

## Going Hybrid When History Forces Your Hand

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Teaching takes on a whole new dimension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the opening up of new possibilities and the creation of new challenges. Without the capabilities of technology, I could not have kept my senior-level communications course on schedule and still have presented at an important national meeting. After all, I needed to be in two places at the same time.

Ironically, I had been asked to give a presentation on supervising online faculty, my primary responsibility. I was teaching a night class because of my long-held belief that administrators need to teach at least once or twice a year to retain their credibility with full-time faculty. Therefore, if I was going to miss a class meeting to be at a conference, I darn well better have a suitable alternate activity. I teach workshops developing effective hybrid and blended classes; now I would have to do so to the same standard that I would expect of my faculty.

Ordinarily, having a Tuesday-Thursday night class in Daytona Beach and a Tuesday through Thursday meeting in Orlando wouldn't seem challenging. I could just commute the 45 miles every day, but both audiences would suffer; either there would be a fatigued speaker at the conference or a fatigued professor in class. However, the first Tuesday of the conference was not just any Tuesday, but Inauguration Day for President Barack Obama. Like any other college or university instructor, I would be kicking myself later if I didn't take advantage of this important moment in history.

Fortunately, my course, "Media Relations II: Crisis Communications," uses the Presidency in its case studies, so this was easily incorporated. I also use a site in our Blackboard-based learning management system to communicate outside class share extra resources, post supplemental materials, and collect assignments. With the schedule conflict looming, I looked for a way to develop something substantive to cover my absence on the evening of January 20<sup>th</sup>.

Early in the course, I set the stage for the work to follow by discussing how to read and brief a case study, reviewing different communication theories we might apply, and noting how one's non-crisis credibility creates a reserve of goodwill to draw upon in the future. Among the theories I present, I habitually include Aristotle's rhetoric. Millennia later, it is still a sound tool in understanding public address, so I posted to the course site a PowerPoint lecture detailing Aristotle's three proofs (*logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*) and five canons (memory, invention, delivery, arrangement, and style). We had a lively in-class discussion about the examples I provided of each, drawing from Kennedy, King, Reagan, Churchill, Lincoln, and even Lou Gehrig's famous farewell at Yankee Stadium.

In lieu of attending class on Tuesday night, the students were asked to watch President Obama's inaugural address and then go to the class website to complete the following assignment:

This is a three-part assignment.

First, find an example from President Obama's inaugural address in which he used one of Aristotle's three proofs. Give the example, state which proof, and why.

Second, find an example from President Obama's inaugural address in which he used one of Aristotle's five canons. Give the example, state which canon, and why.

Third, find an example in which he made a statement that was designed to manage an issue in advance of a potential future crisis. Give the example and state what the crisis might be.

Post your 300-word essay to the discussion board designated for this assignment. Feel free to comment on what your classmates noticed. We'll debrief in Thursday's class.

From my hotel room that evening, I also posted a website announcement and sent a class-wide email that provided a link to CNN.com, where a video replay and full text of the speech was available.

### **If They Can Do It, So Can I**

During the Tuesday welcome luncheon, a large screen showed CNN's coverage of the inauguration ceremonies. I had already resigned myself to watching this historic moment on the web later to prepare for Thursday night's debriefing in class, but this would be better. I was also recording the ceremonies on my digital video recorder at home, yet another time-shifting technology, so I could make a quick DVD-R to take to class, if necessary.

With coffee, dessert, and the backside of my Google map printout of driving directions to the conference center, I made notes on the inaugural address as if I were doing the homework myself. While my students were only asked to find an example of one proof and one canon, I needed to find at least one (hopefully more) for all eight items. Plus, I needed to make as many side observations as I could. That's a tall order for a speech that only ran 18 minutes. Fortunately, I was a newspaper reporter before I was a communications professor and those skills kicked back in.

As an aside, when I got my first job "as a mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper" in 1978, we were still pulling tickertape for stock quotes and there were teletype machines hammering out wire service stories from the AP that we marked up with a blue pencil. The editor who hired me was old school and could cover a county commission meeting on the back of his electric bill. I feel fortunate to have straddled the changes in technology so that I know how to function with and without it.

