaching/learning space. I feel guilty looking back on everything and considering what I could have done differently, mainly because this is not about me. The focus should be on the students with IDD in my course. I failed them as a teacher because I did not understand how to be a good teacher.

Another graduate student was also teaching a course with students with IDD when I was, and we would periodically check in with one another. I remember vividly hearing how amazing their class was going and how I felt guilty day in and day out because mine was not so great. I honestly felt like I was doing horribly and that this was probably one of the worst classes I have taught. I constantly questioned if any of my students were learning anything. It seemed like I was either over accommodating or not accommodating enough, and I could never find a balance or middle ground. I remember watching my students with IDD engaged in the lecture while the other students were dozing off or clearly doing something else (like watching TV while on our Zoom call). I also remember one of the students with IDD asking me to slow down and seeing them struggle as others in the class were attentive and participating. It seemed like I could not grasp how to accommodate everyone simultaneously. I was never taught how to teach in this

way, and it was not something I had considered until I was actively engaged in the complex process—and in my opinion that was too late.

One day, the class engaged in one of my favorite activities of the semester. On this day, we met online versus in-person. I numbered each student off as they entered the Zoom (class)room. One of the students with IDD enjoyed being the first one to class every day, so naturally, I numbered him as *one*. When it came time to play the game, I had them present a short impromptu speech to the class in order. I did not think, however, that the students with IDD might benefit from extra time to prepare or from watching other students go before them. Although the mentors were supposed to attend every class, this was also a day when we had no mentor present to assist the students with IDD. I had the student who was first to class, number one, start the activity. The student tried their best, but it was clear that they did not fully understand the directions for the activity. At one point, they froze, so I joined to help them finish their thought, but they quickly told me, “NO!” because they wanted to finish the activity themselves. In reflection, after the outcome of the interaction with the student, I now know that I should have waited longer for them to try to finish. I thought, ableistly, that I was helpful, but they did not need my help. I am accustomed to a fast-paced atmosphere that includes Grice’s (1975) maxims of what to expect when speaking. Chapter one in the introduction stated issues with the maxims and how they are not designed with the disability community in mind. My brain needed retraining—I believed that I had thought about every aspect of this activity, especially by altering it just weeks before. There it was again, guilt.

The other graduate student teaching the course, myself, and another graduate student ended up having a conversation one night over wine about how difficult this seemingly effortless course to teach had become with students with IDD now incorporated. We were disclosing how

tedious it was to consider the students with IDD at every point in the course. We all began noticing a significant disconnect in some of the passed-down course activities and suggested games to play. As mentioned briefly in the introduction chapter, a game was suggested that each class play. This game consisted of predetermined rules and instructions that includes imagining that the entire class is on a cruise ship that is starting to sink, and there is one life raft available that can only fit five people, so students must play out a set of characters and convince the class to vote for them to survive based on good and bad traits or qualities (and yes, that does mean that the rest not on the life raft would stay on the sinking ship). In the game, each student is asked to disclose both their good and the bad qualities. It is unclear where this game came from or who created it, but one of the characters from this game includes, *Sam- Excellent swimmer; been arrested three times for assault*. Being an excellent swimmer would be the *good* quality and being arrested would be the *bad* quality. It was evident that some of the “bad” parts were controversial. Below are a few examples that are directly exclusive to the disability community:

*Tyler- 25 years’ experience as a mechanic; deaf*

*Jack- 12 years old; paralyzed and reliant on a wheelchair*

*David- A teacher; a former Eagle Scout; blind*

*Mary- 30 years old; 4 months pregnant; has severe panic attacks*

Although it may be unintentional, this game plays upon societal assumptions of which lives are worth saving. The disability community are regarded as a liability deserving of death. Dolmage (2014) states that “all humans have agency, and all should live in communities that enable them to enact it within ethical limits,” and that within the communication classroom, teachers should abandon the ableist assumptions from civic life (p. 298). Furthermore, we must revise this way of thinking as “we will all be disabled if we live long enough” (Thomson, 2001, p. 337). We

decided to create a more inclusive version of this game that included animals rather than people.

We have since tested the new version numerous times, and it has the same, if not a better, outcome with students. The point of the game is to be persuasive and use concepts that students have learned in the course, which can still be achievable with this new alternate version. But it is moments like the unaltered version that public speaking courses need to be more aware of and revise. One of my honors classes even brought to my attention the following semester when we played the updated version that public speaking courses need to be more considerate and inclusive. My students in the honors class and I built a great atmosphere in this class to where they were ready to call me out because one of the animals, the kangaroo, was trying to sneak a joey onto the raft with them. This was a “bad” trait because this could mean the kangaroo is a liar, will eat more food, take up more space, etc. However, the student with this animal told the class that they were “with child” rather than hiding a joey. We quickly discussed the misunderstanding and that I was not having them play a game where pregnancy was a bad thing. It made me wonder how many students felt that the first version of this game is offensive but do not feel comfortable enough to say anything. If it were not for the dynamic that I had with the students in the honors class, I am not sure that that conversation would have happened. This was also the game that I classified as my favorite to play earlier, where I had one of the students with IDD going first. By altering the game, I thought that I had considered the students with IDD, but there was much more for me to consider besides just an activity, such as the preparation before the game even begins.

### ***Classroom Atmosphere***

It is crucial to me that students feel comfortable in my classroom since most students tend to dislike public speaking. I have personally had a unique relationship with public speaking,

specifically with being an instructor of speech courses and working in speaking centers. I did not have great reviews in my first few years teaching on my own in the classroom, my [ratemyprofessor.com](http://ratemyprofessor.com) page is proof, and I struggled in my leadership roles in speaking centers as well. One event that happened during my master's program nearly broke me. In short, I had trained an undergraduate consultant on how to facilitate workshops effectively, and when it was time to give their first one, at the last minute, they froze up, and I had to step in and provide the workshop to Greek student leaders. The students did not enjoy this workshop and wrote such bad reviews to my director that our stakeholders had to be informed as well. I was devastated by the students' comments, mainly about my character. Some of the statements included that I was insulting, I was not answering their questions, I did not know what I was talking about, I had an attitude, and so on. I spent about two weeks reconsidering my whole life's purpose due to this situation. I thought, *why on earth am I teaching public speaking when I am not a public speaker*. In hindsight, I believe that 20% of those reviews had to do with me, and 80% had to do with the last-minute change and other things out of my control. I also cannot help but think that power dynamics played a role in this scenario. Like most of my teaching situations, I am usually one of the only, if not the only, person in the room that is not White. When I enter a classroom, I am already disadvantaged as a young, minority woman. The educational system in the U.S. is already not made for me, let alone structured for me to be teaching or encouraging/supportive of me teaching.

Dr. Orlando L. Taylor, a black male, former vice provost for research and dean of the Graduate School at Howard University, and recipient of the National Communication Association Mentor Award for teaching and leadership, wrote an article in 1970 specifically calling that speech teachers revise their professional perspective and start to listen to the black

academic community. Taylor (1970) discussed the struggle to gain the respect of White academics and that Black individuals essentially “can only expect to achieve a taste of human dignity by rejecting black cultural values, black behavioral models, and black aspirations and replacing them with a white orientation” (p. 112). Taylor’s article, published in 1970, is still relatable in 2022. I feel that I need to be the best version of myself at all times for the academy to take me on. Historically, higher education has failed to respect black Americans (Taylor, 1970). Higher education places emphasis on White perspectives and the “culture and values which are considered important enough to be taught and perpetuated in colleges and universities are either white or those which are considered necessary for whites to know” rather than meeting the needs of students outside of that box (Taylor, 1970, p. 113). I habitually am compelled to keep with the status quo and am afraid to push against the grain too much because I know that I am at a disadvantage working for a system not intended for me. Taylor (1970) wrote about the same feeling stating:

White America resists black educational power because it is fearful of what might result. It is fearful of what might be taught because blacks might cease to be ignorant and whitewashed. In fact, blacks might develop a sense of pride far beyond the rhetoric level and begin to use it to develop minds which will seriously challenge a system that is advantageous for whites and disadvantageous for blacks (p. 115).

Having my personal experiences always in the back of my mind, I place a high value on co-creating a safe space for my students in the classroom. I encourage my students to try new things in my class since it is a safe space and takes students through various low-stakes activities throughout the semester. I also strive for a democratic atmosphere that coincides with my teaching beliefs and instructional communication theory. But I believe that classroom dynamic

goes beyond just this. I think that as teachers, we have an ethical responsibility to constantly evaluate what we are teaching and how we are teaching it, and we need to “be aware of the ways in which power, privilege, and exclusion in the larger society may be reproduced in our own classrooms” (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008, p. 45). What transpires in the classroom comes from the dominant ideologies and traditions that leave certain students out based on race and ethnicity, class, gender (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008), and arguably abilities as well since disability, culture, race, and identity tend to overlap (Parry-Giles, 2021).

Although my students with IDD were struggling in my course due to it being ableist and not designed for them, there were additional obstacles that they were facing as well. Students with IDD are usually facing additional judgments and or inequalities aside from discrimination based on their abilities (Emerson, 2007). From observation and disclosure, some of those other challenges included, racial barriers, language barriers, first-generation challenges, and so on. To honor their privacy, I will not discuss the intersectional discrimination in detail. I could relate to the multiple layers of discrimination that I believe my students were dealing with, being that I am a multi-racial, women, with mental health and learning disorders. Although I did not know about my learning disorders while teaching this specific class, I have constantly felt the struggles of trying to position myself in the academy knowing that I have to work ten times harder as a BIPOC woman in a Western, White valued atmosphere. Rather than academia being a space that was formed with individuals like me in mind, it has only made accommodations to adapt to include individuals like me, and the same can be said for the disability community. The public speaking course was not created with students with IDD in mind, rather, it was created for students without disabilities and is only adapted for students with disabilities (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 205). The public speaking course needs to value and accept the differences in

people and embrace that rather than keeping the course how it is currently to create a safe space in our classrooms (Forrest, 2020, Daniels et al., 2016).

Additionally, we must constantly evaluate how students teach each other in our classrooms. I have found from my experience that students taking public speaking learn the most from observing each other. If one student is loquacious, another feels comfortable to talk too. Or if one student begins inserting verbal fillers after every other word, the next student is likely to do the same. And if one student starts to move around in the space, usually the rest try and follow suit. Through this, I realize how important it is to make sure that students recognize their power in our shared space. They have the right to their own words and should, to some extent, have ownership of their voice through their thoughts and comments. I am merely a public speaking teacher; I do not have all the answers to every topic they decided to present. With this in mind, I find it imperative that teachers reevaluate what they are teaching, how they are teaching it, and how they evaluate what has been taught. I believe this starts with proper support and training.

### ***Support, Supporting, and Training***

Although my experience teaching students with and without intellectual disabilities was challenging, I appreciate the knowledge I have gained. My experience led me to uncover a much broader issue in the public speaking curriculum that extends far beyond my mishaps in this one course. I believe that moving forward, if I had the opportunity to teach students with and without intellectual disabilities in one public speaking course, I would do it, but I would also need three things, 1) further support and guidance, 2) to be educated on how to be supporting rather than being ableist or disablist, and 3) proper training. I will discuss each one in further detail.

**Support.** During my time teaching students with and without intellectual disabilities, I had supportive people around me, yet I did not feel supported. Yes, I had individuals that I could turn to for help or find answers to my questions, but I often heard the same thing repeatedly—“do what you feel is best.” I did not know what was best! I am naturally a very indecisive person. It was challenging to navigate what was *best* for my students with IDD. And again, I did not think to ask them what was best. As mentioned earlier, I should have communicated with them directly more often. I was afraid to, however. After talking with other students who identify with the disability community, this echoes how they often felt in their classrooms—that their teachers were scared and treated them like they were fragile, almost like porcelain dolls. I can admit I took this same approach where I felt cautious about talking with my students with IDD, like I might hurt them or that they could not possibly understand me. This, unfortunately, led to my disablism showing. It is tough to admit this because I also must admit that I did not give my students with IDD what they deserved.

At the end of the semester, my Student Opinions of Instruction were average. A few students did mark and include comments sharing that the course was not a valuable experience. However, the section labeled “comments about the instructor” had only two comments, “Great teacher” and “She was awesome! Great teaching style and very sweet!” which could signify that this class was not as successful as it could have been not because of me, but because of the curriculum, which supports my beginning argument. If the public speaking course was more inclusive, if I could unlearn what I have been taught about public speaking, and if I had better support to turn to in times of need, I think that would have significantly helped the situation. I also needed resources to help me understand how to support my students to provide them with exactly what I was missing about a more inclusive curriculum that met their personal needs.

**Supporting.** Through the creation of this dissertation, I have realized just how much I did not know, should have known, and need to continue researching about disability and pedagogy. The disability community is intertwined with the millions of sub-communities that I am surrounded by daily. The disability community is a part of my everyday life, family, and a community where I belong. Before knowing I would have students with IDD in my course, I considered myself an ally, but I was wrong. How can one be an ally when they are not adequately equipped with the proper amount of knowledge about a particular community? I was oblivious to how to support the disability community; I was not an ally who supported the disability community. In reflection, I do not think I needed to know everything, and I understand this type of knowledge must be cyclical because every community varies, evolves, and has different experiences for every individual. Still, I would have benefited from training on being an ally and supporting the disability community before teaching this course.

Additionally, I have also had the opportunity to speak with many individuals about this topic, leading to many conversations with individuals who self-identify as having a disability and who have experience with public speaking. One of the conversations led to a student disclosing that they have autism and explaining how difficult it can be to hold eye contact with the audience or control their facial expressions during a speech. These conversations confirm that my experience is not a one-off but that other individuals notice these issues and support change in this specific communication context and others.

With the help of additional resources going into my course, I might have been a better teacher and provided a better learning experience for all of my students. Allyship training, or any training on disabilities, is something I plan to do now and encourage others in my position to do as well. Since this course, I have had many conversations about my experience and am talking

and working more with the disability community to gain perspective on how to implement change in the public speaking course. I have also spent more time training and informing others who serve as instructors in communication courses.

**Training.** At most institutions, the public speaking course is taught by graduate teaching assistants and very little training is conducted beforehand (Nyquist & Wulff, 1992). When public speaking courses are not taught by graduate students, adjunct faculty members often teach the course. The public speaking course must be reevaluated especially knowing that the teachers teaching the course tend to have minimal training. It should not be just the responsibility of the teacher to complete training; it is up to the Communication field as a whole to make changes and relearn/reestablish the foundations of public speaking to be more inclusive. Training could come in many forms, though, but in the end, the training should at least start with being more aware of inclusivity within our field.

Palacios (2017) wrote that “ableism is when I ask you for help, and you feel entitled to choose for me.” I would like the standard for an instructor in higher education to be not a choice to help but rather a fundamental human right to help and make accommodations for students where necessary. However, it is difficult to do this when instructors lack the requisite training and information on how to best accommodate their students. For example, one anecdote at our institution in the last several years explains that a culturally Deaf student (who uses American Sign Language (ASL)) in a doctoral seminar asked their instructor about an assignment in the course that included a presentation. Rather than asking what accommodations that student might need, the instructor immediately offered an entirely alternative assignment and assumed that the student could not give an *oral* presentation. The student was shocked because he had given many successful presentations in ASL where a voice interpreter provided the information for non-

signers in the audience. This student had a lot of experience in self-advocacy because of their experience seeking accommodations in higher education. However, I personally have not been the best advocate for myself in school and am not familiar with having others advocate for me, but this example reminds me that I need to allow students the chance to advocate for themselves first—a process that requires re-shifting answers from the instructor to the student and requires patience and perspective taking.

