

Submission to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy

From: Brian Jenner, independent speechwriter and founder of the European Speechwriter Network (writing in a personal capacity)

Argument: Teaching young people public speaking skills gives them leadership capabilities, helps them build strong relationships and maintain sound mental health.

Summary: *To gather my evidence for the committee, I have worked with the theory of 'bright spots'. I had a quality oracy education. Thanks to my education and involvement with several institutions, I have had many opportunities to develop my public skills and grow my talents. I will explain how this has benefited me at different life stages and in different settings and how I have seen it change others. I prefer to share what works rather than analyse what doesn't.*

Segments – 1) Education 2) Graduation 3) Public speaking training in London 4) Self-employment as a speechwriter 5) Business failure 6) Public speaking as a networking tool 7) Creation of a new business 8) Value of a training in public speaking

1) Education

I was educated at Magdalen College School in Oxford. There, my imagination was fired by stories of the former pupils and masters of the school. Notably Cardinal Wolsey, William Tyndale and Thomas More.

When Helen Castor made a documentary for BBC4: *A Renaissance Education, The Schooling of Thomas More's Daughter in 2011*, it was no coincidence that she went to my school to film a Latin lesson. MCS, along with Eton, Winchester, Ipswich School and St Paul's, pioneered the teaching of rhetoric. In retrospect, there was still a trace of that in my time.

Between 1980 and 1987, I did Latin and Russian to 'O' level, French, German and English to 'A' level. I learnt by heart poems by Larkin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and WH Auden to take part in competitions, which involved performing in front of the whole school. I also learnt Goethe's *Erlkönig*, in German, for a competition. I can still terrorise my children by quoting it at bedtime.

I took part in school plays and debates and I wrote for school magazines. I studied, in depth, *Othello* and *Henry IV Part one and Two*. And Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I got my 'A' in English thanks to the Argo spoken word cassettes of these texts, which I bought in Blackwell's and listened on my Walkman. I also had the chance to attend performances of the plays we studied at the Oxford Playhouse and in London theatres.

I then won a place to study French and German at Brasenose College, Oxford.

When I got to university, I became a member of the Oxford Union. I went to lots of debates. I saw the young Michael Gove, Ed Vaizey and Boris Johnson in action - I could have predicted then that within 25 years they would be top politicians. And, indeed, they were. Simon Hoare and Jeremy Quinn were less likely to make it, and Jacob Rees-Mogg was too eccentric to ever be selected to be an MP - but I was wrong there.

I saw Michael Heseltine, Paddy Ashdown and Enoch Powell speak in debates. I went to listen to Geoffrey Howe, Roger Scruton and Keith Joseph and many more.

Despite my private school education, I found the Union debating culture very intimidating. I was not confident enough to speak.

In 1989 I did a year abroad in Strasbourg teaching English in a lycée. It was a momentous year to spend in Europe. Through connections I made by attending the Anglican Church in Strasbourg, I was able to get a tour of the Council of Europe and attend some plenary sessions.

I left university with a 3rd class degree, which made me ineligible for graduate recruitment schemes.

I wanted to become a journalist.

2) Graduation

When I graduated David Daniell was organising the Tyndale Quincentenary. He published a biography of Tyndale, as well as his New and Old Testament translations with modern spelling. I was intrigued by the bits in the biography about Tyndale's school days and I learnt about the teaching of rhetoric and the influence of Erasmus.

I went to the Bodleian Library and photocopied Erasmus's *De Copia* and read it. *De Copia* was a textbook that Shakespeare and Tyndale would have used in school.

What interested me were the competitive rhetorical exercises. The approach was to learn composition by repetitive tasks. Pupils translated Latin into English and then from English back into Latin (without the original). Poetry was translated into prose and vice versa. Pupils had to find over 100 ways to say, *I was delighted to receive your letter*. I could see a link between the art of translation and creative writing.

My mother was a minister of religion. She was nervous about public speaking. While I was back living at home, she took me along to a meeting of a Gavel Club in Springhill Prison. It was for the rehabilitation of prisoners. The Gavel Club used the methodology of Toastmasters International. Toastmasters International started in California during the Depression. It was formed to give people the chance to develop their public speaking skills. It is now a worldwide movement, especially popular in Asia over the past 20 years.

In 1993 I attended a five-month journalism course in Hastings. We were trained in news writing, newspaper production, editing and media law. At the end of it I still couldn't get a job.

I decided to move to London from Bournemouth without a job. In the long term I wanted to go into politics. So I was determined to learn to speak in public.

3) Public speaking training in London

One of my first acts when I arrived in London was to join a Toastmasters Club in Marble Arch.

