ANATOMY OF A SOAPBOX SPEAKER

Even the smallest stage can dramatically change how students see themselves in the world. By fostering face-to-face dialogue and better forms of public debate, university teachers can help promote responsible citizenship, both in the classroom and beyond. Here are just a few of the qualities nurtured in students when they are given a public platform and encouraged to speak their minds:

- **Agency**: Soapbox speaking is a form of role playing that requires students to cast themselves as confident, impassioned orators. In committing themselves to this role, they get to experience the very intellectual and personal freedom synonymous with empowerment.

- **Outspokeness**: As a theatrical prop that is strongly associated with speaking up (and out), the soapbox can actually help reluctant speakers find their voices. One student remarked: “I feel like talking up here. And I feel like I have something to say.”

- **Creativity**: Soapboxes and creativity go hand-in-hand, as the platform requires students to come up with new and original ways to make the soapbox a meaningful part of their speech. Entrances, exits, and body movement are all excellent opportunities for creative expression.

- **Sensitivity**: Whenever students are encouraged to participate in kinaesthetic learning, it’s essential that they also reflect on the issue of accessibility. Doing so reminds them that not all great speeches have been delivered by the able-bodied (see, for example, Stephen Hawking’s ted talk).

- **Courage**: Speaking extemporaneously from a soapbox can feel like jumping out of an airplane and searching for a parachute on the way down. And yet students become infinitely better at connecting with an audience when they have the courage to try.

- **Control**: An excellent cure for nervous feet, the soapbox requires students to speak from a fixed point, having planned themselves in one place. They learn to convey energy primarily through their upper bodies and voices, which helps them become more versatile communicators.

- **Respect**: The contentious nature of soapbox speaking exposes students to beliefs that may run contrary to their own. By listening to each other, and by engaging in civil debate, students gain a greater sense of what it means to get along in a pluralistic society.

- **Perspective**: Nuanced as they expose students to a course of contemporary issues affecting communities both near and far, the sense of perspective made possible by soapbox speeches has the potential to engender greater compassion in speakers and audiences alike.

TIPS FOR USING A SOAPBOX IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- **Set the Stage**: By providing a quick history of soapbox speaking, you’ll help your students imagine themselves into the role. Keep in mind, too, that fewer and fewer of today’s students are familiar with public oratory, and so some added context is essential to their success.

- **Keep Things Moving**: A lot can be said in two minutes or less, especially when a simple problem-solution pattern is used effectively. By keeping your students’ speeches short, you’ll make it easier for them to address their topics extemporaneously while also saving time for questions afterwards.

- **Get an Early Start**: If you assign a soapbox speech mid-semester, you’ll find that the talks students give later in the term will be more forthright and concise. Soapbox speaking is, in this sense, great cross-training for other types of presentations that students are often asked to give.

- **Have Them Sign It**: Ask your students to sign their soapbox at the end of the term. Not only is it rewarding to have a record of their names, but you’ll also make them feel like they’ve been a part of something bigger than themselves, something tangible and lasting, which, of course, they have.

FURTHER READING: