

# Pasquaney *archives*

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Chris Reigeluth on Diversity and Difference

This past spring at Colby, I took a course on Public Speaking, and going into the course, I really did not know what to expect. Public Speaking had always been a huge fear of mine, but at the same time it was something that I wanted to conquer. I longed to move audiences with my voice and to be the perfect public speaker, the person who fully captivates others with words and expressions and pushes audiences to the edges of their seats with each phrase that falls from his or her mouth. So that was why I signed up and took the course. I wanted to master public speaking and not only become a wizard of the word, but a wizard of moving people with that word.

The first day of class proved to be incredibly intimidating, and from the moment that we set foot in the lecture hall, Professor Mills threw us into the spotlight and forced us to speak on our own, while everyone else listened. On the first day, I remember he called me up to the front of the classroom and said, “Chris, you have five minutes to talk about yourself, no more and no less.” Completely caught off guard, I rambled on about squash and my spring break trip, failing to convey any useful or engaging material to my classmates. When my time was up, I walked away from the front of the classroom, disgusted for both putting my fellow public speakers to sleep and for failing to express myself in a passionate and moving way. I remember thinking: “How am I going to make it through this course? I want to step into the spotlight and shine, but I just don’t know if I have what it takes.”

Well, the course turned out to be an incredible experience. As the weeks rolled by, I became more comfortable speaking in front of groups, and with each speech, I gained confidence and energy. I started to use less and less notes and got to the point where I spoke using a minimal outline. I no longer wrote my speeches before class, but crafted them in the act of the actual speeches themselves. Now, I never became the wizard of speech that I had hoped to be, but I did improve and moved away from my own past trepidation and discomfort. That’s not to say that I don’t get nervous anymore, because I do. But I now have the confidence to know that the world will not come crashing down around me if I stumble over a word or fail to reach my intended audience.

The huge steps that I made during my experience in Public Speaking are not what I want to talk to you about today. My individual improvements made up a significant part of my public speaking experience, but even more important were the unexpected lessons that I learned from my classmates within the course.

Going into public speaking on the first day, I looked around the classroom and saw a pretty standard group of Colby students surrounding me. For Colby that means a group dominated by New Englanders. Being the last semester, I was not planning to meet or connect with any new people. I was on a first name basis with some of the kids in the class, but did not really know any of them and was certainly not planning to try. I had my close friends and that felt good enough to me. As a result, I went into the class with the mindset that, “this should be a good class. I’ll do the work and become a public speaking genius, but does it really matter whether or not I actually get to know other people and share in their lives? I don’t think so. I already have my friends.” That was my preconception of how the class would go. Well, in the end, my initially limited view turned out to be completely wrong. I got to know the kids in the class, and I got to know them surprisingly well. It’s not that we

started spending all of our free time together or going to movies and out to dinner. But with each speech that someone gave, I saw more and more into that person's life and gained valuable insight into his or her character. I learned many things from the experiences that my classmates shared, and I began to see life through new perspectives. Just like with Circles at Pasquaney, as the group became more comfortable with one another, people opened up and shared intimate and personal aspects of their lives and beliefs. In contrast to other Colby classes I had taken, in public speaking, people had to put themselves on the line and take risks every day. As a result, a tight camaraderie developed, and we not only took chances together, but we learned more about one another throughout the process.

I remember being blown away one day by a student who was giving a personal speech on his childhood. I was not only amazed at his willingness to openly and honestly share personal and emotional information with the group, but I was also intrigued and shocked by some of the experiences that this person had had. To think, a Colby peer of mine had faced entirely different challenges in life and encountered a completely different side of the world. How would I have handled some of the difficult situations through which he seemed to barrel?

Looking around the classroom on that first day, I had assumed that people's lives were comparable to mine. Of course these thoughts were incredibly naïve and limiting, but they did unfortunately fill my mind, at least in a passive way. In my own head, I never allowed for or acknowledged the potential and huge differences that people in my class might have. Yet, here was a student who looked fairly similar to me in overall appearance, but his life was entirely different from mine. As he spoke more and more, I realized how foolish my past assumptions had been and how much I could gain from his unique insights.

This was how the course progressed for me. As people gave more and more speeches, I quickly realized how false my initial thoughts were regarding the students in the class. Everyone had his or her own story and unique strengths to share with the group. Despite coming from similar geographic regions or sharing certain interests, passions, or beliefs, my classmates were all unbelievably different from one another, and as the course rolled on and I got to know people better, I realized this.

In comparison to my public speaking class, Pasquaney is also composed of a variety of individuals. This summer that number stands at 144. We have people with us from all over the world, but we also have people from the same neighborhoods, towns, and states. Regardless of where we live in the off season and how our lives might be at home, we are all incredibly privileged to be here this summer and that is something that we have in common. Uniforms are another similarity that we share, and it is the purpose of these uniforms to enable our individualities and distinct natures to shine through, free from the burden of material cover. The many people in front of me right now are distinct in countless ways. In contrast to my initial views regarding the students in my public speaking class, it is essential that you do not assume that you know people or know about them, before you really get a chance to see into who they are. Everyone is different and has unique strengths and insights to offer. Most importantly, do not cut yourself off from others or fail to reach out because you are comfortable with your life or satisfied with the friends that you have. I've learned some of my most valuable lessons from people that I was just getting to know or from people in completely different friendship circles than me. At Pasquaney, we have the unique opportunity to share in the lives of and learn from 144 different people. This summer reach out to as many individuals as you can and do not look past anyone, because it will be when you least expect it that you will learn some of your most valuable lessons. You'll be amazed both by what you have to learn and what you have to offer.