

## **Evaluation of JR Briscoe's Teaching - COMM 2381: Oral Communication**

**January 27, 2014 – 10:20am to 11:15am**

*Submitted by Prof. Antonio de Velasco*

### **Narrative**

I visited JR class for a session in which they were covering the notion of “communication anxiety” and discussing ways to deal with such anxiety. For starters, my sense is that simply JR’s demeanor – calm, self-deprecating, reassuring – goes a long way toward putting his students into a position whereby they can, indeed, be less anxious about public speaking. This demeanor was on display minutes before class was scheduled to begin. It was a Monday morning, and he was already engaged with students in small talk about the weekend and so on. The class, too, was apparently full at the start when JR distributed his attendance sheet. I noticed no late arrivals.

Before moving to the central lesson, JR previewed a coming quiz and had the students repeat to him exactly what was to be covered on the assessment. (He later did this same thing when the class wrapped up, giving the lesson itself a symmetry and purpose tied to the course more broadly.) As a lead in to his lesson on anxiety, as a way to “put us in the mindset” (his words) for the lesson, JR used a humorous video clip (circulated widely in the fall 2010) of a small-town politician making his case for office in an extreme (and yet instructive) manner that suggested some “communication anxiety” issues on his part. After the class watched (most of) the clip, JR opened the floor with the observation that the speaker seemed to display symptoms of communication anxiety that are addressable but that he had failed to address in ways that could rescue his speech from its clear drawbacks. What were these symptoms? Answering this question was key to understanding the relevance of the clip to the lesson, and JR used a visual argument – via Prezi – to give his students the proper structure/vocabulary to investigate and reflect. He also brought up a timely and relevant scene – the Grammy awards ceremony from the previous night – to create an opening for students to bring their own judgment and lives to bear on things. Just as important as the symptoms of communication anxiety are the causes. JR did his best, I believe, when he began to explore these causes in the general sense – fear of failure, fear of being made fun of, etc. – that covers anxiety writ large, and then moved to identify specific sources of anxiety vis-à-vis the actual course. This move allowed JR to both “normalize” speech anxiety – since its roots are like those of fears we face every day – and to raise the issue of grading with this students. That is, since communication anxiety in a course is likely associated with fears of failing the course, JR deftly moved to reassure students that he was not out to fail them. Instead, he explained, his main focus was on their efforts to improve and not on perfection. In line with this reassurance, JR then listed and elaborated on a set of techniques – e.g., reality testing, relaxation, cognitive restructuring – that could help students to cope with their fears of speaking. Seeing such coping as part of a process integral to the very integrity and effectiveness of public speaking, JR then finished his lesson with a highly assonant section titled “Preparation Precedes Power.” I think this worked very well, because it yoked together the more “therapeutic” sensibility of minimizing anxiety with direct attention on questions of effectiveness and rhetorical power. Moreover, JR expanded the notion of “preparation” beyond getting ready to give a speech, and into the more fundamental aspect of how training/experience are each essential features of any effort to accomplish most *anything* worthwhile. Students responded well to the connection, so aptly captured by JR in the phrase “you have to earn it,” between forethought/practice/focus and the conditions of success in any field. Once he concluded this section, and class was over, JR previewed again the coming quiz and remained to answer questions.

### **Evaluation and Summary**

The class I observed JR teaching recently was impressive in several respects. High on the list of impressive qualities was certainly the ease with which JR related to his students. Consider that this was just the fourth 50-minute session of the semester. And yet JR was already familiar with several names. Clearly, he had worked to recognize his students’ individuality and to make them feel included. He not only took questions from students eager to participate, he also called on more reticent students to solicit their thoughts. My sense is that the fine rate of student participation in this course was a partial outcome of these practices and how quickly his students picked up on his style. JR is patient in his questions, he does not rush students. (This patience paid off at one

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point when a student who had yet to speak spoke up during a longish pause.) JR looks them in the eye, and wisely waits for them to collect their thoughts. This is a smart move that he seems well-adapted to as an instructor. Second, I think that JR used technology in exemplary fashion. His prezi was simple and to the point, while connected directly to the course textbook. It was not distracting, it did not dominate his own presence. Third, and last, I think that connected to his rapport with students is JR's knack for trying to meet them "where they are." Several times I picked up on JR making an effort to know his students – e.g., three of them were intercollegiate athletes and he brought this up – and then using that knowledge to add value/focus to the lesson. This is a strong rhetorical skill that JR would do well to build upon.

Let me, however, offer two comments about things that call for attention.

- JR should try to be more mobile as he teaches. He seemed tied to the front of the classroom
- I think that JR could do more to harness and catalyze his existing rapport with students. One way to do this would be to make more of an effort to put their responses to his questions/prompts into a structure. Though JR was good at asking and answering questions, he could have done more to use these answers as grist for his lesson. As they offered their commentary, I waited for JR to do more with what he was given. For example, he might have listed their responses on the board (hard to do, given the classroom setup.) Or, for another example, he might have tried harder to connect/contrast one student's comments with another as a way to move his lesson along.

Overall, however, JR displays notable strengths as a university instructor. He is both efficient in his work and welcoming in his attitude. He conveys the importance of the material, while still making the classroom an open space for interaction and discovery.