

# **Worshipful Company of Educators**

## **Gresham College Discussion Evening:**

### **Equipping young people with the confidence and skills to speak out**

On Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October, some two dozen Educators and guests assembled at Gresham College to hear Elaine Powell introduce a discussion on the importance of promoting effective communication among our young people. The Chair for the evening was Court Assistant Pam Taylor, who has for seven years run the Educators' Public Speaking Competition for 14-16 year-olds from London schools. She began by explaining that the Company's Education Committee had embraced the topic of promoting communication skills as something which should be a central concern of education, since the ability to speak well in a variety of contexts was of great value to all young people and was also a key part of the work of inspiring and motivating the young. In the group present were a number of people who were prominent in the field of communication, public speaking and debate, including strong representation from the English Speaking Union (ESU), an international leader in the field, which focuses on the power of the English language medium as a global means of communication.

It was a pleasure to welcome Elaine Powell, whose own breadth of experience of working with young people in and around London made her admirably qualified to speak about the topic. In particular, Elaine had demonstrated in her career of working with some of the most challenging young people the power of successful communication in transforming lives. Her biographical details indicated that, over the past three years, Elaine had been an associate trainer with Speakers Trust, who deliver the Jack Petchey "Speak Out" Challenge to over 17,000 students a year in London and Essex and that she herself had taught well over 5,000 young people, including children in primary schools, helping them to build their confidence and speaking skills and focusing on content, delivery, technique and practice.

Elaine Powell started by emphasising her commitment to 'turning speakers into great speakers', and setting out how in her career she had become inspired to work in the field of communication - particularly by seeing the results achieved with excluded groups of young people, including boys in secure centres with extreme emotional and behavioural problems, for whom speaking had had clear therapeutic benefits. It was not only educators who perceived these benefits: employers consistently rated communication skills, along with leadership skills and teamwork, as among the qualities they valued most highly. Speaking well was a matter of the 'three Cs' of communication, confidence and courage.

In view of the centrality of communication in education, she argued that the recent changes in requirements for the General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE) in English, with

regard to Speaking and Listening, were likely to have the very unfortunate effect of downgrading the place of oral communication and giving even more prominence to written testing. This seemed to be a case of the assessment tail wagging the curriculum dog: the fact that achieving reliable ways of assessing speaking was difficult was surely no reason for threatening to undermine the valuable opportunities English provided for developing young people's spoken language. It was therefore all the more important that opportunities be found for encouraging young people to speak out, as was being done by the competitions which were now being run by a number of organisations, such as the Jack Petchey Foundation Awards with which she had been associated.

Such initiatives had underlined that success in speaking transcended boundaries of schooling, and could be attained by students from all backgrounds. All students deserved to have the quality of their speaking challenged and improved (laziness, cliché and 'fillers' such as 'like' often acted as barriers to effective communication). In the words of Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world".

A vigorous discussion followed Elaine Powell's thought-provoking exposition, with topics ranging far and wide. There was debate over the effect of the 'Gove proposals', with some speakers advocating that developing spoken communication should be seen as a responsibility of the whole curriculum: subjects such as science offered opportunities for speaking just as much as did English or languages. Some saw the current climate in which young people were growing up as especially inimical to good speaking: social media networks were predominantly instruments of written, screen-based communication, even when that communication took place between those in the same room. The dominance of the written word was aggravated by what some saw as the further debasement of language through such developments as textspeak, with its inherent reductionism (although some detected creative possibilities in the newer forms of communication). A further point was that the widespread use of mobile phones, predominantly for communicating orally with friends, encouraged speaking in a highly idiomatic, telegrammatic register which did not necessarily transfer well to more formal contexts requiring sustained construction.

What was generally agreed was that the role of schools and also of organisations for the young is a vital one, if the youth of today is to achieve success in spoken communication. There was an argument for preferring the term 'communication skills' and 'speaking in public' to public speaking, because it emphasised a widely applicable set of competences. It was noted that some schools, and perhaps especially independent and grammar schools, have a long tradition of encouraging speaking out, both by such forums as debating societies and public speaking competitions and by inviting skilled speakers to address students. This tradition can easily exacerbate the educational and even career advantages accruing to those attending such schools, which often have a strongly positive 'culture of communication', and hence it is essential that all schools, especially those serving disadvantaged communities, should offer stimulating opportunities to their students to develop and practise their oral skills. Teachers from the schools present offered suggestions for how this challenge might be taken on. The comment was made that 'speaking in public' was a wider and more fundamental concept, perhaps, than 'public speaking' as somewhat narrowly interpreted at times. It was also suggested that effective communication was a matter of combining style with substance: some speakers had acquired

ample confidence but without the content to make what they said compelling. Others had excellent ideas and the linguistic subtlety to express them, but failed to convince through a lack of clear articulation and projection.

In thanking those present for their fascinating contributions, Pam Taylor reluctantly brought matters to a close at the sound of time's wingèd chariot, expressing the group's strong appreciation of Elaine's words and the ideas these had generated, and commenting that this was not the end but the beginning of an important discussion. A number of those present, including the speaker, repaired to the adjacent Melton Mowbray establishment for further healthy discussion and perhaps marginally less healthy pies.

DW Taylor  
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