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## **Speaking at Speaker's Corner** - the rhetorical challenge and didactic considerations

*Sine Carlsen & Henrik Juel (2007)*

### **The challenge**

In September, 2005, we went, for the first time, to Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde Park with twenty five students from Roskilde University, and let them try their hand at a demanding discipline: speaking from a beer crate in front of a vociferously critical, thoroughly inquisitive and culturally complex audience. And in September 2006 we repeated the experiment with eighteen other students, who tackled it with equal enthusiasm.



*Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park, London. In the foreground on the left is Astrid from Roskilde University, making her speech standing on a beer crate (Photo: Jacob Reenberg).*

The trips to Speaker's Corner were one facet of an intensive workshop in verbal communication at the university - and at the same time an experiment. Many of the students who had enrolled for the course at home in Roskilde were quite unused to making a speech or standing up in front of a crowd; several were nervous of standing up just to say something in class, in front of their fellow

students. Yet after just ten days work on rhetoric in theory and practice they were going to have to overcome the challenge: *Speak for ten minutes on a subject you have chosen yourself and which you consider important; at Speaker's Corner; in English. And you must be able to get through to your audience, regardless of what sort of audience that may be.*

### **Why this experiment?**

The aim of our course in rhetoric is not merely to enable each individual to survive a firestorm such as that at Hyde Park: it is to draw attention to the process itself, whereby one works up a speech from the first inkling of an idea, through the research stage and rehearsal to the final performance. By focussing on the rhetorical work process we can demonstrate that it is not reserved to those few born with nerves of steel and a silver spoon in their mouths to take the stage at a public assembly: it is really a question of rhetorical insight, of recognising the tools of rhetoric; and of practice in using them expediently.

The most important thing lies not in having a good speech in your head – and certainly not in having it down on paper – but in managing the situation with enough skill to conjure up a meaningful form of communication with the audience. Rhetorically speaking, the successful speech is that which offers insights to all those participating, speaker as well as audience.

For those taking part, as well as for us as teachers, the experiences at Speakers' Corner were a thought-provoking manifestation of free speech. Sunday sessions in Hyde Park can give the effect of being rough, crude play - of bandying with 'freedom of expression' - but they are actually giving expression to a singular form of culture and tradition. Here thrives a special form of speech-making in a very lively and critical debating forum. Here personal commitment thrives, side by side with physical proximity, and sets the information society's otherwise so smoothly mediated forms of communication in relief. Here one can be challenged by a shout from a stooped, evil-smelling down-and-out wearing a filthy T-shirt and holding a strong beer in one hand - but look out! – the chap is a skilled psychiatrist, razor-sharp in both glance and critique. So here much is demanded of you if you wish to speak your mind, hang on to your ideas and insist on fighting your way through. But then should not democracy and free speech be built upon the individual's being able, (and daring), to speak his mind?

### **On the study of Communications at Roskilde university**

The students we took with us to Speaker's Corner are not students of rhetoric as such, for that subject is not to be found as a separate entity at Roskilde University, but they are students who have spent two to three years at university and are already well trained in project-oriented work in groups. At Roskilde one must first undergo a two-year foundation course either in the humanities, or in social science, or in natural science. And common to these foundation courses – despite their widely disparate subjects – is that specific way of working and teaching. The students organise their own work to a great extent: only half of it is based on preparatory reading or course work. The rest of the time is used on various projects requiring research, or perhaps on empirical work in the field taking interviews or making investigations – in which theory, method and results must all be taken thoroughly into account from beginning to end of the final written report. Typically this report is then defended by the group at an oral examination.

Oral expression and rhetoric are seldom addressed directly as themes, either during the foundation courses or the higher courses that build on them, but in the studio and in project work there is

nonetheless a great deal of really practical training. One holds problem-definition seminars using other students and teachers as critics and respondents; holds group discussions; and lays out the provisional conclusions and results for one's tutor several times in the course of each term. In this way the students at project-oriented universities quickly pack some of the traditional skills of rhetoric in their knapsacks. The inventio- and dispositio-phases, like the actio-phase, are well known. The oral aspects themselves are not systematically taught, and voice training is unheard of.