A specific training that I believe I could have benefited from circles back to how to be supporting. I would have appreciated knowing more about being an ally for students with disabilities or even how to be accommodating. In Wong's (2020) book, Samuels' chapter describes crip time as the flexibility and expanded approach to normative time frames. Crip time creates a new normal for time constraints, such as more flexible schedules and deadlines, to allow for extra time needed for someone with a disability. Crip time focuses on disabled bodies as the priority because "rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Being more educated about the disability community to understand the things that I was not aware of, I believe, would have changed my experience tremendously.

### **Final Reflection**

After teaching this specific section of the course, I had a few conversations with the students with IDD's advocate and the program's point person to reflect on the semester. We had a conversation and a few email exchanges directly after the semester was over and then met for a discussion again six months later. Our conversation six months later was the most impactful one for me. I processed my experience and articulated my frustrations, grievances, and joys. I learned through this meeting that there were things that the advocate wished went better as well. For

example, the advocate explained the fear of pressuring the instructor too much to make accommodations for students with IDD. The individuals working for the program that supports the students with IDD is thankful that instructors are even allowing students with IDD into the classroom, so there is a fear that if they ask for too many changes, they might pull their class from the program in the future. In addition, many established professors tend to be stuck in their ways and not as open to learning ways to restructure or teach their courses that accommodate students with IDD. I hope that the advocates of the students with IDD will feel comfortable enough to speak up for their students in the future in ways that can align with institutional, departmental, and course goals.

Along with asking for accommodations, simply getting a meeting with an instructor can be difficult. The advocate shared that many instructors were not as willing or available to meet before the course began. I was also told that the instructor's standards and expectations drastically differ. According to the advocate, when comparing the course that I taught to the other public speaking courses with and without students with IDD, I held my students to a higher standard than the other instructor did. This is problematic and something that I hope changes in the future. An adjustment could be to have all of the instructors teaching the same course meet with the advocacy program together to establish base standards. Once that is determined, the standards can be altered per student if necessary. The goal, the advocate explained, is for universal learning design, meaning a curriculum that is designed for all students (Powell & Powell, 2010; Daniels et al., 2016).

In the end, it comes down to me relearning what I was taught about public speaking and relearning what I have been trained on how to teach effectively. I also have to understand that there is no one way of doing something. Academia tends to ascribe to close-minded ideals and

not accept various ways to accomplish the same goal. This can be reflected throughout my college career. Sure, I barely had any support, not many believed in what I wanted to do or study, and few understood why I was doing, thinking, or viewing things the way I did, but I made it and have accomplished an outstanding amount, although there is much more that I still want to accomplish.

Maybe I have always been empathetic towards differing abilities because I could relate. People often assumed I was not anxious about public speaking because I loved it so much or did not mind talking in front of people, but that is not true. I have heard similar stories while talking to other individuals with disabilities that public speaking helps them to mask their disorders. My learning disorders include impairments in reading and mathematics. I would get so nervous reading in front of the class, but I do not think anyone ever noticed because, for one, I am pretty good at hiding/manipulating my nerves since I study public speaking anxiety, and two, because I enjoy pushing myself and trying to overcome my fears so I would still volunteer to read aloud anyway. Over the years, I learned some tricks for reading aloud. It was only later that I realized that the techniques I used were not something other people also had to do. Such as, if everyone were reading a passage in the class, I would count ahead to establish which passage I would be reading and practice it before it got to me. I would be so focused on reading each word accurately that I would not retain anything that I read to the point that I would not even know if I read it right or not.

Unfortunately, I never learned any tricks for math though. Reflecting back, the many times I simply thought I just was not *good* at math stemmed from my learning disorder. I worked in retail for six years and used to get terrified when I had to do easy addition on the spot or in front of other people. I just could not do it. I would go into shock and freeze at times. Again,

reflecting now, I realize that this is not something that most people deal with. I was drawn to get tested for learning disabilities while working through my dissertation because I noticed a lot of similarities to the students I was teaching. I clearly remember conversing with one of my CCOS students and disclosing that I have anxiety, and they were extremely shocked. Their reaction surprised me too, and from there, we were able to have a conversation about what works for us to help lower our anxiety and connect that to the course material.

I also had another student who had academic accommodations enroll in one of my honors public speaking courses. They tried to take my class for two semesters but suffered from extreme social anxiety that they could not even walk through the classroom door. I met with them a few times in my office, and I think I made it more comfortable by disclosing my anxiety diagnosis as well, but I remember them sharing that they could sit and talk to me just fine, with no problems, and at ease, but the thought of going into a classroom filled with other students that they would have to talk in front of and with was too daunting. This experience showed me how empathy could go a long way in building student-teacher relationships. Empathy is now a more critical factor to me as a teacher in this situation. Additionally, academic accommodations do not provide enough detail to fully understand what specific accommodations a student may need in my classroom. Thus, valuing empathy can help students become more comfortable sharing their diagnoses. If students feel that a teacher is open to feedback and actual changes, the more inclined students feel to share their perspectives (Bolkan, 2017), and I think the same could be applied when discussing disclosure.

My experience has made me realize just how significant changes to the public speaking course are and how impactful they can be for all students. Because many students do not have access to determine their disorders, disabilities, or struggles and must provide proof of their

disability for academic accommodations, they struggle in silence because they do not have the means to pay for the testing needed to provide the proof (Kleinfield, 2018). This is ultimately what happened to me in my undergraduate program. I did not have the knowledge or means to further research why I struggled in school so much. It was only as an adult that I had access to resources to uncover my disorders, and even then, it cost me \$400 to undergo an evaluation. This points out larger issues of accessibility, but since so many individuals struggle with accessibility, changes can be highly beneficial for all students taking public speaking courses, not just students with disabilities.

My ultimate hope is that instructors who have yet to teach a student with a noticeable disability read this so that they can consider making changes now to be more accommodating to all students. I want people to learn from my experiences, learning more from the disability community. Since this experience, I have reached out to various programs, organizations, and leaders to educate myself further. A deeper discussion on recommendations will be discussed in the concluding chapter of the dissertation.

## **Conclusion**

Although this is about my experience, I wanted to have conversations with the disability community to include their considerations and show that even if a person does not identify as a part of the community, they can still be a part of the change the community deserves. At the beginning of my journey working on this research, I initially did not identify as a part of the disability community, but that has changed (literally in this chapter and in my life) for two reasons.

The first reason is that I have a different perspective about differing abilities, and the second reason is due to my recent diagnosis of mental health and learning disorders. I was

surprised to find out about my learning disorders although they make complete sense to me as well. I have been made to feel that something was wrong with me, as if there was something that I could do to fix the problem, my entire life. Learning about my disorders felt like a weight off of my shoulders though; that I could now stop masking my struggles and embrace that I am in fact *different*. It was also surprising that the list of recommendations for them included visiting the speaking center that I work for on campus. According to the report, I could utilize the speaking center to help me improve with reading aloud. I am not sure how the speaking center was added to this list, but that is not something actively promoted at the center. It was good to be aware of the list as we can now work on training our consultants adequately for appointments made from the recommendation list. I want to be sure from this point on that I can be a faithful ally for the disability community and help make sure that more academics are considerate rather than excluding differing abilities. One step to achieve this is by writing and sharing my experiences so that others can learn from them.

CHAPTER 4:  
ASSESSMENT RESPONSABILITIES:  
EVALUATING PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE RUBRICS

**Introduction**

When searching the most popular TED Talks of all time, their website states that the one with the most views, currently at 72 million, is by Sir Ken Robinson (Ted.com, n.d.). Robinson, who passed away from cancer in 2020, was known for their captivating and innovative ideas on educational efforts. Additionally, Robinson was diagnosed with poliomyelitis, more commonly known as polio, which often causes paralysis and can sometimes be fatal. By the age of four, Robinson reported walking with a limp. Regardless of Robinson's diagnosis, Robinson was well known for their ability to connect with the audience through exemplar delivery skills (Bates, 2020). Robinson frequently walked with a cane, which is visible in said TED Talks presentation. The chance of a speaker having differing abilities than neurotypical or able-bodied individuals is often not something that public speaking rubrics take into account. Instead, instructors of public speaking have the autonomy or power to determine how such accommodations will affect the speech grade determined by the assessment rubric.

Power relations are significantly complicated in educational settings when strict hierarchies are imposed, and instructors abuse their authority. In the classroom, despite our best efforts, there will always be a presence of unequal power dynamics, especially at the beginning of a course, because the instructor holds power to shape the curriculum and how relevant topics are presented. Teachers communicate with students from some degree of social influence

(Schrodt et al., 2007; Turman & Schrodt, 2006), and “in most classrooms there is an invisible hegemony that belongs to the teachers” (Song, 2021, p. 416). One of the consequential power levels in the classroom is a teacher’s ability to assign grades. Usually, various assessments are available to help determine grades in ways that align with learning outcomes or goals, but sometimes the assessment results are due to unfair uses of power that act as vehicles for ideology.

As previously stated, there is an ethical responsibility to design and assess courses with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront, and that includes neurodiversity and physical ability. Students with disabilities have been left out of the construction of higher education courses for far too long. In the past, “education for students with disabilities appeared to be a privilege rather than a right” (Brantlinger, 2006, p. 87). Rather than inclusion being based on privilege or power, a shift needs to be made “from a culture of ableism to a culture of access” (Kleinfeld, 2018, p. 7), and the public speaking course has a role to play in that transition. Specifically, because public speaking courses are a staple in the Communication field, the course should encourage students to share their unique experiences and voice their opinions on various topics through bodily rhetoric that is sensitive to each person’s unique circumstances. With less acceptance of various ways of thinking and being in the world, it may limit instructors’ ability to create a safe space for these conversations to happen in the classroom. In the past, the disability community has been excluded from Western society, and “people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream education, employment, service provision and full participation in society” (Harpur, 2009, p. 163). One way that students with disabilities are being discriminated against is through the assessment tools and rubrics used in the course. Unfortunately, while assessment tools are designed for the purposes of creating fair and equal procedures, they are

also artifacts of cultural norms, and as such, many assessment tools used to grade students perpetuate ableist assumptions. For example, “an ableist education would require all students (including those with reduced vision) to study textbooks with standard-size fonts and would not take into consideration individual student’s limitations” (Harpur, 2009, p. 164). This example showcases how overlooked longstanding procedures and practices that are ableist in the educational system.

In this chapter, I examine current assessment tools used by instructors in the public speaking course from a critical disability lens paired with rhetorical content analysis to uncover ableist perspectives. The delivery section of the assessment rubrics was the only section that was listed across all rubrics; thus, this section is the focus. Other sections were similar across rubrics, such as content areas, but were not the same and difficult to analyze without having prior knowledge of the specific course material or specifics of the assignment since both vary per class/institution. By focusing on the delivery sections of assessment rubrics, a detailed explanation of ableist discrimination can be discussed. This analysis supports the contention that ableism is present within public speaking programs.

### **Public Speaking Programs and Ableism**

Educators can expect to have an increase of students with disabilities in the classroom, and although this can “often present physical, social, and academic challenges to classroom teachers,” studies have shown that this can benefit both students with and without disabilities (Powell & Powell, 2010, 95). With this in mind, it is pivotal to consider how ableism is perpetuated in the public speaking course. One specific source of ableism is through the assessment process of public speaking students. Without training for dismantling ableism, instructors are likely to include their bias when evaluating students (Darling, 1992).

Understanding the general training, or lack thereof, for public speaking instructors before discussing the importance of assessments in the course sets the base for the use of critical disability theory for this study.

### ***Assessment in Public Speaking Courses***

Currently, there is not a shared assessment tool presently used by all public speaking programs. The absence of a universal assessment tool could be positive for extinguishing ableism in the various assessment tools. However, through this analysis, one can comprehend that there is a common trend that ableism exists in the various assessment tools being used. The public speaking course's future depends on careful analysis and adjustments that include a broad understanding of student capability. Taking a look at arguably the most well-known competencies, or learning outcomes, that have become the foundation for many assessment tools displays the problem with exclusionary perspectives to specific student populations currently. *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form* (Morreale et al., 2007), revised once since its creation in 1990, was established by the National Communication Association (NCA) Committee on Assessment and Testing (Morreale et al., 2007). Although the NCA has dedicated much time to evaluating what revisions need to be made to the basic public speaking course, disabled perspectives need more consideration. Communication faculty and administrators need to question the training of instruction and assessment tools for public speaking courses (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994), specifically to ensure that it does not promote ableist norms.

Since rubrics reinforce societal norms, they can also encourage bias from the instructor (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Scholarship from writing centers have focused on changes to this approach. Rather than assessing students on their abilities, writing center research has determined that there needs to be a focus on considering the diverse learning needs of students

(Daniels et al., 2016, p. 21). Writing center research promotes educators to reassess pedagogy and training to challenge inclusion, specifically towards accommodating the disability community (Dembsey, 2020). Training will be beneficial to include students with disabilities in the course as an instructor uses assessment tools in the public speaking course.

**Assessment.** Assessments are essential to maintain programs and departments as they can help determine where improvements need to be made in the instruction of public speaking courses and verify that students understand course material through program and classroom assessments (Allen, 2002; Hunter et al., 2014; McCroskey, 2007; Meyer et al., 2010). Rubrics is an assessment tool often used to grade oral presentations in communication courses (Dunbar et al., 2006). Public speaking rubrics often include text that can penalize students with disabilities, such as “eliminate distracting characteristics, increase eye contact, enunciate clearly/naturally, eliminate distracting mannerisms, gesture naturally, control your facial expressions, stand up straight and tall, movement needed and so on” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 206). As a public speaking instructor, I have talked with students with disabilities about how much of a struggle these standards can be to achieve and the anxiety that is caused by knowing that at the onset of the speech, your body is being negatively judged. Rubrics regularly use the loaded terminology of “natural,” but what comes as natural to one person may not be natural for another person. The introduction of this dissertation discussed how *good* posture, for example, should not be based on Western cultural norms of the term but rather medically and personally determined (Gilman, 2014). Take Robinson’s use of a cane; they physically had medical barriers that prohibited traditional standards for *good* posture, and in drawing attention to posture in this way, rubrics project cultural misconceptions that PWD are feeble and deficient.

There are still many courses that value outdated delivery ideals that include “standards for “effective” communication [that] rest on ableist assumptions” (Tigert & Miller, 2021, p. 1). Some of the most familiar categories found in speech assessments include “maintaining eye contact, standing at a podium, and controlling body movements,” yet these examples include ableist assumptions that offer minimal room for a range in ability (Tigert & Miller, 2021, p. 1). Gunn (2010) argues that in the shift away from orality, the field of communication has labored to conceal the unpredictability of the human body, thus assuming that stronger minds are evidenced by bodily control. Analyzing rubrics promises to expose the inattention to disability within the assessment tools used for public speaking programs. Additionally, many instructors are likely to harbor ableist worldviews established by social norms when using the assessment tools, depending on the criteria and categories present on the rubric (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Newer instructors and teaching assistants are often more strict with rubrics and use them without much grace or flexibility.

