Chapter 15
Understanding Context

from
PUBLIC SPEAKING: AN IDEA PERSPECTIVE
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General Educational Objectives: This chapter helps you to:
1. appreciate the importance of the speech context in understanding audiences.
2. understand Hollingsworth's classification of audiences.
3. understand key factors of context.
3. use speech context to improve your communication.

Specific Testable Objectives: As a result of studying this chapter, you should be able to:
1. list in order, define, provide examples and/or identify Hollingsworth's five audience types.
2. explain how contextual information might be obtained and how it might be used.
3. list, define and provide examples of factors of social context..
4. explain significant considerations from environmental context..

Understanding the way audiences think is the most important preparation for a speech. However, when you haven't worked with the audience previously, the most important information that may be readily available to you is the context in which you are going to be speaking. Context considerations can be divided into social and environmental.

In terms of social context, a classical system from Hollingworth provides a useful way of looking at audiences. He classified audiences based on what he termed **orientation**, a complex social variable of which the group's purpose is a major consideration. His system classifies audiences into five categories. Table 17-1 provides an overview of these categories with examples of groups that are likely to be included in each.

As we move down the audiences, the audience becomes more focused and unified in purpose. *Pedestrian* audiences only become audiences when the speaker gains the attention of enough individuals to justify the speech. *Passive* audiences come to hear one or more speakers but have little commitment to even listen to the speaker much less use the information from the speech. *Selected* audience supports the group's general cause, but come without specific plans to participate in a course of action. *Concerted* audiences are united and willing to act in support of the cause of the group. *Organized* audiences come with specific expectations for what they can contribute to the group effort.

TABLE 17-1
Hollingworth's Types of Audiences

TYPE AUDIENCE	TYPICAL EXAMPLES
Pedestrian	Mall pitch person/Street preacher
Passive	College-day speakers
Selected	Sunday-morning sermons
Concerted	Political-party rally
Organized	High-level sales department session

Obviously, the heaviest burden falls on the speaker in attracting a pedestrian audience. The speaker must (1) gain attention, (2) generate interest, (3) create a positive impression, (4) justify a commitment and (5) provide directions before the audience is likely to act in support of the speaker's cause. Speakers before passive audience must do the last four of these five items. For selected audiences, the speaker can start with creating a positive impression. Concerted audiences require only the last two items and organized audiences need direction at most.

Hollingworth's audience orientation is anchored by the audience's purpose, a principle factor in the social-context factors. The orientation also reflects other of these factors.

Factors of Social Context

Purposes

Audience purposes most definitely relate to why the people are gathered at the specific time of the speech. In most cases, the group also has broader purposes that should be considered. Ideally, the specific purpose will be clear and focused, as with the last two of Hollingworth's types of audiences. Where this is the case, this purpose will be openly stated; thus, easy for the speaker to know. This would be true in "special occasion" speeches such as roasts, graduations and memorial services.

It is best when the thesis of the speech is relevant to the specific purpose of the audience. If the speaker has agenda beyond those specific to the occasion, it is generally best to save those for another day. When, this alternative agenda is so compelling as to not be shelved for a time, the best option is to place its discussion in the middle of the speech after linking it to the occasion. It is also advisable to make whatever reference possible to more general purposes of the group.

More general purposes of established groups are not difficult to find. Usually members of a group are proud to discuss the purposes of its members with you if you ask. They will usually tell you how unified the membership is in accomplishing these goals and how much they are disputed. Where specific

purposes are more ambiguous, it is wise to reference general group purposes that contribute to your goals.

Not only are group purposes easy to learn, they relate to cognitive factors. Social context is a major factor in motivation, as discussed in Chapter 13. Attitudes can also be safely inferred from the group's purposes. For example, it is a safe conclusion that a garden club will be for recycling and other environmentally friendly actions; a band-boosters group will favor issues that advance young people and even bond issues for education.