By the time we rhetoric teachers get the students they have, in fact, been a couple of years at university and have just started on advanced communications studies. The first thing they are exposed to in these is an intensive three weeks workshop, where all the students work practically (and productively) within a specific medium. There is nothing else on the timetable for these three weeks and we work with the same 15 students every day during the period. Choice of medium is to some extent up to the students, but there are, all the same, certain practical and technical limitations. In the course of the first six months another set of such workshops takes place in the semester, so that everyone can try their hand at more than one medium.

"The trips to Speaker's Corner can be described with one word. Fantastic.

To go to Speaker's Corner and speak in front of a collection of more or less professional speakers is an experience that all rhetoric speakers should have. We are living in a globalised world, and the trend is clear: English is a prerequisite for getting on in business life today. Precisely for that reason it is a privilege to have the chance to try oneself out in the rhetorical milieu that is only to be found at Speaker's Corner. The turmoil and vigour to be found in Hyde Park poses a challenge for even the most hardened of speakers, and for this reason also offers an extremely rich learning experience.

To have prepared one's speech and then believe that simply by studying it down to the last word one can promulgate one's message and win the listeners' adherence is an illusion. At Speaker's Corner one discovers that for all that, unless one has thought one's speech through from every angle, one will not attract the public's attention. Professionally it has been a fantastic opportunity to see how the theory of debate holds up in practice."

*Carina*

The medium can be Video, Home-page, PowerPoint, Text and Illustration or Oral Communication. In each workshop there are different exercises and theories, but the aim remains always to produce tangible results that can be applied to real, live communication situations. Thus some students work for that three weeks with video equipment, and try their hand at making their own short documentary or training film. Others design home pages - perhaps for the first time, but hopefully ending up with a prototype that can function as a communications channel for a particular company or organisation. Or the groups produce factual articles and pamphlets that include pictures and a layout which can form part of a practical project; for example, the promulgation of information about sexual diseases or a council recycling ordinance.

A practical and intensive workshop such as this, making one's own material in a single medium, is thought of in educational terms as a flexible route into the more theoretical considerations underlying the study of communications: about audience groups, organisation theory, reception theory and qualitative methods. Between the two workshops lies an intensive course in communications theory, and after the second of these the student writes a project with its starting

point in a theoretical problem taken from the last workshop. That project counts towards the final examination result. It is one of communication education's central principles that it is about imparting the skills required for the understanding of communications situations - across all forms of media - and the ability to complete a communications task in practice.

### **On workshop teaching in oral communications**

One of the media one can choose for such a three week course is "oral communication". Teaching in this area thus resembles that in the other intensive work groups, each of which has its own medium – but there is, nonetheless, a notable difference in that the medium in this case is the student's own voice and person. One can distance oneself from the words one has set down on paper, from the layout that one has suggested be projected onto a screen, or from that video one has cobbled together in the editing: and yes, one does not even need to be there when the product is handed over to the user. But one cannot walk away like that from one's own spoken performance, one cannot leap out of one's skin - or one's situation (although it is, perhaps, precisely that one can see some convulsive attempts at among nervous speakers).



*Samuel in an intense wrangle with a "heckler". A heckler, who interrupts and challenges speakers with more or less caustic comment, is all part of the game in this rhetorical arena (Photo: Sine Carlsen).*

At the same time as being present as the tangible word-smith, one is also "on" in the full sense of the word. To speak is to be "on-line" and "live". It is here and now. What is said cannot be unsaid, cannot be deleted or altered. And at the same time something new can come up while one is talking which has to be taken into account. If one does not react to interruptions and questions, or simply to the atmosphere in the room – well, communications rapidly disintegrate. So one must be both well-

prepared and open to fresh inputs; ready to improvise in order to distil something useful from the unforeseen.