Similar to the approach taken for this study, Ashby-King et al. (2021) completed an interpretive analysis of public speaking presentation rubrics to determine the constraints and opportunities to practice critical communication pedagogy. The results identify three levels of power dynamics present in the rubrics: high context, shared context, and low context, with their suggestion to aim for a shared context type rubric for public speaking courses “to advance equity and social justice in the introductory communication course” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 14). Their study also emphasizes the use of power in the classroom but does not discuss various levels of power. Past research on power dynamics in the classroom pulled from French and Raven’s (1959) interpretation of power categories. Richmond and McCroskey’s (1984) study questioned if teacher power is associated with student cognitive learning and based the study on

French and Raven (1959). Their results concluded that coercive power and legitimate power were less effective for cognitive learning, referent and expert enhance learning, and reward power appeared to be unrelated; thus, “this lack of relationship raises a significant challenge to those who argue that rewards should be employed to motivate students” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 136). Their results match that of studies completed since then that argue that “referent, expert, and reward power are viewed as prosocial forms of power and are generally positively associated with cognitive learning” and that “legitimate and coercive power are viewed by students as antisocial forms of power and are negatively associated with these same learning outcomes” (Schrodt et al., 2008, p. 183). This chapter will draw from both studies mentioned above to examine ableist perspectives within the assessment rubrics currently used in the public speaking course. By expanding upon the power context levels from Ashby-King et al. (2021) to include the levels of power from Raven (1959) and utilizing critical disability theory, this analysis of rubrics will determine how levels of power can lead to ableism in the public speaking course.

### ***Theoretical Impact: Critical Disability Theory***

The opposite of being able-bodied is not disabled; instead, abilities occur along a continuum. Like race, gender, class, or ethnicity, abilities are used to categorize individuals into particular social groups. Individuals can be a part of many social groups or communities at once, given that identity is always multifaceted and that various identifying factors, such as disability, culture, and race, can overlap (Parry-Giles, 2021). Still, one can also have fewer abilities than someone else and not consider themselves part of the disability community. “Disorder” is a medical term, whereas “disability” is societal based and often used as a legal term. Devlin & Pothier (2006) state,

Disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to (p. 2).

Critical disability theory is specifically concerned with physical and cognitive realities and emphasizes power dynamics based on abilities (Rocco, 2005). Critical disability theory values Disability Studies and critical race theory (Rocco, 2005). Critical disability theory is critical insofar that it challenges ideologies of disability and demands that rather than insisting people with disabilities are accommodated or learn to live in an able-bodied environment, it is economic, social, and political policies that must be changed and a shift in power and control should be restructured in favor of individuals with disabilities (Gillies, 2014).

## **Method**

Rhetorical critics are often concerned with power and ideologies, as they aim to explain how rhetoric works in the world persuasively to shape societal norms and perceptions (Foss, 2009). Historically, rhetorical studies have valued perfection and control, and “rhetoric has never been particularly friendly to the disabled, the deformed, the deaf or mute, the less-than-perfect in voice, expression or stance” (Brueggemann & Fredal, 1998, p. 251). Many scholars have highlighted how rhetoric studies can be an ally for Disability Studies by showcasing new perspectives when pairing rhetoric and Disability Studies’ perspectives together (Parry-Giles, 2021; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). A combination of rhetorical criticism and content analysis offers optimal efforts for analyzing rubrics to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. Content analysis is a flexible method used for analyzing text, and the “specific type of content analysis approach chosen by a researcher varies with the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher and the problem being studied” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). A

rhetorical content analysis of 30 public speaking rubrics was used to locate ableist perspectives present in public speaking courses, specifically within the assessment tools used. The artifacts that were analyzed are public speaking assessment rubrics for persuasive speeches from various higher educational institutions in the U.S. and were collected via email. Once obtained, they were stored in a shared folder, analyzed individually, and then compared the rubrics to one another. Examining rubrics as rhetorical artifacts emphasizes the ideology the assessment tools possess and allows for criticism on how instructional power can be made in favor of able-bodies when used to assess students with disabilities.

Purposive sampling was used to collect the persuasive rubrics for this analysis. Persuasive rubrics were chosen as this is the most common speech type that is almost always assessed in introductory public speaking courses, while other speech types vary per instructor/course. First, a request was sent out for rubrics to COMMNotes, the NCA listserv. Second, another request for rubrics went out directly to introductory communication course directors and administrators using the NCA basic course directory. Participants were asked to send rubrics that assess a persuasive speech to be assessed for a dissertation. The rubrics were then stripped of any identification, saved to a folder, and organized for analysis upon collection. A final total of 30 rubrics were included for data analysis.

### *Analysis*

Specifically, analyzing the delivery sections of the rubrics allows for a thorough discussion. Upon analysis, it was useful to include elements from other sections of the rubrics as well that translates to students' delivery abilities. For example, some rubrics did not include a category for eye contact in the delivery section but did include categories elsewhere that could translate to the general goal of eye contact. Public speaking programs are ableist in many ways,

but by first focusing on how ableism is seen through the assessment tools used, we can address how the rubrics promote the use of power and biases. By revealing the ableism in the assessment rubrics, the ideologies of an *effective* speaker are also revealed, which suggests that students with disabilities be accommodated into the course rather than the course being designed for students with disabilities.

A revised version of the Ashby-King et al. (2021) study was used as an example to inspect the rubrics for this study. Ashby-King et al. (2021) determined three levels of contextual richness within rubrics to showcase power dynamics in the classroom, high context, low context, and shared context. The high context is “rubrics that offer rigid, specific directives and deliverables that function as a checklist of behaviors students must complete” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). The low context is “rubrics that provide vague and subjective expectations, unclear standards, and lack directives (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). Shared context is “rubrics that create the opportunity for shared meaning-making throughout the assessment process and allow for the evaluation of each students’ individual presentation” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). I redefined these to address the different categories of power in relation to (dis)abilities. Ableist assumptions can be seen through three new contexts, coercive context, legitimate context, and referent/expert context. This revision includes four of the five bases of power by French and Raven (1959). Reward was excluded since, in this case, receiving a good grade would be the reward; more on this is noted in the discussion of the limitations. The results included rubrics from all three of the new context categories (see Table 2 for an explanation of rubric contexts and examples from the key findings).

**Table 2. Rubric Contexts Definitions and Examples**

	Coercive Context	Legitimate Context	Referent/Expert Context
Definition	Rubrics that provide firm, detailed expectations for abilities.	Rubrics that provide vague and subjective expectations for abilities.	Rubrics that create the opportunity for shared meaning of abilities per student.
Example	“Made extensive eye contact to establish trust.”	“Eye contact.”	No section specifically dedicated to eye contact.

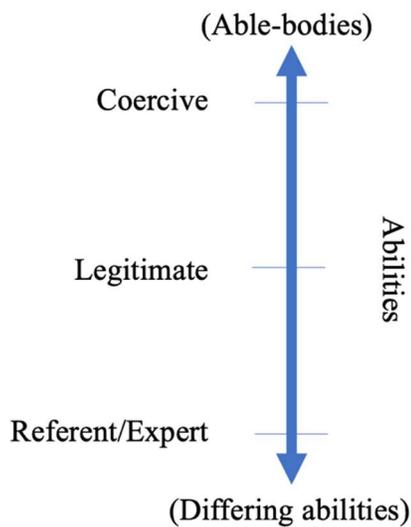
## **Findings**

The results include two parts, 1) an explanation of how the power contexts is present in the delivery sections, and 2) where specifically the rubrics display ableist assumptions in the delivery sections. The delivery section of each rubric was analyzed overall and then re-examined based on the specific categories found within the delivery sections (listed below). Each category displayed either coercive context or legitimate context. When a rubric did not state a specific category, other sections outside of the delivery section were examined to determine if referent/expert context was present.

### ***Power Contexts.***

Similar to past research suggesting that coercive and legitimate power were less effective for learning and that referent and expert power enhanced learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Schrodt et al., 2008), the same theory could be applied to the acceptance of differing abilities within the rubrics (see figure 1). Many of the rubrics assumed that students would be able-bodied, which resulted in either landing in the coercive or legitimate contexts because both of these contexts began with ableist assumptions.

**Figure 1: Basis of Power Applied to Ability Spectrum**



**Coercive Context.** Categories placed into the coercive context were assessments that left little room for various abilities but instead suggested one-single way to achieve a successful grade on a speech. This type of language used descriptive language such as “maintain,” “purposeful,” “natural,” and “meaningful,” or any descriptor of the expectation of the action. For example, rather than stating “eye contact,” a coercive context rubric included statements such as “gestures: distracting, imbalanced, steady, balanced, comfortable,” “your body movement (gestures and posture) made the presentation compelling, and you appeared polished,” or “gestures are big and engaging and are appropriate to the speech.” Coercive context language tends to be highly ableist and lower in power transfer to the students due to low flexibility and high restrictions. The assumption within this type of rubric is that students have minimal control over the expectation of what they are being assessed on in this context. Coercive context language favored able-bodies by limiting the scope of abilities to one standard ideal that assumes each student is able to do the function being assessed. There was still a level of assumption of abilities in the next context as well.

**Legitimate Context.** Legitimate power contexts were more flexible in meaning due to being more ambiguous with the terms used. For example, broad language such as “movement” or “posture/poise” was not accompanied by any descriptive words. This could lead to varied interpretations and misinterpretations between students and teachers but nonetheless were still exclusive to able-bodies. Legitimate power still assumes what students can and cannot do. The wide range of interpretations can lead to the one in power being in control. Legitimate power contexts present a higher chance of power flow to students but can also be limiting as the meaning of the vague terms is, in turn, subjective by the instructor. A student might think that gestures mean minimal hand movement, whereas an instructor might consider including gestures in a speech to mean bold gestures that emphasize crucial ideas. Of course, the classroom is where these discrepancies should be addressed, but it is often the case that problems are only addressed after the grade is assigned. Because legitimate power usually has a standard or code to follow, this would mean that the student and teacher would both need to understand what is meant by the category being accessed *before* giving the speech. However, the standard is ultimately created or influenced by the teacher. Another example of legitimate context that did not fit into the most common categories stated, “used nonverbal communication effectively,” however, this is still potentially ableist because *effectiveness* is ambiguous.

**Referent/Expert Context.** Lastly, referent/expert context language included flexibility in expectations and the opportunity for co-creation between teacher and student. The difference between legitimate context is that instead of using ambiguous language or terms, students and teachers can co-create a shared meaning that can include a range of abilities. Referent/expert context language included phrases that were not assuming of a student’s abilities. For example, two rubrics did not have a specific section for eye contact. This is not to say that eye contact was

not evaluated; rather, it was not assumed that each student was able to be assessed on their eye contact. Referent/expert context language promotes differing abilities because it does not include statements specific to abilities and allows space for shared meaning. Referent/expert context also promotes the expansion of the ideal public speaker because a shared understanding is determined between teacher and student. Although this type of language was less common than the two counterparts, it was included here to explain how a rubric can become less ableist depending on the language used on the assessment rubric. One of the rubrics that did not have a section on eye contact did include a section that stated, “connected with the audience,” whereas other rubrics lumped the two together with “eye contact that connects with the audience.” Small changes that take out the ableist assumptions can make substantial changes to the public speaking course overall. Removing the assumption of abilities also allows for the co-creation process to happen so that the instructor and student can determine the expectations together. Nearly every rubric displayed language of at least two of the contexts. To explain this, a breakdown of the most common categories found in the delivery sections of the rubrics will be explained.

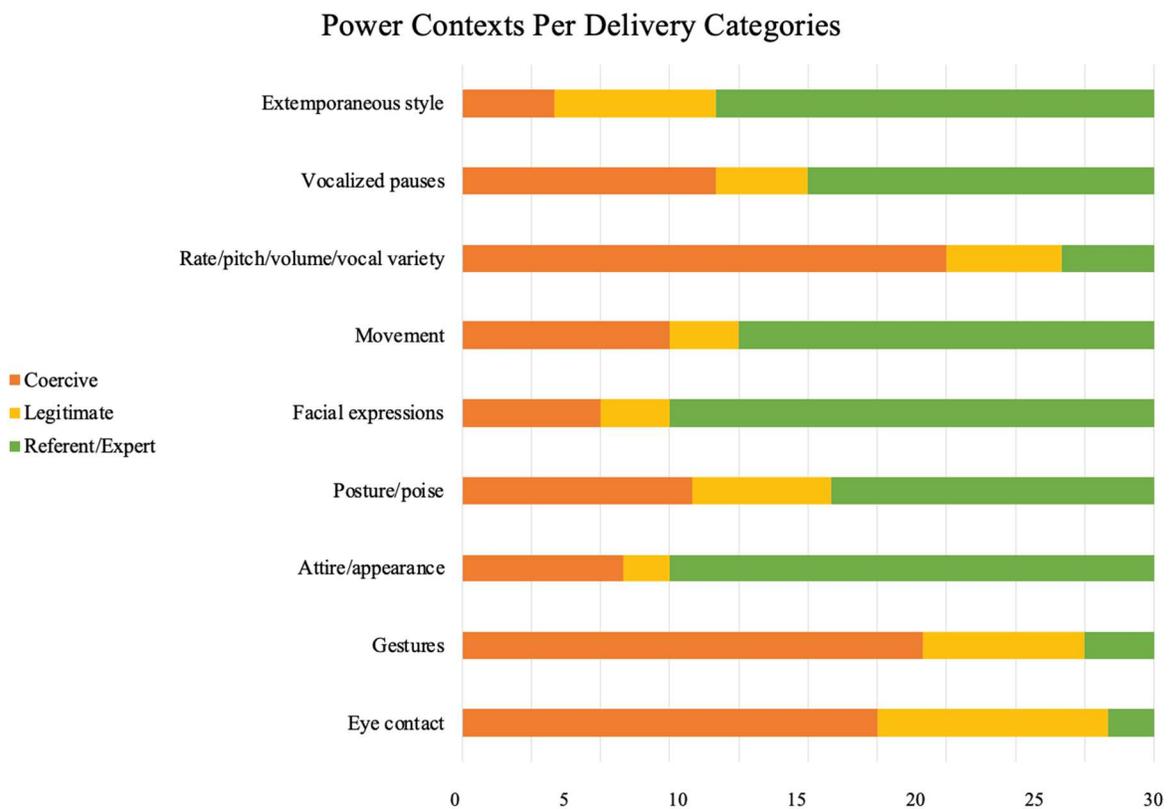
### *Common Categories*

Each rubric had a section dedicated to delivery, although the grade amount for the delivery sections varied per rubric. The most common categories found in the delivery sections are presented in figure 2, along with the levels of power contexts per section. I found these sections in particular to include substantial ableist assumptions through the language used. The common categories varied among coercive, legitimate, and referent/expert context language (see figure 2) and will be explained in further detail.

**Eye contact.** Eye contact assumes that the speaker will be without visual impairments and or are comfortably able to make eye contact. For some individuals living with disabilities,

trying to maintain eye contact can be taxing, exhausting, and feel uncomfortable. A nationally ranked forensic (competitive speech) student who identifies as Autistic<sup>1</sup> explained to me that presenting a speech to a large crowd was the easy part, the hard parts included maintaining eye contact to be a *convincing* speaker to speech judges. Some rubrics, for example, state “sustained eye contact with entire audience” and that eye contact is needed “90%; span the audience” and “at least 70-80% of the time,” yet, in general, adults typically make eye contact 30-60% during a conversation (Shellenbarger, 2013). This student also described that speech taught them how to conceal their autism, yet after making the decision to embrace their disorder and stop exhausting

**Figure 2: Power Contexts Per Delivery Categories**



<sup>1</sup>This student personally capitalizes *Autistic* in relation to their personal identity.

themselves, physically and mentally, to be seen as *normal*, they are now consistently ranked poorly for eye contact. Focusing less on whether or not students maintain eye contact would be highly beneficial for students with disabilities and for students without disabilities who also find eye contact to be difficult or uncomfortable.

**Gestures.** To this same point, gestures reflect assumptions as well. Requiring gestures assumes that students will be able-bodied. Expecting that all students will have controlled gestures assumes that all students have the ability to do so. Some entries from the rubrics include the need for “controlled bodily action” and “controlled gestures.” In some cases, this could seem as if a PWD has to “fix” their disability to make a high score on the assessment rubric.

