

Book Review

Fassett, D.L. and Nainby, K. (2021). *Empowering Public Speaking*. Cognella Academic Publishing. (277 pp., paperback \$124.95; ebook \$79.96).

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Fassett and Nainby's *Empowering Public Speaking* is a text with the potential to elevate speech instruction and communication center staff training by providing a framework that centers difference and possibilities over prescriptive guidelines.

It is the way in which the text defines public speaking that first sets it apart. While most texts define the process early and then move on, *Empowering Public Speaking* slowly builds toward a definition, with each new chapter adding another quality or dimension of public speaking. The end result is a definition that feels comprehensive yet open-ended. For example, some of the chapter titles are: "Public Speaking is Constitutive;" "Public Speaking is Relational;" "Public Speaking is Responsive;" "Public Speaking is Specific to Time, Place, and Purpose;" "Public Speaking is Pedagogical;" and "Public Speaking is Structured." In most textbooks of this genre, chapters are tied very tightly to assignments (for example, chapters about persuasion are read as students prepare their persuasive speeches), which makes sense for the classroom but can be very limiting when it comes to reapplying those lessons to speech and presentation opportunities outside of school. *Empowering Public Speaking* contextualizes the process in a way that helps students understand that public speaking goes beyond classroom performance by preparing them to recognize applications for the practice beyond their assignments.

The way the lessons of each chapter are communicated makes this text unique too. Fassett and Nainby go beyond the basic formula of defining a concept and outlining the steps for how to engage in it; in each chapter of *Empowering Public*

Speaking, the authors frame lessons in negotiable terms that make space for difference, which, in the context of this review, means allowing students their own interpretations, making it possible for strategies to be applied using a diversity of communication styles, and encouraging creativity and curiosity in approach.

Consider the topic of structure, for example, and the way in which most public speaking texts deal with it; generally, authors explain what it means for a speech to be structured or provide some reasoning for why organization is important and then jump to several structural templates that a speaker should follow. Chapters about outlining often come next. In these chapters, students are asked to choose one of the few organizational structures provided to outline their work. No opportunity is given for a student to stop, think, or consider anything other than the rule and how best to follow it. The speech process becomes more of a color-by-numbers task, which can be hard to escape, especially for new speakers who may not realize they have options. What we are left with is a lot of speakers who sound much the same way and speeches without personal touch or genuine motivation.

In *Empowering Public Speaking*, Fassett and Nainby leave more space for discussion and individual interpretation. In their chapter on structure, for example, they start off with the suggestion that "structure emerges from the speaker's and listeners' needs" (p. 108). This section of the chapter alone opens up room for discussion. An instructor could base an entire class session on this topic and encourage students to consider questions such as the following: *What are a speaker's needs? What does an audience need? Would*

a certain ordering of information help to address those needs? Would those needs be different depending on the context of the speech? Of course, a good teacher can work magic with almost any textbook, but here is one that truly inspires good classroom practice.

Fassett and Nainby's commitment to their approach is clear; they continue it throughout the entire text, even down to the reviews at the end of each chapter. Actually, these sections, which the authors call "Toward Praxis," are a standout of this book. In many standard texts, chapter summaries and reviews call for exercises in rote memorization and simple recall. In *Empowering Public Speaking*, Fassett and Nainby ask probing questions to get readers thinking deeply about topics and concepts and what their past experiences have been in understanding and applying related strategies. Just as importantly, the authors ask questions that get readers thinking critically about how they might consider and employ various concepts and strategies in future speeches and presentations. In this way, Fassett and Nainby gracefully avoid the pitfall of overly prescriptive guidelines. At the end of Chapter 6, reflection questions ask "What were your first lessons about outlining and structure? How did these lessons shape your attitudes toward outlining and speech preparation? What first helped you appreciate the importance of adding planned structure to your spoken communication?" (p. 122). Next, another set of questions asks: "Consider an issue you'd like to address within your community, however you choose to define it. How might different organizational patterns lead you to a stronger or weaker argument? What would you need to consider in order to build introductory and concluding material that effectively establishes a relationship between you, your listeners, and the issue you intend to address?" (p. 122?). Depending on an individual's perspective and experiences, they will walk away with different answers to these questions and consider individual and distinctive applications of each lesson. In this sense, readers do not rely on the textbook

definition of public speaking alone; they play a part in defining it for themselves and their own applications.

The importance of a text like *Empowering Public Speaking* for traditional public speaking instruction is clear. The open-ended definition of the practice and the negotiable and personalizable explanations of concepts and related strategies in this book make it easier for instructors to impress upon their students the relevance of public speaking beyond the classroom. When a student can see a direct connection between their lives and the content they are studying, they are more likely to invest time and genuine energy into the process.

For the communication center, a text like this one is invaluable because tutors often work with students who have been assigned speeches and presentations from outside the discipline of public speaking and communication. Although some centers exist as a resource for their college's basic course alone, more and more serve the wider campus community. A text with open-ended and non-discipline-specific definitions and lessons is a perfect fit for this scenario, because it allows tutors and tutees to consider the individual expectations of any given speech, outside the communication classroom. Different instructors, classes, disciplines, and industries require different considerations, and *Empowering Public Speaking* makes space for tutors and tutees to have these important conversations and then adjust their approach.

Empowering Public Speaking stands out from other standard texts as an immediately impactful resource for public speaking courses and communication centers. Books with as much transformational power as this one does not come around often. This book is a high-water mark of speech instruction and a call to action for public speaking faculty and communication center personnel to elevate practice by honoring and prioritizing difference and possibility in public speaking instruction.