The skills demanded of a good orator are not just a matter of the possession of abstract knowledge which one can read up or study aurally, but are rather skills that one has absorbed. The students will acquire something here which is not just a matter of materiel (e.g. classical rhetoric's fundamental concepts), but rather a craftsmanlike - or at its highest level - artistic ability. It also means that the training in the workshop becomes something very personal; it is, after all, a decidedly personal skill that needs to be developed. From time to time, strong feelings come into play: there are those who resist; there are limits; but also widely different talents and opportunities to be developed. As teacher one must try from the outset to take account of each student's entire personality and of the complete spectrum of their potential. The aim is not that all shall be able to speak in the same way, but that all should become better speakers while holding on to being themselves (perhaps about becoming even more "themselves" than before?).

An oral communications workshop typically consists of fifteen students, and so often they come from that group of relatively articulate, resourceful young people who normally, in another context, are not particularly afraid of speaking up or of taking the floor. But even during the first introductory chat and presentation that first morning of the workshop, one can, as teacher, sense a significant nervousness - some students themselves mention it - and many, when the focus is on the spoken word - one's own, mark you - become uneasy. It means going pretty close to the bone with oneself and with one another to talk, not about what we say - that we often do at the university and very critically at that - but about the *way* we say something: about how we stand while we speak; about how we use our hands and eyes; about the way we smile or don't smile; about whether we speak loudly or clearly enough; about whether we are credible.

As teachers, therefore, we often highlight this particular form of nervousness about oral work right from the start. Perhaps we will use an exercise in which the students have briefly to present themselves while at the same time overplaying and exaggerating nervous attitudes; for example by stammering, blushing to the roots of the hair, looking away, chattering hectically and so on, all according to what each one can think up. Creativity flourishes when it is pretending to be anxious, and soon brings out a good deal of humour and laughter. And it is also quite an amusing and enjoyable experience to be able to praise one's students for being 'really bad' at presenting themselves!

### **The safe area**

It is very important to create a secure sense of fellowship in the workshop right from the beginning. The students arrive with markedly different life experiences and are often all too aware of how they rank in the class. Here it is all about demonstrating that all can become better speakers, but that each should achieve this in his own way. There is no right way of speaking. The way that best suits Thomas is not necessarily best for Stine: and in fact it is important to draw attention to the differences. Thomas should develop his special talent and style and Stine should cultivate her eloquence and try her hand at possibilities she never knew she had.

"When one stood up there it was something of an "out of body" experience. One speaks without looking at one's notes, and as soon as one pauses there's a question. One answers, speaks, gets a new question and so on in sequence, and then at some point one comes to the challenge of rounding off. To speak at such a forum is the most testing practice one can get as a speaker. One must have full control of one's material, one's train of thought and one's voice, and be ready for hefty provocation and to be led off at a tangent down some line of thought one has not previously considered. It is the best possible kind of exercise in argumentation and relevant to all forms of communication – not merely that used by a politician.

The two days of speaking at Speaker's Corner have lifted our game tremendously and not least, given us all a large slice of experience to sharpen our understanding of oral communication."

*Annette*

While possibilities are thus very individual, the work is often carried out as a common task. If one has created a sound sense of fellowship – or more precisely, a positive learning space – then the students can quickly assess each others' weaknesses and potential. It is about illuminating the entire spectrum – from gesticulation to argumentation. We do not run on the concept of "error" but express comment more positively: "what can you try in order to improve your ability to communicate to us as listeners?" It can be disheartening to feel that one speaks unclearly or through one's nose. Against which it can be good to be told that we listeners would very much like to hear the speaker's interesting stories and that she should therefore speak more slowly and distinctly, and serve her words up to us like chocolates on a silver tray.

We work systematically with the individual's potential by holding a series of speaking rounds. In the beginning we take their own experiences, adventures and stories as our departure point. The topics can be along the lines of describing travel experiences or leisure pursuits, but the important thing at this point is neither subject nor content, but the manner in which the presentation is delivered. At the end of each talk everyone in the workshop writes a short note to the speaker about what he or she is good at. It can be their contact with the audience, their voice, their use of emphasis, their clarity and so on. Next everyone writes down a concrete suggestion about what the speaker might consider improving on: perhaps it might be something to do with using the space more effectively by moving forward, or taking longer pauses, or laying stress on particular words. The possibilities are many and the students are glad to have such feed-back from their colleagues. They are often surprised to hear that what they regard as mistakes - or appalling nervousness - do not play that big a role, and that they have some perfectly manageable possibilities to work on: that improvement is within speedy reach. It does not seem hopelessly difficult, for example, to dwell a longer pause between sentences and to remember to draw breath. That is a much more useful approach than trying to tell oneself "Now you are going to stop being nervous!"