**Attire/appearance.** For professional attire/appearance and posture/poise, the focus is entirely off the speech and on the speaker themselves. This is problematic because “we live in a culture obsessed with physical looks,” and “research indicates that attraction correlates with grades and the teachers interact more with students considered attractive” (Powell & Powell, 2010, p.16). This category displayed more referent/expert language among all rubrics.

**Posture/poise.** As discussed in the introduction chapter, posture varies by person, yet culturally driven demands interpret posture as a means of goodwill (Gilman, 2014). The deep-rooted, inherent biases are also seen within the public speaking assessment as seen with phrases such as the need for no “tapping or leaning on the podium” and “departs from the lectern without rushing.” Posture/poise varied in context categories with the language used. These examples are coercive context language because there is less room for flexibility and high restrictions.

**Facial expressions.** The same forensic student mentioned earlier, who is Autistic spoke to me about the difficulties they have with facial expressions, as they had to learn nonverbals (i.e., what an angry face looked like). Although the rubrics overall landed more in the

referent/expert context, there were still some rubrics in the other context categories. By assessing students on their facial expressions, there again is an assumption about what students can and cannot control. For facial expressions to be that influential on a speech to be a full aspect in assessment rubrics for public speaking courses is problematic because it emphasizes the speaker rather than the speech, yet most courses focus on content and structure with the speechmaking process. It also poses the question of what is considered good facial expressions.

**Movement.** Assessing students for movement, again, can display ableist assumptions that students will have the same ability to move in the space freely. This can exclude a large population from the disability community, with mobility being the top type of disability at 13.7% (Ability Institute). This is not to say that movement is not possible, but it will clearly look different as “curricular goals for students with physical disabilities vary depending on the specific disability” (Powell & Powell, 2010, p. 101). Leading with the expectation that all students entering the course will have the ability to move during a speech could also discourage a student with disabilities from taking the course or discussing accommodations with the instructor since an assumption has already been made in favor of able-bodies. Some of the rubrics assess students on “foot control” and feet, which would obviously not translate well to all students, for example, students who are paralyzed or amputees.

**Rate/pitch/volume/vocal variety.** Rate/pitch/volume/vocal variety also carries the ableist assumption that these are controllable for all students. Without vocal training for the student, some vocal skills may not be achievable in an introductory public speaking course. Some of the wording present in the analysis included the need for “vocal variation: monotone, minimal, average, good, exceptional” and a “smooth flow: jerky, uneven, stable, clearly planned, very smooth.” Points would be deducted for not displaying able-bodied speaking expectations.

Additional language included “correct articulation, pronunciation, grammar & word usage” and “no inappropriate language (crude, sexist, racist),” although I have seen firsthand that inappropriate language can be a side effect of Tourette Syndrome tics.

**Vocalized pauses.** Vocalized pauses, or verbalized filler words (i.e., um, uh, like so, etc.), were not present on every rubric. Some of the best orators did not fully eliminate vocalized pauses in their speeches, but this can also be increasingly more present for students with disabilities who are facing many ableist challenges at once. For example, Sir Ken Robinson can be heard saying “um” while trying to move on stage without the use of a cane during their TED talk, yet the vocalized pauses do not take away from how effective the speech is. Vocalized pauses can also be interpreted as a distraction, although some students struggle with this section more than others as some have less control over this.

**Extemporaneous style.** Lastly, assessing students on an extemporaneous style is ableist against students with disabilities. A person’s memory can be affected by disabilities (CDC, 2020). Remembering, which is a cognitive skill, can affect working memory. Memory can also affect remaining in the speech timeframe as well as rate/pace. A student might benefit from restarting their speech; however, a majority of the rubrics analyzed would not allow for this option. One example of this includes “not reading,” which could be difficult for some students with a disability. The same student mentioned earlier who is Autistic also explained to me that in forensic competitions, students will get docked for using notes during extemporaneous speeches; however, this negatively impacts students with minds that make it difficult to remember things due to their disorders (such as ADHD, autism, etc.) in turn making them work significantly harder than neurotypical students.

## **Discussion**

Since student populations are increasingly becoming more diverse (Harrison & Myrick, 2020), assessment tools need to become more flexible to adapt to diverse student needs (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). Specifically, there is an increased need to focus on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in higher education (Jensen et al., 2021). This chapter aimed to justify the argument that assessment tools used for the public speaking course tend to reflect ableist perspectives and assume that students taking the course will be able-bodied individuals. This assumption complicates the likelihood that students with various or differing abilities succeed in the public speaking course. With the public speaking course being the “front porch” to the field (Beebe, 2013), it is important to reassess what exactly is being taught and expected out of students.

The most startling finding was that coercive context language was found to some degree in almost all rubrics. Instead of a flow in power, teachers command the power in coercive context rubrics, but rather, “teachers should reduce the use of advice-sounding directives to help students better participate in the network of power flows” (Song, 2021, p. 418). Legitimate context language was also prominent but included the broadest range in interpretation of abilities. Observing the context differences in the delivery categories was interesting, as each category had at least one rubric with referent/expert context. This supports rubrics can have less ableist assumptions by using referent/expert context language. The three highest levels of coercive context in the delivery categories were rate/pitch/volume/vocal variety, gestures, and eye contact. The goal would be to examine how these categories can be re-described to include disability perspectives making it a fair assessment category for all students.

The last thing to note is that categories other than delivery were also examined, but only when rubrics did not include the most common categories in the delivery section of the rubric. Those categories included total points, point scale used, scale categories, time, page length, and amount of sections. Higher overall points for the assessment did appear to lead to more coercive context language. Rubrics that fit the referent/expert context the most had very low overall points. Some rubrics did not include any point value and or included large sections for comments.

### ***Limitations & Future Directions***

As noted earlier, some rubrics included wording that fit all context values, thus, making it difficult to determine one specific power context per individual rubric. Additionally, reward power was excluded from the study because it did not fit within the context values. Reward power is based on the premise that students believe that a teacher can provide something positive, such as a good grade. In the classroom, this could also be seen as bonus points or extra credit (Schrodt et al., 2008). In this chapter, reward power was not applicable based solely on the delivery sections of the rubrics. Also, when collecting the artifacts, a call for alternative rubrics used for specialized courses or for students who require accommodations was included, but no such rubrics were provided. This could mean that institutions alter rubrics on a case-by-case basis or that accommodations are rare. If no accommodations are being made, it should be questioned how many students are not taking the course based on the learning outcomes and assessment tools that measure those learning outcomes. This could be a wide student population missing out on the opportunity to take the public speaking course.

Future research can include students' feedback and experiences by asking them about their engagement with assessment rubrics. This approach would allow for direct issues to be

addressed and clear guidance for future adjustments to the public speaking course. A study that expands upon more than 30 rubrics and reviews undergraduate and graduate assessment tools could reveal valuable data. Also, expanding on the other sections of rubrics along with the assignment description and other course material could pose valuable to promoting changes needed for invisible disabilities. For example, cognitive disabilities often affect short-term and long-term memory and reading rates (Hatcher et al., 2002). By considering things such as time restrictions, notecards, memorization methods, etc., further ableism towards cognitive disabilities could be uncovered. Unfortunately, cognitive disabilities are more difficult to detect and can vary from subtle to severe but are often determined by self-reports (Lovett et al., 2015), thus, making it increasingly difficult to critically analyze the inclusion and support of cognitive abilities within assessment rubrics.

Finally, considering how much autonomy instructors have over the said course, rubrics should be constantly evaluated. If an instructor does not get to choose or create the rubric being used, they also have less power to transfer and share with their students and less of a chance to co-create meaning and expectations.

### ***Recommendations***

After carefully examining 30 public speaking rubrics, multiple recommendations for improvement come into focus. In general, changes to the standards of public speaking courses should be reevaluated, more training for instructors is needed, and less emphasis on delivery that is focused on the assumption of students' abilities. Training for instructors could include being informed on how to work with diverse student populations and students with differing abilities. It is apparent that TAs especially need more than just a handbook to read over when it comes to training (Young & Bippus, 2008). Furthermore, instructors realize that training is important

(Aguirre et al., 2021). Without training, the success of students with disabilities depends on each instructor and their willingness (Aguirre et al., 2021). Training could help to break the stigmatization of what an *effective* speaker is. De-emphasizing or restructuring the delivery sections in public speaking assessments is more welcoming for students who might struggle more with physical disabilities. Additionally, instructors should assess students' prior knowledge and skills at the beginning of the course.

Understanding the prior knowledge that students have before the course is crucial in higher education (Bowen, 2017). Meeting students where they are paired with restructuring the public speaking curriculum and standards can reestablish the purpose of the delivery section. For example, instructors look for eye contact as a way of connecting with the audience, showing confidence, etc., but there are other ways to do this. Additionally, students should have more autonomy in the public speaking course, which relates directly to the power dynamics between instructor and student and why considering power in the classroom is so important. Students and teachers should determine together what the assessment expectations are to have a clear understanding. Past research has shown that by including students in the assessment process, “students felt that their opinions were important, and they participated in the design of their own learning process.” (Aguirre et al., 2021, 312). To implement this process, instructors need to be open and flexible to modifications (Aguirre et al., 2021). For example, perhaps a cohesive rubric that includes only the sections with referent/expert context meshed together might serve as an exemplar rubric to use. Even with this change, however, an overarching need for changes to the foundations and course material being taught is still necessary for the public speaking course to be less ableist.

## Conclusion

Most people remember Barbara Jordan as a famed Civil Rights icon and Congressional Representative. Fewer people know that Jordan was a queer, Black woman with multiple sclerosis, which impacts the brain and spinal cord. Many people living with MS experience “invisible” (or not outwardly visible) symptoms, such as pain and fatigue. Jordan is a trailblazer as the first African American Congresswoman from the South. Jordan was very well known as an outstanding orator and is even listed on the top 100 speeches of American Rhetoric (Eidenmuller, n.d.). One of Jordan’s most notable speeches includes delivering the keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1976. Jordan made history during this presentation, being the first African American woman to deliver the keynote speech at this convention. Jordan can be seen leaning against the podium, hunched over posture, minimal gestures, does not maintain eye contact, has a slower rate and mispronunciations. Jordan gave a fantastic speech; however, they would more than likely not make a passing grade if using most of the rubrics viewed in this analysis, and this contradiction teaches us that the effort to gauge rhetorical eloquence is not inclusive of differing human abilities.

Communication faculty and administrators involved with the public speaking course need to reevaluate the assessment tools being used within public speaking courses to be more inclusive of differing abilities and include less ableism. Assessment rubrics display power dynamics that can affect student-teacher relationships. Rubrics that use coercive and legitimate power are more likely to be less effective in learning, and coercive and legitimate contexts rubrics made up 96.7% of all rubrics. Valuing teaching-student relationships and a flow of power will lead students with differing abilities a better chance to succeed in the public speaking course rather than setting them up for failure by leaving the course as is (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017,

p. 206). Instructors who value students and are able to express that in the classroom are more successful at creating a space that empowers students (Kirk et al., 2016). Students who feel empowered by their instructor also “reported better grades, fewer behavioral incidents, increased extracurricular participation, and higher educational aspirations than students who were less empowered” (Kirk et al., 2016, p. 589). Public speaking courses should revise traditional assessment tools to reflect referent and expert power, complementing instructional communication theory.

CHAPTER 5:  
CURRICULUM RESPONSABILITIES:  
ANALYZING PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE TEXTBOOKS

**Introduction**

I was teaching a student in a section of my online public speaking course who sent me a distressed email asking for help. The student explained that they have Tourette Syndrome, a condition that affects the nervous system and can cause individuals to have sudden twitches or tics, and they were struggling to record their speech video due to their tics. The student was concerned that they would get points deducted for not maintaining eye contact with the camera and explained that they kept wanting to watch themselves instead to make sure that their tics weren't showing.

Although I had prior knowledge of the academic accommodation documents for my student, I was unaware that they had Tourette Syndrome and what that would specifically mean for their prospects of success in the course. My first thought for responding to this student was to ask why eye contact was that important for the speech, but because this is an online course, I had to think about what the students had been taught about eye contact thus far. The course relies heavily on the textbook to teach/learn the course material since the course is asynchronous. I have no personal interaction with the students. That week, the class read the chapter on delivery in the textbook, which discusses eye contact. The chapter explicitly states how vital eye contact is and that the audience will be disengaged without it. The section on eye contact exacerbated the student's anxieties about how their disorder would affect their speech.

This experience is quite similar to other active voices in the disability community that openly discuss the challenges they have had to overcome. An elementary school principal, Robert Furman (2021), explains how having Tourette Syndrome is something they are proud of, although they faced struggles while growing up. Furman was often made fun of for their tics which resulted in “arms flailing, eyes blinking, and neck moving from side to side” (para 3). Some disabilities, such as autism, require specific training to teach socially acceptable behaviors, such as eye contact (Helgeson et al., 1989). Sadly, “Western society has historically created barriers to creating and accepting diversity” and has continuously prohibited and or unwillingly kept people with disabilities from joining many areas of society, such as education (Harpur, 2009). Yet, Western ideals present in public speaking textbooks are centered around social behaviors that instill one way of being an effective speaker. The social behaviors that proselytize one way of being an effective speaker encouraged in public speaking textbooks emit Western ideals (Ashby-King et al., 2021).

This student narrative demonstrates the many subtle ways that ableism can seep into instructional materials. As discussed in previous chapters, ableism is the process of valuing individuals who are nondisabled and viewing abled bodies as the norm (Procknow et al., 2017). By the same token, disablism is over privileging or over accommodating people with disabilities based on the presumption that they are incapable or unable to do certain things based on their disability (Dolmage, 2017). Both ableism and disablism are harmful to the disability community, and both are currently present within higher education. For instance, “in higher education disabled people must go to an office serving disabled students verify disability status and request accommodations” (Rocco, 2005, p. 5), all because the system was not built to be inclusive. Students are constantly exposed to textbooks throughout their lifetime, thus making them

important ideological texts due to the lasting impression (Gullicks et al., 2005). The basic course does not always succeed in advocating for diversity, in part due to textbooks, which often include sexist and racist language and photography (Gullicks et al., 2005) and, as I argue in this chapter, ableism.

On *Communication Matters*, the NCA Podcast hosted by Parry-Giles (2021), Sophia Maier spoke about how Communication scholars addressing disability enrich the field because *disabled rhetoric* changes the foundation of rhetorical theory. Rhetorical analysis is one means of understanding how ableist logic and practices perpetuate through public discourse (Parry-Giles, 2021). Jim Cherney correctly points out that more research is needed to explore ableism as humans are not ableists from birth; ableism is communicated, taught, and learned (in Parry-Giles, 2021). Uncovering the ableism within public speaking textbooks will expand this necessary research, reimagining the ideal speaker as more than just an idealized abled body or one abled mind. Scholars and educators involved with the public speaking course need to be considerate of differing abilities and uphold ethical and moral standards as educators so that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in the course. Currently, public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs, often unknowingly, and overlook the material realities of differing/different abilities.

Public speaking pedagogy has long prioritized uniformity and homogenization, thus, discriminating against the idea of various perspectives, mainly based on race, class, sex, culture, and abilities. Unfortunately, this has led to many rhetorical scholars reproducing White-washed material that excludes specific perspectives (Lechuga, 2020). The disability community has also been privy to this exclusion. The community is often left out of public speaking pedagogy consideration because an assumption on who will take the course is already made in favor of

able-bodies. More fundamentally, these attitudes serve a gatekeeping function that makes it less likely for students with disabilities to pursue advanced degrees in Communication and teach public speaking courses of their own.

