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Public Speaking and Career Advancement: Experiences of Past Student Leaders from Ghana Institute of Journalism

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Abstract

Public speaking is a relevant skill, especially for those who aspire to be leaders, including student leaders. Being able to communicate effectively, eloquently, making meaningful statements as well as persuading people to agree to your opinion cannot be taken for granted for anyone who aspires to take a public leadership position. Similar to any democratic political system, winning leadership position in institutions of higher learning requires persuasive skills to make colleagues buy into your vision to win. Though some people have the natural ability to speak eloquently and communicate their thoughts publicly, others learn to do that, fostering the incorporation of public speaking into the curricular for Public Relations students at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ). Using the Theory of Communicative Action and a qualitative methodology, this study sought to understand how student leaders in GIJ came by their public speaking skills and how it impacted their career choices. Findings indicate that students who took up leadership positions had mastered the public speaking skills through social institutions before entering GIJ, partly because they had the leadership aspiration. The curriculum training was seen as a supplement to harness that skill, and the art of public speaking greatly influenced their career choices.

Keywords: *Career; Communication; Curriculum; Experience; Public speaking; Student leaders*

1. Introduction

Public speaking is a relevant skill, especially among those who aspire to be leaders, including student leaders. This is because leadership requires making presentations before an audience or interacting with people to persuade them to accept your vision and galvanize their support to win elections. Beyond leadership positions, nearly every job involves some public-speaking skills (Verderber & Verderber, 2006), which could be routine or daily meeting presentations to different levels of workplace audiences, necessitating the honing of skills such as self-confidence, connecting with people, speaking fluently while relaying relevant information and above all, being able to reduce apprehensiveness (Griffin, 2006).

While some people, especially extroverts, are born with the innate ability to speak publicly, some have had to learn to master the art because it is non-negotiable in leadership aspirations and eventually taking up the positions (Lucas 2004). Student leaders have to be equipped with this skill to engage with students first to win the position, as well as garner the needed support to carry their vision through (Lucas, 2004; Griffin, 2006). Nikitina (2011, 10) for instance, recommends a level of skill and training to make meaningful speech or presentation before an audience. Others, however, by virtue of previous experiences or aspirations master the art of public speaking (Lucas, 2004). In some institutions of higher learning that specialize in teaching communication studies, public speaking has been incorporated into the curricular, compelling students to have oral engagements with their peers and lecturers, informing its essence to communicators (Griffin, 2006).

The Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) propounded by Habermas (1984, 1987), which underpins this study has been used to underscore how communicative action which could either be instrumental or strategic coordinates actions



of interaction by social actors pursuing goals through shared understanding (with other actors). This is observable in the kind of interaction people have with others as they pursue their leadership aspirations. According to Habermas (1998) the shared understanding underlies the mutual understanding and agreement which is communicated using regular language or gestures which could initiate or keep a conversation between two or more people going (Edgar 2006, 21). Habermas' (1981,81), three types of communicative action – transferring of information, establishing relations with others and enabling for expressing ourselves is captured in public speaking, making it fundamentally cognitive, interactive and expressive, and is directed at achieving mutual understanding and agreement.

While previous studies have concentrated on public speaking trepidation on the part of students, and found out that most students experience anxiety in public speaking (see Lucas, 2004; Griffin, 2006; Grieve, Woodley, Hunt & McKay, 2021; Raja, 2017), this longitudinal qualitative study deviated from that, concentrating on two less researched objectives. First, it sought to gather relevant insights on the public speaking training and experiences of past student leaders of the Ghana Institute of Journalism and to ascertain whether their capabilities were due to their innate strengths or developed and enhanced by the training in the academic curricular. Secondly, the study sought to ascertain whether their public speaking experiences impacted their leadership tenure and also how it influenced their career paths after school.

Public speaking has been defined severally by various scholars. This study defines it as the skill or art of designing and delivering a purposive message to audiences. Public speaking is an essential skill for every leader. Being able to communicate effectively, eloquently, making meaningful statements as well as persuading people to agree to your opinion cannot be taken for granted for anyone who aspires to take up a public leadership position. Leaders are always expected to get it right as far as speaking publicly matters because, speaking reflects who we are and it serves as a basis for others to judge us (Ngwu, 1999; Lucas, 2004; Griffin, 2006). Though some people have the natural ability to speak eloquently and communicate their thoughts publicly, others learn to do that.