*Christina hanging on to the theme of her speech in spite of the crowd and many an interruption (Photo: Sine Carlsen).*

From time to time it also means that the students' personalities and personal boundaries get knocked quite hard. Here, plainly, one must be careful not to cross the boundaries either of therapy or the infliction of trauma: it is, after all, a professional form of university education and one course amongst others, but one gets great pleasure as a teacher from seeing hesitant young men and women develop in character and become firm of voice and mien, ready to step forward to deliver a speech: one they truly believe in and are burning to give.

### **Common criteria for quality**

After just a few days in the workshop the students have become quite good at observing and evaluating the others' – and their own – speaking techniques. The written feed-back from the oral exercises is also often followed up by discussion, in which everyone contributes. The starting point is the individual student's speech, but in point of fact the others find that they learn a lot from working on someone else's opportunities for expressing themselves. They may, for example, suddenly notice that they themselves tend to stand uneasily and restlessly, just like Charlotte, or to fail to get the audience's attention, like Søren. And from such public coaching of a single speaker there can arise more general insights into those mechanisms that typically come into play when one has to speak to an audience. From this we can work towards a general overview of the criteria for quality in oral communication.

The students are quite clear in their allocation of priority to qualitative aspects: they do not pick out the formal or "correct" criteria first and foremost, but talk of involvement, presence, energy - and about the speaker himself being able to handle his or her role, and enjoy the situation.

In this way the building blocks of rhetorical analysis and critique turn into a clear, experience-based understanding of the interplay between speaker and audience in real life. And after that we are ready to dip into the technical aspects of rhetoric.

### **The teaching workshop**

The students themselves also get to try their hand at the difficult art of imparting rhetorical theory in such a way that all can understand it. A great deal of such group teaching they manage themselves, collectively. Here it is not a matter of short, five minute reports, but well prepared presentations on a sound academic basis. These scholarly teaching presentations last typically ninety minutes in two equal parts, and on these the students receive feed-back, since oral presentation is seen as a definitive part of their training.

In this we can, for example, cast light on the concept of *ethos* in way that fires the interest, as the students are usually good either at finding current examples in the media or at performing short illustrative sketches. Indeed classic skills and concepts such as *dispositio* are well suited to this; and the students then discover why so much of their knowledge of how to organise school essays and study reports has suddenly acquired a deep historical resonance, and begin to consider how best to keep control of larger technical topics in their heads. Here classical memorising skills, *memoria*, come once again into play. It can be a distinctly “aha!” experience for the students to grasp the rhetorical background to the well known phrase: “To have your subject at your finger-tips”.

In the teaching workshop there is much to reflect on and the students themselves begin to consider and evaluate the question of where the divide between theory and practice should lie; and about whether theory should come before practice; or whether it answers better to start with something tangible and let something practical make way for theory; and about how to find the right exercises - those that will not create chaos, while bringing out the technical points?

Even more complex teaching considerations suddenly come alive for the students: one can, through dialogue, often get the participants themselves to come up with worthwhile concepts. It is then the student instructor’s job to systematise and structure those ideas (but how does one steer a dialogue so that it does not fly off in all directions?).

Then there is the question of teaching style. The opportunity is there for two widely different types of exercise. The analytical, in which one typically analyses something that others have done; and the productive, in which one is set the task of creating something new, or a part thereof. When and for whom does which exercise have most relevance?

These kinds of question can open up a multitude of insights and unbelievable new energy. The students have plenty of experience of being taught by others, but it is rare for them to be able to try things out seriously for themselves or to be allowed to take responsibility for and reflect on, the various forms of teaching.