In this chapter, we explore how ableism is communicated via public speaking textbooks. By examining three respected textbooks with multiple editions in high circulation through a rhetorical lens, I argue that ableism is present in a few major areas. The themes were generated by looking for ableist language, terms, representation, or idealistic views that valued able-bodies. The textbooks used language and terms that valued able-bodies while omitting the inclusion that differing abilities could also produce the same outcome. These textbooks include very close-minded perspectives with specific quotes as examples. Additionally, the pictures in the textbooks displayed a lack of diversity overall, specifically towards disability representation. The textbooks rarely discussed disabilities, and the same was present in the pictures. The examples in the textbooks also include both able-bodied and people with disabilities; however, many of the examples did not disclose that a disability was present. Additionally, there were many successful figures used as examples, but an omission of said figures' invisible disabilities led the reader to believe that the example speakers did not have a disability. After discussing the ideological power of textbooks and the ableism within them, I will then describe the ableist findings by giving some specific examples, and finally, this research ends with suggestions for modifying textbooks to be more inclusive of differing abilities and offers recommendations for the introductory public speaking course to reflect a more realistic society with various abilities.

### **Conceptualizing Public Speaking Textbooks**

Many public speaking courses are shaped around the NCA competencies, which were developed in 1990 and revised in 2007. *The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation* by Morreale

et al. (2007) attempts to be inclusive by stating that the competencies are “free of cultural bias” (p. 9). Yet, some scholars have critiqued it as insensitive (see Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994). For this study, the focus will not be to evaluate how the competencies include ableist views; yet instead to call attention to how the competencies are being operationalized through public speaking textbooks and where ableist views are present within them.

Textbooks are essential to the public speaking course because they are a fundamental source for learning course material in many instances, especially for less experienced instructors. Close adherence to the textbook allows for consistency across multiple sections and can help students understand how to be a successful speaker through a how-to approach. Rood (2013) states that “introductory rhetoric textbooks are an important site for teaching students normative and practical skills of argumentation and debate” (p. 333), and the same can be applied to public speaking textbooks, which discuss similar concepts. Textbooks not only inform the students who are purchasing and using them, but they also inform the instructors teaching the course (Rood, 2013) by providing stability and cohesion across the discipline (Connors, 1986). Textbooks teach students core principles that rhetorical education has been built upon in the West for thousands of years; many of which remain relevant; however, I am arguing that improvements should be made to the foundations of public speaking taught within textbooks by expanding the narrow-mindedness of the how-to approach which can often support ableist perspectives.

### ***Previous Textbook Research***

Textbooks, often viewed as cultural artifacts, reinforce societal ideologies (Leeman & Martínez, 2007). However, textbooks are far from the ideal advocates for integrating and representing the diversity of classrooms (Wood, 1998), being that “the emphasis in education to maintain and prescribe societal expectations may be directly linked to the misrepresentation and

underrepresentation of diverse experiences in the textbooks” (Gullicks et al., 2005, p. 248).

Scholars have argued that “we erased the orality of speech” due to the lack of attention towards the teaching of public speaking in the last century (Gehrke, 2016, p. 251), so much so that it is not surprising that public speaking textbooks are so outdated.

Textbooks, in general, are created with the intent of mass production (McGarrity & Crosby, 2012); thus, making them generalized is a tactic to reach a wider audience. Students, unfortunately, are not utilizing textbooks the way they should be, and “much of what makes for good public speaking is poorly taught by a text precisely because speech is not a textual medium,” although technology has made things more easily accessible in recent years (Gehrke, 2016, p. 259). But textbooks are not only used for students since they are complementary to the course curriculum, but they are beneficial to instructors as they influence the scope of content covered in the course (Pearson et al., 2007).

Research has shown that “in textbooks, the number of examples depicting the disabled in social life and emphasizing the human rights perspective is almost negligible” (Mengi, 2019, p. 733); this study focused on social studies textbooks, but the same is seen with public speaking textbooks. Societal views of ability and disability transfer to what is and is not present in public speaking textbooks because these materials train students in the art of influence, which is often predicated on broad cultural norms. Communication and culture, for example, are so intertwined because “communication is shaped by culture and shaping of culture” (Wood, 1998, p. 173). Recent movements for social justice, for instance, have forced humanity to be more inclusive and respectful towards marginalized groups. Still, more effort is needed to include the disability community as well. Rarely is the disability community respected as a marginalized group in society even though they are treated as such and share similar discrimination as other

marginalized groups within education (Rocco, 2005; Ross-Gordon, 1991). As seen throughout history in the U.S., “the most common response to diversity has been to devalue whatever differs from our own identity and way of life” (Wood, 1998, p. 172), which arguably is the case for course curriculum as well. It isn’t simply enough “calling for respect for and appreciation of diversity,” educators must fuse diversity into our teaching practices (Wood, 1998, p. 173). One way to research this problem further is by focusing on how textbooks operate at the level of power and privilege (Rocco, 2005); this study attempts to do just that.

### **Guiding Theoretical Framework**

This study is multifaceted insofar that it draws from the intersections of identity, culture, and power in society; thus, a series of theories are used to examine public speaking textbooks through a critical lens concerning the disability community. First, an explanation of intersectional rhetoric is necessary to connect identity with communication or rhetoric. Next, it is helpful to review critical disability theory to unify abilities and power dynamics. Finally, describing rhetorical criticism, which will be used as the methodology informed by intersectional rhetoric and critical disability theory, is essential to understanding the analysis.

### ***Intersectional Rhetoric***

Intersectional rhetoric places value on the students by expanding on personal experiences and how they connect to theory (Otis, 2019). Through a consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion, intersectional rhetoric interrupts traditional rhetorical norms by embracing a variety of ideas and concepts. Norms and standards are constantly highlighted in public speaking courses, as discussed above, and this is also translated throughout public speaking textbooks.

Intersectional rhetoric reframes traditional standards of rhetoric by privileging multiple forms of discourse rather than valuing one form over another (Enck-Wanzer, 2006, p. 191), and this is

lacking in current textbooks. In other words, there is no one ideal way to be an effective public speaker and encouraging conforming to a setlist of standards within current textbooks reproduces traditional standards that value one form of discourse. Considering intersectional rhetorical values while analyzing the chosen textbooks will help inform the analysis by critiquing from the perspective of the disability community. Intersectional rhetoric connects intersectionality by valuing identity and rhetorical praxis.

It is difficult to disconnect one layer of identity from others, especially in marginalized communities. Identity is not a linear concept, and individuals can hold multiple identities simultaneously; this is essential to foreground that “people who experience oppression based on disability, race, class, or gender do not have singular, unitary identities” (Procknow et al., 2017, pp. 365-366). Intersecting identities is more likely to occur, which will affect an individual’s reality (Procknow et al., 2017). Disability is not always accepted as a part of one’s identity. Some scholars argue that disability is a social construct (Oliver, 1996; Procknow et al., 2017). This is based on the notion that abilities are on a continuum where society determines what is normal, unusual, or disabling (Procknow et al., 2017). It isn’t necessarily that a person is *disabled*, instead, one might not fit the standards created by society for what is deemed *normal*. Procknow et al. (2017) use the example of two people, one born with different colored eyes and the other born with only one eye, “[the] first variation is seen as unusual” and “[the] second variation is seen as a problem or disability and a deficit” (Procknow et al., 2017, p. 366). Disability as a social construct objectifies certain individuals politically, socially, economically, and culturally, but the objectification is what is genuinely disabling, not the person or diagnosis (Procknow et al., 2017). This understanding of disability is similar to a critical disability theory approach.

### ***Critical Disability Theory***

Critical disability theory merges Disability Studies specific to physical and cognitive realities and critical race theory (Rocco, 2005). As displayed, critical disability theory's stance revolves around power dynamics and basic human rights (Gillies, 2014). Devlin and Pothier explain that critical disability theory is informed by the belief that,

Disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; instead, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to (Devlin & Pothier, 2006, p. 2).

Critical disability theory challenges ideologies of disability and suggests that rather a person with disabilities be accommodated or learn to live in an able-bodied environment, economic, social, and political policies change and a shift in power and control and autonomy be restructured in favor of individuals with disabilities (Gillies, 2014). This study supports the argument that this same idea of pushing individuals with disabilities to conform to an able-bodied society is seen within public speaking textbooks as well. Not many would view disability as an issue of power, but "disability should be recognized with true minority group status, instead of viewed as an individual anomaly" (Rocco, 2005, p. 1). Instructors, for the most part, have autonomy over the course textbook or what they ultimately choose to teach from the textbook, but when that textbook excludes an entire student population, it implicitly establishes issues of power and suggests that students with differing abilities are not welcomed to take the course. Although textbooks are often not tailored for a specific audience (McGarrity & Crosby, 2012), I argue that the current intended audience is limiting and ableist driven. A rhetorical content analysis of public speaking textbooks used in higher education will aim to address the argument that the disability community is not considered in the introductory public speaking course.

## **Method**

The following study will advance the argument that public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs, reject the idea of differing/different abilities, and need to be more inclusive of disability perspectives. This study aims to provide a critical rhetorical lens to reveal the ableism that exists within public speaking textbooks.

### ***Measures and Procedure***

Three of the best-selling textbooks, Coopman and Lull (2015), Lucas (2015), and Wahl, Brazeal, and Butland (2017), were selected for analysis to serve as a general representation of course material in the introductory public speaking course. The three textbooks were chosen because they appear as top results in basic Amazon and Google searches; however, it is important to state that the search results change constantly based on sales, so the textbooks chosen for this review may not be included in the most current search results. Additionally, textbooks go through multiple editions due to their success and revisions, so the artifacts may not be the latest editions due to convenience sampling. The editions included Coopman and Lull's third edition (2015), Lucas' twelfth edition (2015), and Wahl, Brazeal, and Butland's seventh edition (2017).

## **Findings**

The chosen textbooks were analyzed by reviewing sections or chapters which seemed most relevant to the argument. The results below explain the most prominent areas of ableism seen in the artifacts. The categories are visual and textual findings and two subcategories in both areas of 1) omission of (dis)ability and 2) afterthought of (dis)ability. For the findings, the textbooks will be referred to as textbooks A, B, and C in no particular order for anonymity. Referring to the textbooks anonymously is meant to keep the analysis as a broad representation

for all public speaking textbooks as most of the findings are similar for other current public speaking textbooks and the recommendations are mostly applicable for all public speaking textbooks.

***Visually: Omission of (dis)ability***

Although, at first glance, “communication textbooks may initially appear to be advocates of gender and diversity,” it has been supported that they are severely lacking (Gullicks et al., 2005, p. 250). Gullicks et al. (2005) examined how power and diversity can be seen within textbook pictures. Different perspectives have become more widely accepted since the shift to a student-based curriculum occurred (Gullicks et al., 2005). Historically, the US educational system has strived for a universal, idealized set of shared values for one common culture, probably leading to the lack of diversity seen within textbooks (Gullicks et al., 2005). Visual representations in photographs within textbooks are far from equitable, and little research has addressed this issue (Gullicks et al., 2005) and contradicts equality (Cawyer et al., 1994).

There are many ways to analyze public speaking textbooks between critiquing the themes through language, terms, assumptions, visuals, et cetera. Visuals are critical to examine in public speaking textbooks because representation matters. Pictures are a form of representation and, as a symbol, bring words closer to reality (Thomson, 2001; Stange, 1989). Generally, people want to see alike people—someone they can relate to. Marginalized communities have long been left out of mainstream photography, with the medical field being one example. Recently, Chidiebere Ibe, a medical student, brought diversity to the medical field by creating a textbook with medical illustrations on black and brown skin (Yancey-Bragg, 2021). They quickly went viral on social media, with many responses expressing that they’ve never seen medical pictures of a person of color (Yancey-Bragg, 2021). This follows another viral headline about another medical student,

Malone Mukwende, who created the handbook *Mind The Gap* (2020) to include a broader spectrum of darker skin colors as seen in images and descriptions of clinical signs and symptoms (Page, 2020).

In similar ways that the black and brown community has fought against erasure, the disability community has. There was a point in history when individuals with disabilities were often concealed from the public (Burgdorf & Burgdorf, 1974). For example, historical pictures of former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt strategically crop out his wheelchair (Thomson, 2001). This again justifies the need to examine such features in public speaking textbooks. To examine textbooks as visual rhetoric and to position with respect to the disability community, there is an opportunity to “not only ‘read’ the content, conventions, and contexts of the photographs but also probe the relationship the pictures seek to establish with the viewer” to then determine “how and what the photographs intend to persuade their audiences to believe or do” (Thomson, 2001, p. 339). In the past, especially in Western culture, photography of people with disabilities was more for entertainment than for understanding, learning, or knowledge (Thomson, 2001). Now, in 2022, we should be embracing diversity with representation that includes the disability community to share an actual reality of the various individuals in our society; after all, “[r]ealism in disability photography is the rhetoric of equality, most often turned utilitarian” (Thomson, 2001, p. 344).

Representation is of high importance in 2022, but unfortunately, only a few pictures display diversity in abilities. The textbook includes many pictures to draw attention and connect with students. The pictures include many public figures, examples for effective delivery, or simply there for aesthetics. Most of the pictures are of real people, and many are famous figures that are being used as exemplars of oratorical excellence. There was some racial diversity

present, such as pictures that included various races, but overall, it was minimal at best. Most of the pictures were seemingly able-bodied individuals who were public figures; thus, an omission of disability was present.

Diversity was lacking in all textbooks, but a particular type of erasure is noticeable when considering disability. PWD were included, but more often than not, their disability is avoided or an example of a person that overcame a “challenge” (i.e., a success story). This lacks the true reality and experiences of everyday people. The front cover of textbook A displays a group of people in a classroom of various ethnicities and races, with the person in authority as a black male. Textbook B includes pictures of many famous figures. Some of these figures have openly discussed having a disability, yet textbook B does not always disclose this information visually or textually. For example, textbook B includes many pictures of famous figures and starts the beginning chapter with a large picture of Muhammad Ali in his prime, accompanied by text at the bottom stating, “Ali gave numerous electrifying public speeches throughout his career.” What is not included is that Ali had Parkinson’s at 46 and dyslexia. Additionally, in textbook B, Gwen Stefani, who is pictured and used as an example, has openly discussed learning about having dyslexia as an adult after her children were diagnosed, yet the textbook does not disclose this information. Stefani explained on Good Morning America that “it was just really hard for me to function in that square box of school” and that when it came to schoolwork, “my brain didn't work like that; it still doesn't. But it works in different ways” (Stone, 2020). Another example in textbooks A includes a picture of Steve Jobs seemingly presenting a speech, and although he is physically abled, there is no mention that he grew up with an invisible disability: dyslexia.

Each textbook does not explicitly exclude students with disabilities in their visual representation, but they also rarely show differing abilities except for one textbook that includes

a section in the delivery chapter about differing abilities, which is discussed below. College students undoubtedly include the disability community; thus, the intended audience, being college students, needs to include the disability community. Excluding visual representation of the disability community establishes the conception of who does and does not take up space in the public sphere. This omission, in turn, may influence students with disabilities to feel out of place in the public speaking course since the representation are people without disabilities.

As stated, disabilities are not completely excluded from the textbooks, but where they are embraced, it seems forced or like an afterthought. The next section explains the findings in this area.