To be an effective public speaker, efforts need to be targeted at understanding the goal of speaking in public and most importantly, the target audience (Lucas, 2004; Griffin, 2006; Carnegie, 1998). Public speaking comes with a lot of anxiety and apprehension because of its spontaneity, no wonder most studies on public speaking have focused on that (Metcalf, 1991; Verderber & Verderber, 2006; Jaffe, 2016). It is important to consider how to prevent fear. Campbell and Ortiz (1991) as well as Sellnow (2005) have suggested that the spontaneity in the public speaking act is to the advantage of the speaker in order to achieve good speaking performance.

Using public speaking in education, it has been observed that being able to prepare, organise thought and speak confidently and effectively is crucial to benefit career, educational setting, and personal life (Carlin & Payne, 1998; Lucas, 2004; David, 2004). Being able to speak publicly has the potential of advancing one's career prospects as well as helping in further career aspirations (Kapur, 2020). This is because almost every job and especially the management level require some form of public speaking. Kapur (2020) again observes that "When the individuals possess efficient public speaking skills, they will be able to carry out various tasks and activities in a well-organized manner and generate the desired outcomes." This makes it a relevant skill for everybody, especially communicators or students who train in communication studies. Most of their job in within the public space and so this skill serves as an advantage for their job prospects and career.

Nearly every job requires some public-speaking skills (Verderber & Verderber, 2006). In many careers and professions, public speaking is a daily part of the job. Workplace audiences may range from a group of three managers to a huge auditorium filled with company employees. Presentations may take the form of routine meeting management, reports to company executives, training seminars within the company, or public-relations speeches to people outside the company (Bradbury, 2006). The occasions and opportunities are many, and there will be an expectation for some good on-the-job public speaking in the course of one's career (Jaffe, 2016; Lucas 2004).

The Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) as propounded by Habermas (1984, 1987) underpinned this study. Though the theory emanated from psychology, its application in communication is not out of place, on the backdrop that communication draws from a number of fields of knowledge. The foundations of TCA are relevant for public speaking especially in seeking leadership positions because it has social and political significance. Communicative



action is inclined toward understanding when using talkative (symbolic) acts such as orders, demands, terms, pleas and related speech actions.

TCA delineates communicative action as coordinated actions of interaction by social actors pursuing goals through shared understanding (with other actors), which is observed in the kind of interaction people have with others as they pursue their leadership aspirations. According to Habermas (1998) the shared understanding underlies the mutual understanding and agreement which is communicated using regular language or gestures. Edgar (2006, 21) observes that even the gestures could initiate or keep a conversation between two or more people going.

Habermas (1991, 81), outline three types of communicative action – transferring of information, establishing relations with others and enabling for expressing ourselves. More precisely, communicative action is cognitive, interactive and expressive. Leadership involves cultivating the thought to be a leader, planning what information to relay to voters, building a strong bond and relationship with them and being able to express your thoughts in a meaningful manner. This is seen in the art of being an effective public speaker to meet leadership aspirations. Communicative action is directed at achieving mutual understanding and agreement and that is precisely what aspiring leaders do with their audience. They relay their vision and seek their indulgence to win elections. Shared or mutual understanding is thus a pivot in communicative action.

Shared understanding, as expressed by (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Janson, 1999) means

inter-subjective interpretation of aspects of social reality and it occurs when the actors agree on a common understanding of what exists (the objective world of facts, events, and states of affairs), what is right and legitimate (the social world of norms), and what they prefer or desire (the internal worlds of personal experiences and emotions). Truth of facts, rightness of norms and sincerity of expressions are the validity claims assumed by communicative action.

Habermas (1991) identifies communicative action as either instrumental or strategic based on the procedure of application. When actors achieve their goals by manipulating and controlling other actors and resources in their environment, the action is called instrumental. By using technical rules, actors calculate alternative means and select the one that maximises their chances of achieving the desired goal. An action is called strategic when the actor pursues a goal by influencing the behaviour of other actors (opponents) following rules of rational choice. In communicating their vision to electorates and even getting their support to implement their projects, student leaders often follow the strategic action, though some pursue the instrumental action.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study employed a longitudinal approach spanning three years (2020 to 2022) to interview ten student leaders of the Ghana Institute of Journalism, made up of eight (8) Student Representative Council (SRC) Presidents and two Graduate Students Association of Ghana (GRASAG) Presidents. This paper forms part of a bigger project to ascertain the influential role of public speaking in student leadership. Data was purposively collected using a semi-structured interview guide. This paper is based on four questions teased out of the entire interview guide, i.e.