### **Instruction and challenge**

In the teaching of rhetoric at the university the speaker and his audience are very much of a kind.

Nearly all the exercises have as their only audience the speakers’ own team members. The whole situation is manageable: the speaking order is established; one is familiar with the space; one is not interrupted; and if one makes a mess of things, one is met with tolerance.

In the final exercise our students make a speech to their entire year, some 200 students. We call this "Show Time" - a day when everyone displays their achievements. It is a big undertaking for many, and we get a lot out of the preparatory process, when the student has to work out his own speech from idea through to delivery. Nonetheless it is still a very controlled situation. The students know both the rules of play beforehand and many of their fellow students. They neither have to fight for a speaking spot, nor hold onto it. They are listened to in expectant silence.

"Sunday's experience at Speaker's Corner was both indescribable and unforgettable. The crowds were both larger and more challenging than I believe most of us had imagined they would be. At the same time as we were given the chance to try out our rhetorical abilities on a very demanding and provocative audience, there was the down to earth and immediate settling accounts. Many speeches developed into lengthy debates with one or more listeners, in which our arguments, rhetorical skills and ability to keep control had much significance. I believe, personally, that most managed much better than they had expected. I spoke to several regular hecklers in the course of the day who greatly praised the standard of the speakers and their "performances"."

*Jacob*

But at this point as teachers of rhetoric we set ourselves the question: what once the students venture beyond the university walls? How do we set up realistic situations? Can we take our teaching outside into the real world where quite unknown factors such as weather, audience, surroundings and time of day all have their influence on how the speaker puts his speech across?

It was here that Speaker's Corner came into the picture, as a result, by the way, of the background to two earlier students' exam projects on this special and very demanding rhetorical milieu. For those students who went along with the experiment, the giving of a speech at Speaker's Corner was a big personal challenge; and for us teachers it was a big teaching challenge. Could we ever equip them properly to withstand the storms they might encounter?

### **What is Speaker's Corner?**

Speaker's Corner can be thought of as a singular patch of ground, a chance area in a long rounded-off corner of Hyde Park, where the traffic from the streets around the Marble Arch makes a thoroughly unceremonious racket. There is a small Café nearby, a subway to an underground car park, wide cycle tracks and footpaths which cross one another, grassed areas with deck chairs and low metal fences, and some tall trees. There are signs which point to "Speaker's Corner" when one is a good way off, but at the place itself there is nothing to mark it out. Not a sign, not a platform nor a rostrum. One can be in considerable doubt, at any event on a weekday, about whether it is the right place. But on Sunday there is street life: groups begin to assemble around various speakers and cyclists have to dismount, or else choose an entirely different route for getting past. One can oneself bring a set of kitchen steps or a beer crate if one wishes to raise oneself up a little to talk to the throng. In more than one sense one has thus right from the start to create one's own rostrum and space - and attract one's own listeners.

There is a large, mixed company of regular speakers at Speaker's Corner: there are the religious, the political, the alternative, the alternatively alternative and those who simply stand still without saying anything at all. But there are also, among them, some very competent, trained orators. There are also idiots and fanatics. There are even Members of Parliament.

The place lies near the spot where London's gallows once stood, and according to myth the tradition of speaking out freely arose there because the condemned were allowed to have a last drink or two, and consequently rattled on for a while. The last public hanging took place in 1783 - but the tradition of making speeches near the place is thought to have begun somewhat later.

Nowadays every Sunday there are lively speeches and discussions, regardless of the season or the weather. Just as it is open to anyone to set themselves up on a soapbox or aluminium ladder, it is open to anyone to join in with comment or questions. The place is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Flaming indignation is relieved by joking good humour, by raids and sallies both political and moral.

Speaker's Corner outwardly resembles fairground entertainment, but in spirit it proclaims "This we truly take seriously." Earnest discussions arise after the heckling of a speaker, as the public begins to discuss things amongst themselves; and after a speech people often go on talking about it on the paths or grass round about. Politics, religion, lifestyle, ideology, the roles of the sexes – that is the arena for the big speeches.