***Visually: Afterthought of (dis)ability***

The rare visual representation of (dis)abilities in the artifacts is detailed here. Textbook B shows a picture of someone using American Sign Language (ASL) with text next to it that says, “Sign Language, just like vocal language, still requires active listening skills to receive the complete message.” Unfortunately, textbook B does not discuss anything about ASL or speakers with different abilities. The analysis for textbook C did not discover any visual representation of the disability community. In textbook A, a section on “adapting to your audience” includes a written excerpt from a speech by Sergeant Raymond Dan Hubbard, who was awarded the Purple Heart. His leg was amputated from a severed carotid artery after serving in Iraq, which the text does mention. Including Hubbard is significant and a representation of the disability community; however, there is no visual component in this example. Textbook A states that “you can view his speech on YouTube” but does not include a link or picture, although other sections of the textbook do include links to videos from the interactive portion of the textbook. When I searched for the video, which was more difficult to find than I thought it would be, I found a significantly

edited version. The video did not show Hubbard getting on or off the stage thus, there were no visible signs of a disability. The video shows a short scene of someone introducing Hubbard and then cuts to Hubbard being behind a podium beginning the speech. It does not show Hubbard entering or exiting the stage, although they do appear to be standing. One might question why this example used a written excerpt of the speech rather than the visual example.

It is also questionable why the textbooks did or did not disclose a (dis)ability. Discussing effective examples of speakers who identify with the disability community allows for students from the disability community to connect with the examples. As is, a majority of the examples are of able-bodies; thus, someone who is not might struggle to connect with the course material presented in the textbook. This will be discussed further in the next section.

### ***Textually: Omission of (dis)ability***

The beginning of the artifacts, or the opening paragraphs of chapter one, tend to set the scene for what is to come. In textbook C, a note from the author explains the importance of examples to show the principle of public speaking, stating, “thus you will find in the book a large number of narratives, speech experts, and full sample speeches that illustrate the principles of effective public speaking,” but upon analysis, it does not appear to include the disability community. Following this statement, textbook C also states, “I rely heavily on examples that relate directly to students’ classroom needs and experiences,” but if this were true, the representation of the disability community would be included.

In the preface notes for textbook A, it states to students that “the basics of public speaking haven’t changed since classical times, but how you go about preparing and delivering a good speech has changed a great deal.” This felt promising for reading the rest of the text, being that they used words such as “latest innovations” to describe the content; however, the latest

innovations included in textbook A are not updated perspectives inclusive of various abilities; in fact, much of textbook A includes phrases, metaphors, and scenarios that are ableist. For example, textbook A shares that “as a student, you’re used to the instructor standing in front of the room. As a speaker, you’re the one there in front.” While seemingly innocuous, this example is one among many that echo the able-bodied assumptions presented textually. Describing “standing” in front of the room assumes that every student has this ability.

Meanwhile, textbook B, in the first paragraph of the chapters, states that “this book focuses on how to present yourself and your message in a way that increases the odds of getting what you want in an efficient and ethical way.” This statement, unfortunately, is leaving out the disability community as textbook B does not include different ways to be *efficient* other than the Western, idealized, able-bodied public speaker. This theme will first discuss how the ideal speaker is presented, specifics of this through mentions of subsections in voice, eye contact, and gestures, as well as a discussion around obscene language and concepts that exclude the disability community and or differing abilities.

**Ideal Speaker.** Each textbook shares examples of famous figures to illustrate the principles of “effective” speaking, but in doing so, a little reflection is paid to the cultural norms that structure how oratorical effectiveness is accessed. In textbook A, the delivery chapter begins with a list of eight famous names who are well known for their public speaking skills. Four out of the eight names mentioned is a person with a disability, which is a step in the right direction; however, this is not mentioned. For example, the first name on the list, and also pictured on the page, Maya Angelou, had selective mutism, which is an anxiety disorder, from a traumatic experience that Angelou wrote about in “Caged Bird.” There is no mention that the other names also live with disabilities. Those names include dyslexic Erin Brockovich, who is dyslexic, John

F. Kennedy, who suffered from Addison's disease that often led to him needing crutches or a wheelchair to deal with the symptoms, and Marlee Matlin, who is legally deaf. Angelou, Brockovich, Kennedy, and Matlin are all arguably excellent speakers, but to dismiss a piece of their identity, their abilities, is doing injustice to their lived experiences which cannot be disconnected from their entity as a speaker.

Later on, a chapter in textbook A about adapting to the audience explains how nonverbal feedback from the audience is meant for the speaker to translate and adapt accordingly to be better perceived by the audience. One of the examples of bad audience adaptation is a reference to a Michael Jordan speech. Jordan, who is a Black male with ADHD, used his Hall of Fame speech time to criticize other players. Although the textbook does not disclose Jordan's race or diagnosis, it is important to note here. Excluding these key factors could be teaching implicit bias by using a person from a marginalized group as a bad example.

Textbook B mentions Steve Jobs as an effective speaker in many parts of the text, along with many other able-bodied individuals. Textbook B also encourages readers to consider Elon Musk as an effective speaker; however, Musk announced on *Saturday Night Live* that they have Asperger's. The textbook does not disclose this probably because the versions in this study came out before this announcement, but hopefully, future editions will include this information to encourage atypical students. Excluding this information could be due to timing, as it appears Musk has only recently opened up to the public about the diagnosis. If textbook B did disclose this information, though, it would be very important to highlight.

Textbook B uses Musk's commencement speech for the University of Southern California as an "effective example" of "speaking confidently, coherently, and efficiently." Although the speech transcript is not provided to the reader, the YouTube link is. While

watching the speech, though, it goes against many of the thoughts on what makes an effective speaker. Musk's speech might go against what is detailed as the ideal speaker since it was arguably disorganized, includes many verbal fillers, rambles, stutters, includes jargon, only some gestures and eye contact, and choppy structure. Albeit Musk is still an idealized speaker regardless, and I do appreciate that this example is realistic rather than presenting an unattainable goal. Musk's speech currently has 227k views, thus presenting its value. One might wonder what it would take for Musk to be viewed favorably in a public speaking class, as to do this, a new standard for what is and is not rhetorical would need to be established.

Textbook C lays out a list of public figures in the U.S. that influence others through public speaking. Many of these public figures have been open with the public about living with disabilities, but the textbooks do not share this. This is not to say that the public figures listed should live with a label attached to them that explains their abilities, but diversity, just like racial or cultural representation, should include differing abilities in the long list of idealized speakers.

Additionally, textbook B explains that the ideal speaker will use their voice effectively and that "it is no surprise that pleasant, resonant, harmonious voices are attributed to attractive people." It is unclear exactly what is meant by *attractive*, but we can assume that this observation plays off of ableist assumptions. Much of textbook B's emphasis is on the ideal speaker rather than accountability on the ideal audience member but being a good audience member is important to consider. Most students are not taught how to be an audience member, and what might seem intuitive to some is not for others who think differently than the norm. Textbook C also states to "keep an eye out during the speech for audience feedback" because nods mean approval and frowning, or quizzical looks are disapproval. Textbook B discusses how a speaker should not burden the audience members as "poor verbal delivery makes the listener work hard."

Generally, as mentioned earlier, the disability community usually faces multiple challenges at once, so this statement fails to consider the challenges that speakers are dealing with aside from presenting a speech.

Textbook A also states that in a speech, to mitigate speech anxiety, one should “display a confident attitude” by “calmly [going] to the front of the room” next “face your audience and look at all your listeners” and finally “take a deep breath and smile” (p. 35). While this might seem like good advice in order to have a successful speech, it assumes the speaker’s abilities by making suggestions that are only applicable to some students. For example, the same way that taking deep breaths and smiling does not instantly lower my anxiousness from my social anxiety disorder, and a student who is blind cannot possibly look at their listeners, this could also not apply to many other forms of disabilities. Textbook C provides a similar stance when providing tips to help with nerves that include being at your best physically and mentally. However, in actuality, what they mean is Western society’s *best*. Textbook C provides the following scenario:

When it is your turn to speak, move to the front of the room and face the audience.

Assume a relaxed up-right posture. Plant your feet a bit less than shoulder-width apart and allow your arms to hang loosely at your side,

which again assumes that the audience is able to do said things. Textbook C describes how novice speakers do not know what to do with their body/movement. Textbook B includes a section with a list of essentials for the ideal speaker that includes one should consider stance, sound, smile, silence, and sight. These ideals continue in three specific subsections below with voice, eye contact, and gestures.

**Voice.** To follow up with the way the artifacts present who the speaker will be, there is a brief section found in the textbook A on speaking abilities that states, “you may not be sure you

have the skills you need to speak effectively” and that “if English is not your first language, you may also feel uncertain about any accent you may have or your ability to pronounce words correctly.” This suggests that overcoming speaking challenges that might prohibit being an effective speaker is possible. However, there are various disabilities that could fit this description as well, but no mention of them because the assumption is that a speaker will be able-bodied, and the challenges are easily fixable. Consider Furman (2021) in describing uncontrollable movement due to Tourette Syndrome. Furman’s (2021) movement was not by choice and often something that could not be *fixed*. Textbook C also states that “with study and practice, you will be able to master [public speaking],” and that “smooth delivery is the result of a great deal of practice,” as if practice alone will accomplish the goal of “smooth delivery.”

Additionally, Furman’s (2021) example can be paired with other problematic language used within the textbooks. Textbook B explains that “public speaking is also a creative activity that includes both mental and physical aspects” and that effective speakers have learned this art through mastering “appropriate eye contact, and meaningful gestures.” Again, this is exclusive and assumes that everyone has control over their bodily movements at all times.

Textbook C emphasizes the use of voice significantly. One of the chapters explains that a speaker with a “golden voice” is an *asset* but that some famous speakers have “undistinguished voices,” which suggests that some voices are *better* than others. However, one usually cannot change their voice. For a student with a stutter, changing their vocal pattern usually requires extensive therapy. Likewise, textbook C also shares that vocalized pause are often negatively perceived and exhibit that a speaker lacks intelligence and could be deceptive. This is a cultural stereotype and something that the disability community often faces, as mentioned in chapter one.

For a student with Tourette Syndrome, tics that include shouting out words are often perceived as lacking intelligence when that should not be the conclusion.

Textbook C explains that “most people who communicate well in daily talk can learn to communicate just as well in public speaking,” however, this would also suggest the opposite—that someone who struggles to communicate daily will not communicate well in public speaking. Textbook C continues by stating, “try to use your voice as expressively as you would in normal conversation,” but what does that mean for someone who communicates through help (such as devices or another person)? Textbook C also states that through conversations, we have already developed skills useful for public speaking and that one of these includes “adapting to listener feedback,” which makes us aware of someone’s verbal, facial, and physical reactions. However, sometimes a person’s physical reactions do not match their intent due to disorders.

Furthermore, textbook C lists how public speaking and conversations are different, 1) more highly structured, 2) require more formal language, 3) require a different method of delivery, and the third point suggests that “effective public speakers” will not have vocalized pauses adjust their voice, assume a more erect posture, and avoid distracting mannerisms and verbal habits.

**Gestures.** In textbook B, the mention of politicians’ “awkward gestures” and a list of “problematic” gestures are provided. The list arguably does not take the disability community into consideration. Textbook C states that a speaker should “feel free to use hand gestures” and not “let your gestures or bodily actions distract listeners from your message.” By stating the use of gestures in such a way, there are high expectations for the speaker, but this should be the audience’s responsibility, not the speakers. Placing most of the responsibility on the speaker is further exhibited in discussion with eye contact.

**Eye contact.** In a section dedicated to eye contact, textbook B states that “no other aspect of nonverbal behavior is as important as eye contact” and that poor eye contact might seem like you’re hiding something or unprepared. This is not always the case, as seen with my student’s example at the beginning of this chapter. Textbook C highly focuses on eye contact with statements such as, “speakers in the U.S. who fail to establish eye contact are perceived as tentative or ill at ease and may be seen as insincere or dishonest,” “maintain eye contact...you know how much more impressive a speaker is when she or he looks at the audience while speaking,” “speakers who gaze at the ceiling or stare out the window trying to recall what they have memorized are no better off than those who read dully from a manuscript” and “make eye contact with [the] audience because they are your friends.”

It is apparent that an assumption is made that all speakers are able to make eye contact. Textbook C additionally states to “prepare by writing or printing key terms and phrases on index cards or sheet of paper” so that you can read clearly at arm’s length, which furthers this assumption and excludes students who are not capable of reading or making eye contact, or for individuals with cognitive disabilities that make doing this difficult.

There was also a lot of comparison of good versus bad, for example, “eye contact makes a good speaker.” Additionally, the use of the word natural was saturated but angled to mean a certain way, an idealistic way, rather than what is actually natural for an individual. Displaying natural eye contact with the audience will not mean the same thing for every speaker. Most of the textbook focuses on the speaker, but when there is mention of considering the role of an audience member, it is ableist as well due to what society has ingrained perspectives. For example, the text states, “if audience members avoid eye contact or frown, you’re more likely to feel anxious about your speech” (p. 27). Although this may be true, lack of eye contact could

also have nothing to do with the speech or speaker. Lesser eye contact often occurs with specific disabilities, such as autism. In addition to the opening anecdote, students with autism report that it is not natural for them to make eye contact, and something that they constantly struggle with while publicly speaking. Similar assumptions can be seen in the language choices and concepts present in the artifacts.

**Obscene Language/Concepts.** Each textbook uses language/terms that are ableist and suggestive that the type of speaker that will be successful will be able-bodied. Terms included, but are not limited to, “purposeful,” “effective,” “beneficial,” “natural,” “relaxed,” in addition to phrases such as having an “upright stand and squared shoulders,” “walk to the front,” “do nothing to distract,” “seeming uneducated,” “speaking intelligibly,” “don’t lean on the podium,” “stand quietly,” “as you rise to speak.” This is problematic in many ways and excludes the chance for someone unable to follow the recommendations a chance to succeed in public speaking.

Another form of obscene language from textbook B states in the “developing language and presentation aids carefully” that students should “use plain language” and that “our audience should not need an interpreter.” This textbook probably does not mean a literal interpreter, but for someone who does need one, it suggests that using an interpreter is a *bad* thing. Further interesting language includes where textbook C supplies that confidence growth comes with the ability to “stand before other people,” yet confidence does not equal ability.

Following the omission of (dis)ability in the category of textual is a reference to the afterthought of (dis)abilities. I believe that much of the discussion surrounding disability in the artifacts are afterthoughts rather than intentional or the focal point.

***Textually: Afterthought of (dis)ability.***

Textbook A includes a section on “physical impairments and delivery” in the delivery chapter, and there are pictures of a person presenting in a wheelchair and another of a speaker utilizing an aid who is signaling American Sign Language (ASL). And although there are many links to video examples throughout the text, there are no video examples of speakers with differing abilities.

Another chapter from textbook A on “building your confidence” begins with an antidote explaining how King George VI experienced speech anxiety but overcame it. King George VI lived with a stutter, which the text mentions, however, it implies that the stutter was a symptom of speech anxiety rather than a disorder which he underwent speech therapy for. It continues by sharing what speech anxiety is and is not and explains the symptoms. What might seem like an inspirational story of overcoming the odds for some is a reminder for others that their experiences are not the norm and or society views the experience as something that needs to be fixed. The way this textbook explains the symptoms assume that anyone who experiences these symptoms must suffer from speech anxiety, however, some of the symptoms (if not all) could be symptomatic of other diagnoses that receive no mention. Take, for example, the issue of “shaky hands,” which could be a common response to nervousness or a persistent neurological condition. For students who naturally shake, this discourse implies that their circumstances are an issue that hinders being an effective speaker. They share that it is normal and natural to feel nervous, yet there is a need to reduce the symptoms and build confidence instead, and this has the consequences of perpetuating that able-bodies will be the only bodies that can be effective speakers.