- 1) How did you learn or develop the art of public speaking?
- 2) What motivated you to learn to speak in public?
- 3) How beneficial has the inclusion of public speaking in the curricular at GIJ been to you?
- 4) How has your public speaking abilities influenced your choice of career?

Data was analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding, categorizing and deriving themes from an interview data set. The six-stage thematic analysis procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was the basis for analysing the data obtained in this study. The stages included familiarising oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. These stages were followed through conscientiously to help maintain the needed depth.

This study engaged two coders to manually code and identify themes independently. The two coders then met to reconcile the codes and themes, satisfying the much-needed inter-coder reliability (Cook 2012). Following the amalgamation of the codes, six themes were developed, that is, strong innate public speaking abilities, public speaking abilities developed in social institutions, public speaking ability honed by desire to be a leader, formal teaching of



public speaking important but not basis for public speaking abilities, public speaking ability influenced career choice and career advancement opportunity.

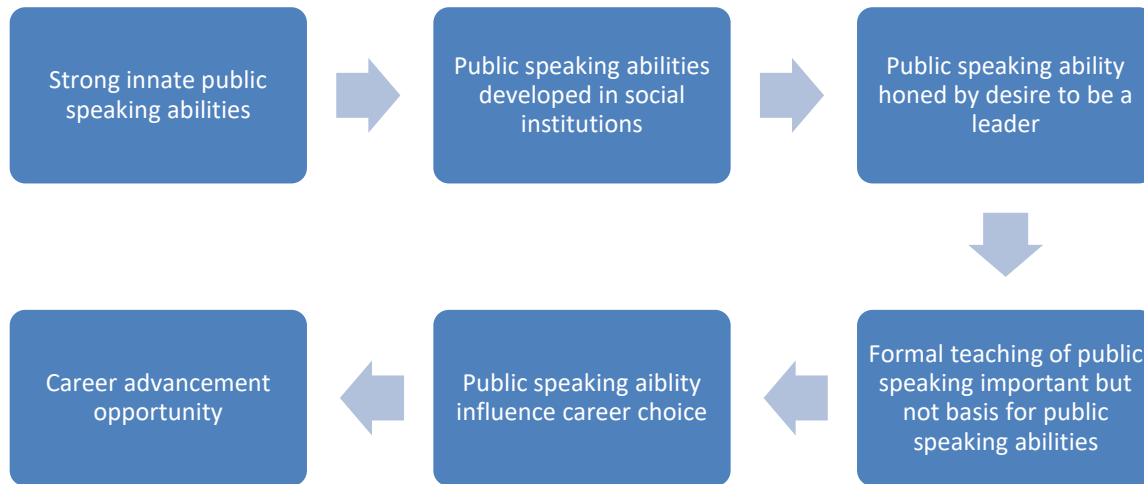


Figure 1 Public speaking development process for student leaders

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Strong innate public speaking abilities

Most of the student leaders interviewed in this study had an in-born trait to talk publicly. They were born with the natural ability to talk publicly so they had less challenges expressing themselves in public. This is confirmed by the following interview extracts:

“I did not learn public speaking through any formal training.”

“I haven’t had any training or mentorship in public speaking so for me it comes naturally.”

“I am an extrovert, so I think that also made a difference as I am able to relate well with a lot of people.”

3.2 Public speaking abilities developed in social institutions

One striking observation during the study was that all the participants had prior public speaking experiences in social institutions like churches and schools before enrolling into the Ghana Institute of Journalism and also before taking on their student leadership role. They had spoken in formal, semi-formal and informal settings during class activities and church programmes. This implies that opportunities for practicing and making speeches surround us at our schools, on the job and in our societies even before becoming student leaders (Pagne 1998, 17), suggesting that institutions of socialization such as churches, schools and pre-universities are playing active role in propelling and encouraging the act of public speaking (Nash, Crimmins & Oppresscu 2016; Lucas, 2004; Abella & Cutamura, 2019). This is demonstrated by the following interview extracts:

“I learnt the skill of speaking publicly at church...”

“I learnt the skill of public speaking from my high school when I was a member of the debating team for the school.”

“I learnt public speaking in senior high school...I performed the school’s epic poem during the 103rd anniversary.”

“GIJ equally taught me a lot.”