Members included a former MP, the wife of a famous aristocrat, business owners and non-native speakers of English. The standard was very intimidating, although the ethos was very supportive.

There are two halves to any meeting. The first half involves impromptu speaking (table topics) the second half prepared speeches from a manual. Meetings take place twice a month and last for about two and a half hours.

After three meetings, I plucked up the courage to do my first table topic I was invited to come to the podium to speak without preparation on Mars Bars. I was paralysed with fear and had to sit down after 15 seconds. I still remembered how the chairman quipped that it wasn't that difficult.

However, I stuck with it and quickly improved. At one point I attended meetings across London several times a week.

The organisation had an international speech contest and a humorous speech contest I took part in.

When the internet came along in 1998, I'd still failed to get a foothold in journalism. I applied to the Prince's Trust to get a loan to start my own business.

4) Self-employment as a speechwriter

I'd had four years in Toastmasters to learn my craft, so I set up a website offering my services as a speechwriter.

The company secretary at BP was attending Toastmasters and he saw me speak. They were looking for a speechwriter for the Chairman and he found my website.

I got a 12-month contract with BP to write speeches for Peter Sutherland and other top BP Executives.

I met Mr Sutherland on a few occasions. He showed me his commonplace book which he stored good one-liners for his conference speeches.

Aged 30, I'd found the most congenial and best paid work I'd had to date.

I joined the Conservative Party and met Elizabeth Truss when she was rising in Tory politics. I advised her to go to Toastmasters. And she did. She did the leadership and communication programme of ten prepared speeches. She's been a Cabinet minister since 2014. For myself, I learnt that expressing trenchant views as a young member of an Association did not endear me to my Conservatives colleagues.

After a year my work for BP came to an end. I was then stuck by how to get more clients.

I advertised in *Private Eye* and had the challenge of writing wedding speeches, birthday speeches and anniversary speeches. Through my work I got to write for investment bankers, entrepreneurs and one or two celebrities. This didn't always pay the bills and in 2003, aged 35, when I realised I was never going to own a property in London, I moved back to Bournemouth.

5) Business Failure

In Bournemouth I had to go back to being a temp - the way I earned my living in the early years in London. It took a year before I was ready to rebuild my speechwriting business.

I joined the Conservatives in Bournemouth and I was briefly a candidate in the local council elections. I soon fell out with them and the experience taught me that I was not cut out for politics.

6) Public speaking as a networking tool

I got involved in the Bournemouth Literary Festival. Bournemouth is culturally the polar opposite to Oxford. It became painfully obvious that nobody was interested in literary events in Bournemouth.

I set up a group called BoMoCreatives - to bring together those 'arty types' who did live in the conurbation and build an audience for the festival.

The thinking behind it was to encourage creatives to use their skills for business. It worked. We had about 30 people at each meeting. Entry fee include a coffee, a speaker and a light buffet. There was a point in the meeting where every person had to introduce themselves in 30 seconds and explain what their talent was.

They hated that bit. But I persuaded most of them to do it. The meetings ran every month for two-and-a-half years. It was then taken over by someone else who abolished the speaking slot. Soon after, the meetings lost their shape and people started to drift away. It fizzled out within a year.

In 2006 I started a blog about speechwriting, which caught the attention the organiser of a speechwriting conference in Washington DC.

In 2008, I was invited to the conference in the Mayflower Hotel to give a presentation on using humour in speeches.

I'd never met another speechwriter in person before. Here were over 200 speechwriters from around the world in one room, including distinguished speechwriters from the White House and corporate America.

I delivered my presentation. It went well. The speech was reprinted in the American publication *Vital Speeches of the Day*, because the editor was in the audience.

This was the beginning of many friendships and commercial collaborations with American speechwriters which continue to this day.

Given my event organisation experience with BoMoCreatives, it occurred to me to copy the format of the American conference for a UK audience.

7) Creation of a new business

Through my blog, I had got to know Max Atkinson, a former speechwriter to Paddy Ashdown. Max wrote a book called *Our Master's Voices* which described the techniques of political orators.

They used the techniques in a *World in Action* programme to train a woman with no previous experience in public speaking to speak at a party conference. Max argued that there is a language of public speaking. When you speak in public, you have to translate your messages into that language.

The layman can apply these techniques that can be summarised on the back of a postcard.

The postcard summary?

When you write you speeches, structure your sentences using rhetorical questions, three-part lists and contrasts.

When you know this, you see it everywhere. I spot these structures watching *Peppa Pig*, Taylor Swift videos and reading *The Gruffalo*. These are the simple patterns that lie behind creative genius.

Max also wrote a blog at the time. He was pointing out how Barack Obama used these techniques. Inspired by the example of Max Atkinson, I launched the UK Speechwriters' Guild.