In textbook A, under a section for “understanding factors that influence delivery,” there is a sub-section on “physical impairments and delivery.” This section states that “speakers who use crutches or a walker must consider several issues before presenting a speech.” The next subsection discusses visual impairments and how one might “write out the speech and have a sighted person present it for you” and that a speaker with hearing impairment “may use an interpreter.” This section is a little over a page in length. Following this section includes a discussion on “managing your voice during your speech,” which makes it seem as if the section on physical impairments was an afterthought. Of course, including this section admits that not everyone can relate to the previous examples about delivery skills, but it is arguably one of the only places that acknowledge these differences, and this section was only in one out of the three textbooks analyzed. A lot more could be said about different delivery styles, including vocal delivery.

When discussing the communication process, a definition of noise is explained and, more specifically, “physiological noise,” where textbook B mentions “hearing loss or vision,” yet the textbook positions this as something bad. Furthermore, textbook B shares that “a speaker may grapple with physiological, challenges of stuttering, lisp, or tics beyond their control” and that this type of noise is “a result of our sense failing us in some way.” Again, this word choice and context position such things to be a bad thing that needs fixing rather than perhaps something out of one’s control.

Textbook B also has a section on “listening and other communication activities” discussing listening and hearing where it states that “The Hearing Less Association of America reports that, according to recent statistics from the National Center for Health, 36 million Americans or 17 percent, have some hearing loss,” and that hearing loss is the third public health

issue. Because of this, the text states that “we shouldn't assume our entire audience will hear us,” but quickly moves on to the next section on listening rather than spending more time discussing the implications of this insight. Finally, textbook B shares that “an active speaker can encourage an active response from an audience, but an immobile speaker can leave listeners listless,” which completely disregards immobile students.

Textbook C references the disability community but mostly as quick references. Textbook C does, however, provide an example, Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by a gunman, resulting in facial paralysis and loss of hearing in the left ear, which resulted in a Cochlear implant placed where the eardrum was destroyed. Yousafzai is used as an example of a great communicator, although not much is explained about the struggles/differences/accommodations they make that veer against the idealistic standards.

Later on, textbook C acknowledges disabilities again in “a note on inclusive language,” stating that “[audiences] also expect speakers to avoid stereotypes based on age, race, gender, disability, and other factors” with an example replacing “handicapped” with “disabilities.” This again is displaying a quick nod to disabilities without much conversation to follow. The last place this is seen in textbook C is when it mentions Winston Churchill and how they “suffered from a slight lisp and an awkward stammer” and explains that “you can overcome natural disadvantages” and “[they] learned to control their voices” as if a disability is controllable or needs to be controlled.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions**

By analyzing three public speaking textbooks, it is clear that the introductory public speaking course needs alterations that include revisions to public speaking textbooks to include differing abilities. Although some mention of diversity was present, the disability community

does not seem to be a part of what is meant by diversity. Excluding differing abilities is doing a disservice to the disability community and the larger U.S. population, although the intent of omission might not be intentional. Public speaking is not exclusively for able-bodied individuals, yet it is designed as such, and this can make it less appealing to a student who cannot relate to or adapt to the material present in current textbooks.

Furthermore, a major shift in the instruction of the public speaking course that focuses less on textbooks could be of value. When truly examining the content of public speaking textbooks, Gehrke (2016) found that most of the focus is on writing a speech rather than instruction on actually giving a speech. Gehrke (2016) suggests a curriculum that focuses less on the textbook and more on practical techniques or excludes textbooks altogether in order to truly train students about the art of public speaking. Although Gehrke's (2016) argument is based upon the notion that students need to learn more about delivery and the need to do public speaking rather than learning how to write a speech, the end result of shifting away from textbooks or focusing more on practice is useful for students with differing abilities as well. Mastropieri et al.'s (1999) results showed that students with disabilities learn better through an activities-based curriculum. I recommend that textbooks emphasize more of an activities-based approach rather than providing examples that conform to ableist perspectives. Additionally, rather than textbooks focusing on set standards or lists to achieve being an effective speaker, they should broaden this perspective to be more inclusive of differing abilities. For example, movement is not necessary for an effective speech. Textbooks instead could explain why movement might make sense for some speeches or speakers and not for others. This breaks the mold that an ideal speaker must have strategic movement in the space to be an effective speaker.

Additionally, analyzing other sections of textbooks could be helpful in uncovering necessary changes. For example, delivery contexts are not the only place that needs revisions to be more inclusive for the disability community. Finally, additional research could complement this study by including student perspectives and voices. For example, interviewing or observing students and instructors could help uncover other challenges not addressed here. Interviewing students with disabilities could provide a much deeper understanding of current challenges that might be overlooked in this analysis. Observations could also provide a deeper understanding. Further research could help to influence change within the introductory public speaking course as a whole and stimulate change for the curricula.

The public speaking course needs to be more inclusive of differing abilities and includes less ableism, specifically within the textbooks. Textbooks are essential to students' learning and understanding of course material; thus, researching textbooks is critical. My experience as an instructor of public speaking has taught me that students are not one-in-the-same—what works for one student may not work for another student. Although including a how-to or checklist on being a successful public speaker is helpful, it should not be taught as an exhaustive, exclusive list. To create a more inclusive public speaking textbook, we could begin by determining more realistic expectations and understanding of the public speaking course at large. In public speaking textbooks, the representation of disability, or lack thereof, should be of more serious concern to communication scholars.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

After sharing with someone I found out about my specific learning disorders while writing my dissertation, part of their response congratulated me for making it this far in higher education without academic accommodations. At that moment, the relevancy of this dissertation, or the *why*, truly clicked personally for me. It was as if my diagnosis suddenly made me inadequate to be successful at school or as if it was surprising to know that I could make it in school despite my disorders. It almost confirms that higher education is not meant for students with disabilities unless they can receive additional help. I know it was not this person's intention, but their words were not comforting. It made me imagine how many students are dropping out of college because they are trying to fit into a system that is not made for them— a system that is ableist in nature. How many students are dropping out of communication majors or public speaking courses due to this? Additionally, how many students struggle in silence due to the stigma around disorders and snap judgments like the one I faced in this situation?

Before confirming my diagnosis during my doctoral program, I was in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy to process past trauma. My therapist recommended that they write a letter vaguely explaining my current mental health situation in hopes that my professors would provide some grace and or accommodations as EMDR can be very taxing. This approach is significantly different from academic accommodation standards because, with therapist documentation, professors are not legally obligated to provide accommodations. The document basically stated that I was struggling with my mental health and

might need extra help. I informed my professors about the documentation and said that if they had questions, to please let me know. Unfortunately, when I needed accommodations, the documentation did not help. I experienced a severe panic attack during an at-home, timed test during COVID-19, and when I explained the situation and asked for some additional time, it was not granted. The response was that my therapist's letter did not state that I should receive accommodations that included extra time on a test (included in official academic accommodations); however, I was experiencing high levels of anxiety that made it challenging to complete my exam in the allotted timeframe. Rather than my professor making adjustments for me, I had to accept that my anxiety disorder prevented me from completing my exam. It has left me to wonder how this situation might have been different if I had gone through the process to receive official accommodation documentation interpreted as *legitimate*. It has also led me to consider the inequality in students receiving accommodations and why specific documentation leads to such different results.

As mentioned earlier, oftentimes, marginalized communities lack the resources and access to such testing, and in my case, at this time, I did not receive official testing to confirm my diagnoses. My experiences have led me to reevaluate my approach in the classroom when it comes to accommodations. Rather than relying on official documentation that, by law, requires instructors to make accommodations, I try to have a conversation with my students to understand how I can help them overcome any difficulties in my course. This same concept is useful for the public speaking course since I have now explained some of the ableism within the course. As showcased in the studies, documentation is not particularly helpful for all situations in the public speaking course. In this final chapter, this dissertation will come to a close by discussing the implications, along with the limitations, future directions, and final thoughts.

## Implications

Disabilities and neurodiversity were not adequately considered when developing the foundations of public speaking foundations, and this neglect represents a larger social marginalization of the disability community throughout history. In order to address these normative standards, this dissertation argues that public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs and that public speaking programs need to be more considerate of and sensitive to the rich diversity of physical and cognitive abilities. Through an autoethnography of my experience teaching IDD students and two case study analyses on public speaking assessment rubrics and textbooks, it is evident that changes need to be made in order to make public speaking specifically and the field of communication in general, more inclusive of differing abilities. I have argued that the problem truly stems from many of the unwritten rules and disciplinary norms that constitute most public speaking courses, and in this dissertation, I have aimed to uncover ableist assumptions to locate ways to address the broader problem of public speaking programs lacking the perspectives and experiences of the disability community.

This dissertation focused mostly on ableism for two reasons; first, focusing on the spectrum of human ability allows for a more precise conversation within broader academic discourses on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The public speaking course relies on ableist assumptions about students' abilities and obstructs the possibility of differing abilities. Second, deconstructing the social norms that have guided the Communication field for years allows for updated and more inclusive considerations for various views and abilities. Opening up the perspective of *who* can be an *effective* speaker allows for higher enrollment into the course, better retention rates, as well as being ethically moral. Changes will be difficult, and there is no one place to start or finish this process, but we should be encouraged by the examples presented

in the studies, such as Barbara Jordan, Elon Musk, Sir Ken Robinson, etc. Change needs to be seen in many areas, including the course curriculum, pedagogy, practices, goals, and the mindset of public speaking instructors and students. My experiences as a teacher and someone with a list of disorders, as well as the research conducted about the public speaking course in the three studies, have led to pedagogical and practical implications.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

This dissertation is an intervention for individuals involved with the public speaking program to reassess the ableist assumptions and perspectives within them. Public speaking scholars often contribute to the social construction of disability through the ableist information taught in the course, and academics must unlearn problematic habits socially established and encourage students to do the same (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017).

**Changes to the Public Speaking Course.** Fundamental changes need to be made to the public speaking course to account for students' needs in a way that is humanizing and supportive of all students in their academic journey, which shapes their lives well beyond. The mythic image of the *effective* speaker does not include differing abilities; rather, it suggests that to be an effective speaker, one must be able-bodied in multiple ways (male, heterosexual, White, young, attractive, physically powerful). Broadening our cultural understanding of ability by shifting focus from ableist perspectives to a celebration of human diversity, will help to include individuals who are able to speak with passion and wisdom but that do not fit within the confined definitions of the ideal speaker. One example that was discussed in chapter four was Elon Musk. Musk is displayed as an ideal speaker, a vision of success in public speaking textbooks, yet Musk having autism is not discussed. Neurodiversity is only one element of Musk's identity, but by not acknowledging his autism diagnosis, the textbook sends the message that Musk is not part of the

disability community and is a great speaker despite any ability differences. Musk is positioned as a speaker to emulate, and yet he does not make eye contact during 90% of a speech, which would trigger penalization according to most rubrics. Instead, when referencing Musk as an ideal speaker, one should also point out that he does not fit the standard criteria, thus challenging socially constructed perceptions of rhetorical performance.

Public speaking courses should make changes that consider disability perspectives by transforming what the course objectives (or outcomes) should be, as seen through the course competencies, and by reconsidering what is being taught and evaluated in the course. Through the textbook analysis, it is evident that what is being taught displays ableist views and values able-bodiedness as the default. Wood (1998) stated,

We cannot teach our students to value diversity when our textbooks exclude gay and lesbian couples from discussions of relationships, portray European American communication patterns as standard for everyone, and ignore how race, gender, age, religion, physical (dis)abilities, class, and sexual orientation shape personal identities and communication practices” (p. 173).

This cycle will only continue if changes are not made to public speaking textbooks. The concern between what is being taught, specifically in the textbooks, and what the course competencies are, is that the course is not inviting to students who are not neurotypical or able-bodied. Public speaking textbooks rarely discuss a speaker with differing abilities, thus assuming that all speakers will be able-bodied. This is teaching that students taking the course are predominantly able-bodied and discouraging the disability community from joining the course or conversation. This is also promoting exclusion in public speaking and valuing able-bodiedness in rhetoric.

Additionally, the rubric case study explores the high percentage of what is being

evaluated in speeches has to do specifically with delivery, and that these sections are often ableist in nature. Many of the rubrics valued the delivery section as much as 20%, up to half of the total grade. A majority of the delivery sections assume the ability of a student by the criteria they assess students on. Yet, as we've seen, academic accommodations often do not share that students have disabilities; thus, accommodations do not always translate to what accommodations should be considered for a speech. Academic accommodations generally provide extra time or noise reduction but do not always explain that a student might need additional accommodations for a speech. The example of my student who disclosed having Tourette Syndrome is illustrative because the accommodations letter only stated that the student receives extra time as in extended time on timed assessments, and a reduced distraction environment, as in a quiet, uninterrupted environment for test-taking. Most of the required accommodations, just like most of the other accommodations provided through such offices, do not translate well to speeches. Public speaking instructors have a unique responsibility to make further adjustments for all students to break the prejudiced mold of public speaking foundations. Thus, it is important that instructors consider universal design, changes are made to the overall public speaking course, including the curriculum and assessments, and ethical training before and during teaching efforts.

**Training/Workshops.** Issues with training and disciplinary support make it difficult for instructors to navigate, providing a safe space for students to work through societal controversies (Waymer, 2021). Focusing on the development of the training and workshops offered for faculty and TAs teaching the public speaking course is essential for changing the ableist perspectives found in the course, as the instruction can contribute to said ableism. There are many ways to do

this, but I highlight past research as especially promising that focuses on training and workshops for public speaking instructors.

Previous studies highlighted the lack of training for faculty members and their choice to be less accommodating in making adjustments for students with disabilities (Aguirre et al., 2021). This outcome is a direct reflection of power structures in the classroom which further ableist perspectives in the assessment of some students over others. Assessing students to verify that they are learning the course material “is arguably the most important function that a graduate teaching assistant (TA) performs in the classroom,” however, excluding stereotypical judgment while evaluating speeches requires extensive training that most instructors and TAs do not undergo (Bock, 1992, p. 82). However, a lack of research in this area makes it unclear to know if this is currently true. Aguirre et al. (2021) completed a study that looked into ways to improve the academic experience for students with disabilities. The participants of the study were all faculty and uncovered that most lacked training specific to disability although they were teaching students with disabilities even though such training was seen as important to all participants. A common goal was “the educational and social inclusion of students in the classroom, and their academic success,” however, how the participants gained this knowledge varied (Aguirre et al. 2021, p. 311).

Training that points out instructor’s internal biases crafted for public speaking instructors can also help to alleviate predetermined assumptions of students and interpretation discrepancies which could lead to inconsistencies across classes. Some individuals might value delivery over content, especially if one is not convinced by what is being said. Social cues often learned based on the societal reward that such cue brings (i.e., popularity for something arbitrary) are also highlighted in assessment rubrics (Rubin et al., 2022). Additionally, “there is an abundance of

relevant information (e.g., eye movements, body posture) that can lead to specific interpretations about what a behavior during an interaction means,” for example, interpreting that eye contact from the audience means that the speaker has the attention of the listener (Rubin et al., 2022, p. 396). Part of the training process should “include helping TAs [and instructors] to identify both their own biases and their identification with groups that are the target of negative bias” (Darling, 1992, p. 64). Identifying one’s bias could help to determine potential discrimination against students with disabilities.