In the new President's speech, which was pretty sober and had very few built-in applause lines, there were a few nuggets I was hoping my students would find. Through this warping of time and space, I could imagine that we were listening together. As I wrote down "patchwork heritage" as an example of invention (for coining a phrase as Churchill had done with "Iron Curtain"), I rooted for my students to hear it the same way.

Likewise, I used the way he rejected the logical false dilemmas of choices that come in only two parts as an example of *logos*. In saying that government is not a choice between large and small but a judgment of what works, Obama laid the question on its side. He did

the same with the dilemma of security or liberty, and of whether the free market is a force for good or evil. Logical reasoning is one of our general education standards, so I expected my class to spot this one.

For the third part of the assignment, the President may as well have been throwing slow-pitch softball. From the opening, he stated that the nation faced a series of crises: economic, military, healthcare, education, energy, and in particular national will and resolve.

While I placed no stricture against it, my students would also have the opportunity to have Obama's speech analyzed for them by innumerable pundits and scholars more worthy than myself. These analysts may not have explicitly employed the Aristotelian model, but the pieces might be found. I tell my classes that, in order to be good media counselors someday, they must also be voracious media consumers. They might as well start now.

### **Nurturing the Nature of the Medium**

During the luncheon, the host remarked that the inauguration was a teachable moment. I predicted to myself that this phrase would be used more than once, just as the phrase a "tough act to follow" would be said by speakers afterwards about Obama. That was like predicting sunrise. However, I would not have predicted the number of potential bonus insights about distance learning, especially via webcasts like the one used to show the inauguration, even though it was only one-way communication.

On a prosaic note, from time to time during the event, there would be new email notifications popping up on the video screen. The speech was being run via a laptop into a projector and the user had not closed Outlook before starting the webcast. These pop-ups caused a light and amused murmur around the banquet hall when they happened. To me, the pop-ups did two things. First, they were a reminder of the medium, which we always hope will be invisible. Second, they were a reminder of the 24/7/365 ceaseless nature of modern life. I try to have at least one computer-free day a week. I am not always successful, but the goal is to be out-of-touch and to refresh myself, so that I have something to give the next time I am hooked back into the matrix.

When Pastor Rick Warren gave the invocation on the big screen and said, "Let us pray," my head reflexively bowed. My peripheral vision picked up a number of other heads in the banquet hall that did the same. This audience participation was not unexpected. However, I did not expect that the group in the banquet hall would break into applause at some lines of President Obama's speech. Of course, a little spontaneous reaction could be understood, but to also have applause in the banquet hall for the classical music performance featuring Itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma was a bit too much in the moment for me. Especially upon finding out afterwards that they were playing along to a prerecorded track because the bitter cold in D.C. would have knocked the violin and cello out of tune.

### **Closing the Loop**

When we met again as a class to discuss the exercise, the first thing I wanted to do was get into the context of the assignment. With his methods of fundraising, his ground campaign of organizing, and his web video addresses to the nation (soon-to-be supplanting FDR's radio

“Fireside Chats”), Obama is the first “Internet President,” so it seemed especially appropriate that this should be a hybrid assignment.

I asked the class how many saw the speech live and only a third raised their hands, one of whom saw it on an airplane. She reported there was live applause in flight, too. Interestingly enough, there didn’t seem to be much difference in the items observed in the speech. Much of that I attribute to the use of the same rubric, but some observations were different—where one observer placed an aspect under “delivery,” such as Obama’s deliberate use of pauses, I had put it under “style,” seeing it as similar to Frank Sinatra’s distinctive phrasing. The lenses we teach can still be aimed differently. Even when we think we are using a shared perspective it may still be subject to interpretation.

What was most gratifying in this whole experience was that, instead of lashing together some busywork, it was actually easier to assemble something coherent with high expectations in a hybrid format than it might have been otherwise. The source material was ubiquitous on the internet, course members could stay in contact through our website, my lecture materials were available as a perfectly posted reference and not as imperfectly transcribed notes, and all could participate equally (dare I say small-D democratically?) in a discussion of the events of the day.

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