

Book Review

Waldeck, J.H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T.J. (2017). *Public speaking in a diverse society*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company. (416 pp., eBook \$119.99).

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As our society becomes more globalized and interconnected, the need to teach our students about the ethics of public speaking and ways to think about diverse, multi-ethnic audiences is augmented. Communication centers could benefit from a textbook which offers thought-provoking questions, guidance, and activities surrounding such considerations.

Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax (2017) tackle this call in their book *Public Speaking in a Diverse Society* (5th ed.). The authors challenge students to ethically consider how their speech could affect audience members from other co-cultural groups, although their attention to this goal is subordinated to the typical framework that guides public speaking textbooks. In the preface Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax lay out their purposes for this textbook stating, “Our first was to present the most important principles and skills of public speaking in a clear and readable manner. Our second was to frame this discussion of public speaking within a multicultural perspective” (p. xvii).

To achieve these goals, each chapter discusses general public speaking skills and then how to apply those skills with a multi-ethnic audience. One of the strengths in this textbook is the way the authors stress the speaker-audience relationship. They note the ethics and responsibilities of both groups toward one another. However, the intercultural framework they chose to adopt is more problematic than helpful which

inhibits the authors from fully reaching their secondary goal and diminishes the strength of the book as a resource for communication centers.

The book is structured in five parts and follows the typical format of other public speaking textbooks. The first part introduces students to the concept of speaking to a diverse audience, yet the authors do not emphasize diversity and multi-ethnic audiences until the third chapter, at which point they discuss Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. This framework has been critiqued for its generalizations and its methodological approach (e.g. McSweeney, 2002; Venaik & Brewer, 2016). Other lenses such as the critical dialogic approach (Xu, 2013) would have more effectively addressed public speaking within a multi-cultural context.

The second part of the book highlights the speaker while addressing diversity in smaller and sometimes problematic ways. For instance, Chapter 4 discusses cultural groups more prone to apprehension, making a distinction between high-context versus low-context groups. Doing so neglects the complexities of cultural identity and public speaking, potentially misrepresenting why a student may feel apprehensive.

Part three turns students’ attention to the audience. The authors discuss the importance of polling the audience and adapting speech content, but diversity

continues to be relegated to the background. Part four teaches students about developing content for their speeches. Students are encouraged to make sure topics, evidence, and speech logic are sensitive to a multi-cultural audience. Of all the chapters in this section, Chapter 9 handles cultural diversity most directly and strongly. It explains how different cultures tend to prefer certain logical preferences (i.e. linear vs. configural). Yet, this chapter still falls into the trap of generalizing individuals from cultural groups.

Finally, part five narrows in on constructing an argument and the delivery aspects of speaking. Chapter 15 focuses explicitly on cultural considerations of delivery. The authors encourage students who speak English as a second language to appreciate their ongoing efforts but advise them to adapt their accent or dialect to audiences. Noticeably, the authors do not provide corresponding strategies for audiences listening to ESL speakers. Such an imbalance hinders the authors from comprehensively helping students appreciate public speaking in a diverse society. The authors do challenge students to use more inclusive language like “they” versus “he” or “she”. Nevertheless, they argue for students to wear professional attire without fully acknowledging how ideas of professionalism may reproduce gender norms (Dillabough, 1999; Osgood, 2006). They also outline how to use sensory aids effectively without mentioning audience members or speakers who may have physical disabilities. By not attending to all these elements, the authors missed opportunities to meet the overarching goal they were striving to accomplish.

The strongest aspect of this book, though, lies in the authors’ intention to “include a wealth of strategies and exercises to help students develop their public skills

and become more effective and confident speakers” (p. xviii). They do so through skills-based excerpts such as *Building Your Skills*, *Assessing Yourself*, and *A Closer Look* boxes. Each of these boxes contain pragmatic tools aimed at content engagement and learning. They additionally include *Questions for Critical Thinking and Review* at the end of each chapter to enhance students’ critical thinking skills. These elements are beneficial for communication centers because they enable students to think more deeply about each stage of the public speaking process.

At the same time, communication centers should consider some of this textbook’s weaknesses, such as the authors’ framework for cultural typologies. In using this book, communication center professionals should be intentional about having conversations with students regarding the harms which may accrue from making broad generalizations and assumptions based on culture. Such conversations could also address speaker positionality by asking students to reflect on who they are, where they come from, and how their background impacts them as speakers. The book could have addressed speaker positionality through an *Assessing Yourself* box or *Questions for Critical Thinking and Review*.

Waldek, Kearney, and Plax’s textbook offers valuable speaking strategies, which are not often covered in other public speaking textbooks, as well as useful questions to spur a student’s critical thinking. Both of these elements make the book advantageous for communication centers to adopt in their sessions with students, but tutors would need to mitigate the larger cultural assumptions the book makes and caution students from doing the same.

Public Speaking in a Diverse Age sets itself up for a worthy goal when it argues, “unless [students] can speak to people who are different from themselves, they are likely to be ineffective with contemporary audiences” (p. xvii). Their textbook addresses this goal insofar as it discusses the fundamental concepts of public speaking and the ethical nature of the speaker-audience relationship. However, communication center professionals should use supplemental instruction to overcome the weaknesses of this book when adopting it as a resource.

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