Disability training should be more of a focus for educators in the near future. Most if not all campuses have offices for disability services, such as academic accommodations; however, although these services often provide documentation and or training, they are not always equipped to appreciate the range of student abilities. Understanding that the law prohibits discrimination against students with differing abilities, and that accommodations must be made with documentation, does not mean that an instructor will treat the student fairly. Documentation from various offices on campus is often limited to a few required accommodations. For example, at UA, the Office of Disability Services provides the following types of accommodations: priority registration, testing accommodations, note-taking assistance, e-text, and alternative formats, syllabus modification, deaf and hard of hearing services, sign language interpreting or real-time captioning, attendance modification, and course substitution. However, how these accommodations are translated to a speech is up to the instructor; thus, discrimination from internal bias can occur. Additionally, the process for receiving accommodations should include meeting with instructors but based on my own experiences and those of peers; such meetings appear rare. This furthers the need to invest in proper training for the instructors rather than leaving the heavy lifting up to the students. The Ability Institute (n.d.) shares in the Allies For

Inclusion: The Ability Exhibit that one of the most helpful things that teachers can do is check in with students, but that is difficult if students do not disclose their struggles and if teachers do not have proper knowledge about disabilities.

Training for instructors of the public speaking course has been important to many organizations and associations, such as the Speech Communication Association (SCA). Through SCA's efforts, specific manuals have been created to instruct training for TAs. Darling (1992) stated that the issue of including diverse perspectives in communication classrooms is primarily attitudinal problems rather than cognitive, "thus, preparing TAs for student diversity will, of necessity, involve first attitudinal change and secondarily cognitive and behavioral change" (p. 61). To this, an expansion of knowledge around diversity is necessary. This can be done through engaging conversations that are "honest, liberating, and constructive" (Darling, 1992, p. 64). Such conversations could also translate to the classroom and include disclosure between teacher and student, much like the examples presented in chapter one about professors disclosing their disabilities and chapter four explaining my experience disclosing my disorders with my students. The point of these conversations should be to first identify the TA's biases, challenge other perspectives, and explore the curriculum with diversity in mind (Darling, 1992). There are many programs that offer training and workshops for diversity, equity, and inclusion. One, in particular, is the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI). The NCBI is an international leadership organization that colleges and universities can get to provide training and workshops in DEI. The NCBI is committed to "contribution to long-lasting institutional and social change" (see <https://ncbi.org/about-us/>). The NCBI has many core principles, a few of which include, *Building hopeful Environments to Welcome Diversity, Becoming effective allies, Changing Hearts through stories, and Skills Training leads to Institutional Change*. Colleges and

universities can become affiliated with the NCBI. More specific towards disabilities, the National Center for College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD) offers many online training sessions and seminars. Some of the training sessions are listed as *two-minute training*, a few of which I completed. One of the two-minute training, for example, labeled Prove It! What is Disability “Documentation”? is helpful for describing the process and various documentation types (NCCSDI, n.d.).

In addition to national efforts of training and workshops for diversity, equity, and inclusion, most colleges and universities offer such training and workshops, but usually, teaching assistants (TAs) only complete a shortlist of these. Requiring not only TAs but all instructors of the public speaking course, some of the programming specifically tailored to the disability community would be highly beneficial during this process for change. Also, public speaking directors and coordinators are encouraged to reach out to the various offices, programs, and services on campus for additional resources or to visit instructors and TAs. I was able to obtain information from multiple programs, offices, and services on campus for this dissertation. Additionally, institutions can invite outside programming on campus to spread awareness.

The Ability Institute offers a traveling exhibit titled *Allies for Inclusion: The Ability Exhibit*, which was first launched in 2010. This exhibit showcases issues of disability inclusion and provides awareness. Reservations can be made online. UA was able to bring the exhibit to campus, so I had the opportunity to see the exhibit firsthand in Spring 2022. It offered great information, and I was able to learn more about how to be an ally, be supportive in the classroom, and revise the terms that I use. This information informed the discourse in this dissertation and helped me to rethink my language. The exhibit ended with an emphasis on Universal Design (UD). As mentioned in the first chapter, UD is extremely beneficial for all

students, not just students with disabilities, and will be discussed with practical implications in the next section.

### ***Practical Implications***

Public speaking is highly important to the Communication field, as it often recruits students into the course. What the course teaches is also vital for many other disciplines and professional success beyond college; thus, discussing practical implications is important.

**Universal Design.** The *Allies for Inclusion: The Ability Exhibit* describes universal design (UD) as one answer to increasing inclusion. UD has various definitions and categories to it, but ultimately it is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (The Ability Institute, n.d.). Harpur (2009) explained the following,

Universal design maximises inclusion by removing barriers at the design phase of a building, website and in a curriculum, rather than attempting to address barriers once they exclude a person with a disability (p. 165).

UD worldwide would mean that “society should be structured to enable equal access to as many aspects of life to all people, regardless of their characteristics and abilities” (Harpur, 2009).

Ableism is to have a five-story building that only has steps in it, thus making it inaccessible to some, whereas UD would have a building that is accessible for all metaphorically and physically (Harpur, 2009).

Considering UD in pedagogy through instructional efforts would be Universal Instructional Design (UID) or Universal Principles for Student Development (UDSD). UID, involves the highly intentional and reflective practice of considering the multiple and intersecting social identities of all students who might potentially pursue an academic

program, enroll in a class, or use a learning support service (e.g., learning center) when designing the program, course or service (The Ability Institute, n.d.).

UDSD is to more so focused on communication efforts to establish “clear expectations, use methods that consider diverse learning styles, provide natural supports, ensure confidentiality, and define service quality” (The Ability Institute, n.d.). UD in public speaking courses might be reframing the foundational information of the course, redetermining the course objectives and values, and reconsidering the evaluation process of students with assessment tools. Rather than higher education being the only community to utilize UD, “society should adopt universal design to reduce the instances of unnecessary barriers for people with disabilities” as well (Harpur, 2009, p. 163). All individuals also need to take responsibility for their part in societal norms and ableist practices.

**Allyship & Destigmatization.** The way that abilities are viewed in society impacts educational spaces and vice versa. Scholars have stated that the ideologies established and promoted in higher education enhance societal ableist perspectives (Dolmage, 2017; Davis, 1995). It is evident that societal changes need to be on how disabilities are understood, and some ways to do this are through education and through allyship.

To be an ally is to reexamine one’s privilege or power to unlearn societal norms and gain perspective on the marginalized group. Allies promote others by uniting with the oppressed to act upon and or call out the wrongdoings that they observe. The Ability Institute offers information about becoming an ally, such as through a specific workshop titled The Ability Ally Initiative. There are also many other nationally recognized programs on allyship. Becoming an ally starts with accountability and self-awareness. The Ability Institute also places emphasis on

language and terms used. Using inclusive language is one way to start destigmatizing the ideals of disabilities.

When teaching students with and without disabilities, I really wanted to be there for my students and help them the best that I could, but I did not know how to. My desire to be a better teacher for them made me realize that I should be more focused on doing this for all of my students. It also made me more aware of my own identity and my connection with the disability community, which has created a need to deepen this connection further. In the process of writing this dissertation, I have realized the need to continue to learn and practice being an ally.

This dissertation will inform my future work as an educator and speaking, writing and digital rhetoric studio director. In these roles, I am responsible for teaching courses grounded in rhetoric, such as public speaking, and direct student consultants in public speaking, writing, and digital rhetoric. There needs to be more collaboration between writing and speaking centers and I will be in a unique position to add to scholarship in this area. What I have uncovered in this dissertation is that change begins with me. I need to be more cognizant of the ableism that I project in the classroom and work on being more considerate and inclusive of all students. These insights will inform the way I teach and train students and staff in the future. Chapter one discussed how another graduate student and I created a diversity workshop for consultants working at the Speaking Studio at UA. I suggest that similar training is needed at all speaking and writing centers in addition to training TAs and instructors of public speaking courses. Completing task-based training allows individuals to work through real-life examples and consider their biases. This training can facilitate necessary changes to public speaking courses by bringing to light any ableist values and attempting to reframe them.

## **Limitations & Directions for Future Research**

The development of this dissertation is connected to what I have learned from working with other students, various organizations, and offices on campus, but more is needed. Although I found out during the writing process that I have mental health and learning disorders, I do not represent the disability community at large and am only now coming to terms with how to situate myself within this community. This dissertation is not about me, but it was centered around my voice; and as much as I wanted to discuss identity, I was not ready to discuss all the intersections of my identity quite yet. I would like to continue to explore how identity plays a role in ableist perspectives. I'm left to wonder if I get to choose if I am a part of the community? According to society, my disorders make me a part of the disability community; thus, exploring identity in this aspect deeper could be beneficial to this work. Additionally, incorporating Disability Studies scholarship would benefit the public speaking course and provide perspectives that I cannot. Critical disability theory was complimentary to instructional communication theory and intersectional rhetoric to examine ableism in the public speaking course, but because critical disability theory originated in critical theory, it would be further benefitting to learn more from theories originated in Disability Studies.

In a study by Wiesel & Bigby (2014), it was found that individuals develop shared experiences when schools integrate students with and without disabilities into one shared space and that this encounter impacts long-term understandings of disabilities. This is something that I support as a student and as a teacher. In my case, learning about my disorders during the latter part of my academic career has also had a similar effect to Wiesel & Bigby's (2014) results.

I also would like to explore the ableism in speaking and writing centers. Although there is some research about Disability Studies in writing center research, much more is needed for

speaking center research. There are such conversations happening at national conferences, and much more appear to be coming. In fact, the NCA conference calls included many around this topic and filled up quickly. I would like to continue researching training for consultation efforts with the disability community in mind. Examining speaking centers will be essential to the growth of public speaking programs. When changes are made to the course, changes will also need to be made in speaking centers.

Not only will speaking centers need to reevaluate their training efforts and prior knowledge, but they should also be concerned with recruiting consultants with various abilities. Researching speaking centers with disability perspectives in mind could uncover additional issues not addressed in this dissertation, such as what consultants are helping students change or fix during an appointment. Based on what is learned in the public speaking course, consultants could be promoting ableist assumptions during appointments. For example, if a student is struggling with eye contact during a speech, a consultant might value helping a student “fix” their eye contact.

As mentioned in the introduction, consultants are not aware of academic accommodations or students’ abilities during a session unless the student is disclosing this information. However, with an update to the public speaking course through UD, less emphasis should be placed on giving feedback about eye contact during a speech. Much like the public speaking course, all speaking centers are different, and there are no set standards for speaking centers universally. Although similar conversations have been made during national conferences, such as NACC, published research about disability perspectives in speaking centers would be advantageous.

## **Final Reflections**

I was in my very first doctoral class with two master's students and already felt completely out of place knowing that they were approved to take doctoral courses. I remember sitting in class one day, and everyone was talking about how they pronounced a name in one of our readings. The instructor turned to me and asked how I pronounced it in my head, to which I explained that I don't read names when I'm reading; I skip over them completely. One of the master's students looked over at me as if I had said the obscenest thing ever. We then, as a class, discussed how important it is to read the names while reading articles to become familiar with who was writing in that research area. I felt stupid after that class and like I did something wrong, but I realize now that I do not read and comprehend the same way that others do.

Like far too many students, I have struggled in silence, not knowing for certain if I had a disability and unsure how to move forward. I am a living example of the students who needed help but did not feel comfortable enough to ask because they thought they were the only ones struggling and that the struggle was a me issue to figure out on my own. I am an example that all students can benefit from UD changes in higher education. If I never went to be tested, I would still question if my disorders existed. I wonder what might have been if I went through school knowing of my disorders, and if that would have made my experience better, or if it would make a difference at all. In addition to dealing with discrimination as a woman of color, I struggled without knowing of my disorders and did not like asking for help. I wonder how having academic accommodations would change my perspective. I received a B in my undergraduate public speaking course, yet I have still excelled in my public speaking career by teaching it, working in multiple speaking centers, training speaking consultants, and facilitating workshops.

But what if my public speaking instructor was aware of my disorders; would that have changed my B to an A? This experience has been transformative to the way I teach now.

When I first found out about my disorders, I started to reevaluate my entire identity. It truly felt like I did not know who I was anymore. A rush of memories went through my head as I read each diagnosis. Memories of struggling situations that suddenly made sense to me started coming in, such as the time I got so anxious in class when talking about trauma, and I had to leave the classroom or the time when I read a passage and had nothing to say about it afterward. Now, these instances suddenly made perfect sense. In those situations, I felt dumb, but in the moment of finding out about my diagnosis, I finally felt vindicated that my challenges could not be explained away by stereotypes and uninformed presumptions.

When talking to a friend who recently underwent a similar process to find out that they have autism, we were reflecting on the struggle with our identities after discovering our diagnoses. We made the connection that as much as we felt we knew ourselves; it was like the diagnoses overshadowed what we knew and placed a new label on our foreheads. To understand how my mind works with my learning disorder with reading, let me describe a situation. There were two doors right next to each other; they both had signs on them that looked similar. One sign read “restroom,” and the other sign read “employees only.” I was trying to go to the restroom but recognized the usual symbol for a restroom and went straight for the “employees only” door rather than the restroom. I quickly realized upon opening the door that I did not actually comprehend what I had initially read. Instead of reading the words on the sign, I saw the text as symbols rather than as letters that create a word. My friend and I discussed how it made sense to us to hear such diagnoses, yet it also did not make sense at all. How could *we* have a disorder? How could *we* have what society would call a disability? This conversation made me

rethink the inherent ableist perspectives of society and how I am possibly contributing to it.

My ultimate hope with this dissertation is that others can learn from my experiences to provide a more fulfilling context for students to call out ableism and become an ally for the disability community. Having a disability or a disorder should not exclude anyone from public speaking, rhetoric, or any field/discipline. We should all celebrate our differences and have access to accommodations that are fair and promote inclusion. Rather than punishing a student for not doing something that is not *normal* for them, it is time to readjust our focus toward what is important in the public speaking course. I have argued that currently, public speaking programs contribute to ableist beliefs and reject the rich complexity of human ability. Making changes and improvements to the course will invite students with differing abilities to our front porch and promote diversity within the field.

### **Closing Discussion**

Although this dissertation is at the end, the work reflected in these pages will continue. There is so much more that can be done and so much more that I personally can do. I will continue researching and writing about ableism within the public speaking course and in higher education. I will continue educating myself and trying to educate others. I want to continue to revise and edit the training workshops that we've started. I also have plans to work with other individuals from the disability community on future projects that include additional training for working with students with disabilities, specifically from the autistic community. I plan to keep exploring my own diagnoses and sharing my journey and struggles. I also plan to continue to share my stories both from the instructor's vantage point and from the student's perspective. In the fall of 2021, I was the runner-up for the Three-Minute Thesis competition at UA, which aired

on television and Facebook Live, where I spoke about this dissertation. This is just one way that I have been able to present my research and add to the scholarship.

Someday, I hope that I am able to make changes to the introductory public speaking course material. I would love to create a more inclusive textbook, which some scholars are already beginning to do, that intentionally promotes the spectrum of human abilities. At this time, there has also been a huge push to continue such conversations at national conferences, such as at the NCA and NACC, both of which I have had the privilege to present at and add to the conversation. I hope that having these conversations at conferences will inspire actual change in the discipline.

For all individuals involved with the public speaking programs, an ethical responsibility exists to design and assess the courses with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront. Providing tools on how to be considerate of differing abilities for public speaking faculty will contribute to adhering to the ethical and moral standards we have as educators to make sure that all students have an equal opportunity to excel in the Communication field. These tools include but are not limited to changes to the foundation of the course, additional resources through training and workshops, and universal design. Hopefully, one day society will interpret abilities differently, and part of our job is to insist that is so, but until then, we must do the work to end ableist perspectives found within the public speaking course too. UD is a great place to start, which would mean adding a metaphoric ramp to the Communication field's front porch so that individuals with disabilities have access, and not just access through afterthought modes such as ramps, elevators, or side entrances (or individual accommodations, currently). It is our responsibility to make our front porch accessible to all because the best kind of ability is accessibility.

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