“I started public speaking back in Junior High School. It stemmed from summarizing books that I read to the class and other groups/clubs in the school and regularly preaching the word of God.”

3.3 Public speaking ability honed by desire to be a leader

Evidentially, the desire for leadership was found to have propelled students into honing their natural public speaking skills, compelling some of them to master their art informally through various online sessions such as on YouTube.



Some were also found to have nurtured the skill through mentors, thus taking on various relevant roles. This is indicated below:

“I entered student politics in 2016 when I was in level 200...”

“I learnt how to speak publicly through constant practice and a few tips from public speaking experts over the internet.”

“From the internet and public speakers, I get the opportunity to learn to speak.”

“I learnt that at GIJ. I learned it while serving in the various Students Representative Council (SRC) roles.”

“Also, as head prefect, some level of public speaking was required and I carried this up to the Senior High School.”

“I learnt it not in a formal way, but I did it constantly because of leadership roles I had to play at church.”

3.4 Formal teaching of public speaking important but not basis for public speaking abilities of student leaders

The findings revealed that though some of the student leaders had taken courses in public speaking as part of the curricular of their bachelor’s studies at GIJ, they were already versed in public speaking before being admitted into GIJ. The public speaking course was not a determinant as far as their public speaking abilities were concerned. This is because the course is even taken in the second semester of their final year when they had already taken up those leadership positions. The curricular therefore did not determine their ability to speak publicly. The student leaders also observed that the course in public speaking will best be learnt through a practical approach, similar to Julaihah’s (2022) observation. Though the participants admitted the importance of public speaking in the curricular due to its ability to help introverts learn the skill, one participant observed that “not everyone wants to be or will be a public speaker.” The following interview extracts give credence to the observations above:

“I learnt it not in a formal way, but did it constantly because of leadership roles I had to play at church.”

“Informally, my teachers at senior high school would give us a few guidelines that enabled us master how to speak publicly.”

“I did learn public speaking informally via the internet.”

“I initially learnt it informally. However, I also read public speaking as an academic course in the second semester of my final year during my undergraduate programme.”

“Yes, for me, I believe before my education at GIJ, I had informally picked up the art of public speaking.”

“I think it (public speaking) is a very necessary part of the training because for even those of us who were engaging in public speaking before GIJ, we added a lot to our knowledge...”

3.5 Public speaking ability influenced career choice

From the interviews, it is observed that the public speaking prowess of the student leaders influenced their career choices. Though some are yet to gain any formal employment, of those that are already employed, one is a lecturer, two work in the broadcast media space and two are communicators for some institutions, while one is currently studying law at the post graduate level.

3.6 Career advancement opportunity

From the findings, the art and skill of public speaking was found to have helped advance the career of these student leaders. All of them have found their way into the careers requiring communicating with different audiences in different industries. As at the time of the study, five of the participants were formally employed. The others were pursuing further studies or working informally. The following extracts are relevant:

“If I could not speak publicly, it would have been difficult to take the position I hold.”

“My job requires that I stand before students and sometimes Management to talk. If I had not mastered the skill, it would have been difficult to do what I do.”

My career as a media person requires speaking on radio and the art of public speaking is an advantage for me.”

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has revealed that students who nurture leadership ambitions pursue their dreams by harnessing any essential skill that will motivate the achievement of their dreams. This study provides further evidence that the art of public speaking is relevant in pursuing various career paths, thus, higher education institutions should acknowledge public speaking fear among some students and provide adequate support in oral presentation assessments. The study has



revealed how student leaders nurture leadership ambitions early in their lives and are able to work towards achieving it.

In spite of the findings made by this study that formal speaking training may not necessarily provide trainees with the required skills for speaking in different situations after school, this study observes that the participants already had leadership ambitions and were working towards their dreams before entering into higher education, thus warranting these findings. It is, however, recommended that the curriculum training in public speaking should take a significant bit of communication training and possibly be incorporated from level 100 to 400. Additionally, students should be provided with the platform that will encourage frequent presentations as part of the training process to augment their capabilities and reduce apprehension. This is to address the observation by some participants that some students shy away from public speaking because of apprehension and they may not want to pursue careers that bring them to the lime light in spite of their training as communication specialists. Finally, the quality of public speaking training should be tailored to meet the needs of different career opportunities (See Dansieh, Owusu & Seidu, 2021) since graduates find themselves in diverse career paths.

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