Cohesion

When members tell you that they are unified in purpose, they are saying that the group is cohesive. The more cohesive the members of a group, the more likely they are to think and behave the same on a particular issue. Generally, it is easier to speak to a cohesive audience because you can speak to the group as you would one person. Success with a cohesive group can be very rewarding; by the same token, failure is likely to be complete.

Cohesive groups tend to comprise the last two audiences discussed above. Thus, they demand less of speakers who support the group's causes. They are less likely to invite speakers who do not. Typically, the advice is to avoid concentrated and organized audiences with whom you disagree. When they can not be avoided, it is best to ask of them only that they listen to your viewpoint with an open and reasonable ear.

While cohesive groups may be simpler in terms of preparation for the speech, less cohesive ones may provide opportunities for increasing unity in a desirable direction. If a majority or even a large percent of the audience is sympathetic to your cause, you can direct your message to that group even praising them/their behaviors as models. Even if only a minority agrees with you, you can asks of the group to be receptive to the views of this minority and to give a fair hearing of their (and your) viewpoint.

In situations where you deal with an audience on a regular basis, you quickly become aware of similarity/dissimilarity in apparel, actions and even content of conversations. The more similarity you obverse, the safer you are in concluding that the group is cohesive.

Sponsorship

Usually, sponsorship for a forum is provided by the organization of the audience. Schools sponsor school functions, social groups invite speakers to their meetings, etc. In that case, consideration of sponsorship corresponds to the other factors. However, where sponsorship is different, the speaker must ask what is the relationship between the two organizations. Sometimes, the sponsorship is provided by the speaker's organization. In that case, it is important that the speaker is aware of how the audience views the sponsor (see also Chapter 12). If you as speaker aren't part of the sponsoring organization, the nature of the sponsoring organization will provide additional information for understanding both the audience and the event of the speech. You may ask what does the sponsor seek to gain in funding this event. Why are the audience

members attending? How was this event arranged? Answers to these and similar questions provide insights into the motives and attitudes of the audience. Take the DARE Program as one example. Police forces typically provide the funding for the program and schools provide the audiences. Both parties see a need, but this need may or may not be shared by the students that constitute the audience. Knowing the history leading up to the event will help the officers making the presentation to anticipate their reception in the classroom.

Factors of Environmental Context

As a speaker, I like to visit the arena of the speech before the speech. While mainly this is psychological, it does also provide information for analysis. Two environmental factors are often helpful:

Size

Room or arena size tells you something of the anticipated size of the audience for first presentations to the particular audience. For meetings in halls and other arranged facilities, the anticipated attendance tends to predict actual attendance.   When fortunate enough to be shown a large venue, I tend to ask the escort where people sit, which typical provides additional information.

Once I was asked to give a speech to a district meeting of teachers. I anticipated a sizeable audience given the meeting was mandatory and the district large. On arrival, I was shown to a normal sized classroom. I quickly adjusted my expectations – and the planned presentation. I did speak to all the teachers, but within small groups, for a shorter period of time.

Size extends to the speaking area. Recently Sam Cox and I spoke as part of a panel. The room comfortably seated the audience, but the stage was very small. Seeing the speaking area in advance permitted us to make adjustments.

Comfort

The more comfortable your audience is (typically) the better. When the audience is uncomfortable, they don't listen as well or want to listen as long. Where conditions are extremely uncomfortable, it is wise to take any action possible to reduce the discomfort. Clearly, the size, closeness and padding in seats are items to note. In addition is room temperature. Lighting and outside noise should also be considered.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered analysis of an audience based on context. In social context, we looked at types of audience based on Hollingworth's conception of *orientation*. This system also provides an idea of the demands on the speaker for each audience type. We then considered three factors of social context and two factors of environmental context.

Key Sources:

Ellingsworth, H. W. & Clevenger, T. (1967). *Speech and social action*: *A strategy of oral communication*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hollingsworth, L. L (1935). The psychology of the audience, NY: American Book Company.

Holtzman, P. D. (1970). *The psychology of speakers' audiences* Glenview, IL" Scott, Foresman & Co.