I put together a programme for a one-day conference in Bournemouth. We got Phil Collins, Tony Blair's former speechwriter, Susan Jones, John Major's speechwriter and Tobias Ellwood MP to speak. As well as Johann Siebers, a Dutchman who had started a rhetoric course at the University of Lancaster.

It was a great success.

After organising a few conferences, I realised the majority of the paying customers were not the British speechwriters, they were speechwriters from the Netherlands, Denmark, the European Commission and other European institutions.

They have to write speeches in English as well as their native language. How many British speechwriters working in Whitehall would be equally confident writing speeches in French, German or Spanish?

Let's not go there.

For me, this underlines the profound connection between translation and public speaking.

If you learn a foreign language, translation teaches you to become aware of the subtle shades of the meaning of words.

If you're seeking to persuade someone that's exactly the kind of sensitivity you need.

There is a direct connection with my love of writing, my love of speaking and my love of foreign languages.

In German at school we had to prepare an 'interessante Rede' on Fridays for our sixth form oral classes. In French, I loved collecting idioms in my vocabulary book like, Il pleut comme une vache qui pisse.

My spoken French and German speaking skills are now rusty, but the cultural affinity with Europe, derived from my study of languages and my year in Strasbourg, gave me the confidence to sell my conference abroad.

In 2013, I organised a speechwriters' conference in Brussels. In 2014 I organised a three-day conference at Trinity College, Oxford.

The UK Speechwriters' Guild became the European Speechwriter Network. Since 2014 we have had spring conference in Oxford or Cambridge and autumn conferences in Helsinki, Amsterdam, Leuven, Berlin and Edinburgh.

Last year the Deputy Mayor of Helsinki hosted a reception for us, and thanks to our connections, we were able to use Finnish Government buildings for the conference.

The speakers at the conferences have included speechwriters who have worked for Michelle Obama, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, David Cameron, Al Gore, Carlos Ghosn, Manuel Valls and many more. My experiences in Toastmasters International and the Oxford Union taught me how to structure a programme, how to select speakers and how to persuade them to speak.

Through the European Speechwriter Network, I have observed young speechwriters join in lowly positions and rise to top jobs. I have given speechwriters opportunities to speak, which have been as transformative as the opportunity I got to speak in Washington.

I send out an e-newsletter featuring jobs, news and noteworthy speeches a couple of times a month. It reaches over 600 subscribers around the world.

We have an exchange scheme with the Professional Speechwriters Association in America. They send their best speakers to our conference and we send our best speakers to their conference. I have been to Germany to address the German Speechwriters' Network. Last year I helped the French inaugurate a *Guilde des Plumes* with a conference in French in Paris.

I got to know Jay Heinrichs, who wrote *Thank you for Arguing*, the *De Copia* of our time for American rhetoric students. Rhetoric, he tells me, is the fastest growing subject in higher education in America. Through the Network, I organise speechwriting training workshops for international institutions and workshops in London and Leuven. I have now been self-employed for over 20 years.

8) Value of training in public speaking

I mentioned I started a group called BoMoCreatives. BoMoCreatives attracted some very troubled but talented individuals. They came from the 'recovery' community. If you're a brilliant at Latin, they send you to Oxford, if you're addicted to heroin, they send you to Bournemouth. The town is notorious for its rehab centres.

Through BoMoCreatives, I discovered an underground culture of 12 step meetings. I was attracted by the composure of recovering alcoholics.

The 12 steps is a programme of spiritual healing based on sharing personal accounts of recovery.

It involves standing up in front of other addicts and telling stories about the insanity of your condition. A condition which destroys families, careers and lives.

The insight of the 12 steps is that the benefits accrue to the speaker, not necessarily to the listeners. The act of delivering the message of recovery to others helps the speaker to remain sober.

Of course, nobody really wants to do this. It's incredibly stressful to say things about yourself in front of an audience. Especially if they're shameful.

For a hobby, I enjoy listening to 12 step shares on YouTube.

Why are they so compelling?

Because to recover, you have to be honest. If you stand up and say something that's true, it has power.

Ben Johnson's dictum was: *Speak that I may see thee.*

We all have something unique inside of us and it comes out when we speak in public.

This is why the ability to vocalise feelings, ideas and experiences is essential if you are to lead people, build strong relationships or maintain strong mental health.

We're here to create narratives of our own lives.

We here to create fellowship.

We're here to create new businesses and institutions.

We're here to create meaning.

We're here to share our experience, strength and hope.

What stands between us and those achievements?

It is the fear of public speaking, the fear of appropriate self-revelation and the fear of honesty in our social interactions.

If the education system can do something to overcome this fear, it will be doing something worthwhile. **ENDS**