There is great competition between the speakers, in sound level too. Some try to attract attention by very loudly shouting provocative assertions. - "I am not against terror!" - but their public disappears swiftly if they feel that the speaker cannot support his case sure-footedly and convincingly or cannot return comments and questions without faltering. Empty show is no good. If you do not have a solid message to deliver, something on your mind, the audience will look elsewhere. We saw a group of young women trying to hold a sort of jovial distaff stag party in top gear and provocative dress – but they attracted no attention with their silly talk and soon had to slip away crestfallen.

### **The personal speech**

In order to be taken seriously as a speaker - and this applies particularly in Hyde Park - one needs to speak from both insight and personal experience. Theoretical topics are only of interest if one has a clear position on them and sound experience in the area. There has to be substance to the speech. Our students chose subjects that were important for them, on which they held clear views, and of which they had experience. They spoke about equal opportunity; they spoke about stress and the modern life-style; they spoke about matters that they felt involved in or which scandalised them, and that they wanted other people in the park to see and understand in the same light.

Even though the students' hands were entirely free in the matter of the subject and development of their speech, they actually worked on their speeches in small groups and we took all the speeches to the podium several times. In this way all contributed their knowledge and suggestions to the points and arguments to be incorporated. Counter arguments and interruptions were also brought to bear, e.g. clapping, barracking and catcalls.

Before we left we had also worked on the basic concepts of classical rhetoric: on the model for preparation; on the arrangement of material, the spoken virtues, the forms of appeal; and argumentation. And we had worked with every last student on this: on their stance and voice, on their tone and pace, on their gestures and footwork. And we had worked on every speech; provoked them into sharpening every point, being specific in their choice of examples, thinking straight and making an effective ending.

### **Trial run**

On both trips we managed to hold trial runs on location, that is to say in Hyde Park on the Saturday. Even though there is not the same throng as on a Sunday it was good training, not least because it is a very different thing to talk in the open air in the Park's wide spaces than in a classroom. Here there is background noise from wind and traffic, the voice easily disappears among the trees, and the sunlight must also be taken into account. Should one speak into or away from the light? Even though it can feel vacuous and almost absurd to stand up and embark on a speech in the middle of a park on what on most days is normally a cycle track, nonetheless it had a big influence on the students' later mastering of the situation. On both occasions we found that a good number of passers by stopped, came over and listened.

The odd regular "heckler" – those familiar figures at Speaker's Corner who perhaps speak themselves, but otherwise meet up and try to interrupt and challenge new speakers – popped up out of the turmoil of the great Wen. Even though it was not Sunday they had their ear to the ground for anything new coming up. The students were a little surprised at this interest, but were also greatly stimulated into doing things even better on the Sunday. It was, as someone said, "an entirely fresh experience suddenly to see utter strangers moving towards one – of their own free will – to listen to what one had to say."

We taught in the hotel dining room, in Kensington Gardens, collected round a pair of benches, sitting on a lawn, and in our rooms. And when the students disappeared into London's night-life we "grown-ups", as we had been dubbed by the young, sat in a quiet restaurant and talked about our students, rather like anxious parents talking about their children's clothing before the onset of a blizzard. Had each one got enough warm clothing with them? Who most needs new boots or a warm scarf. Well, Sara lacks a couple of good examples to illustrate the contradictions between appearance and reality, Morten needs to be a bit more forward with his personal engagement, Lisbeth just needs to get a firm grip on her provocative concept about the "natural" and the "normal" in homosexuality; and what about Laura, who came a day later than all the others – can she stand fast when it blows up?



*From a trial run before the kick-off: Haiko Khoo, from the milieu of the regular speakers at Speaker's Corner, instructs Danish students (Photo: Sine Carlsen).*

On both Saturdays in London we had the great pleasure of a presentation and instruction from Heiko Khoo, a very experienced and committed speaker who has been around in the Speaker's Corner milieu for many years. He is himself a very passionate speaker with an unbelievably well developed dynamic in both voice and gesticulation. At the same time as knowing pretty well all the dirty tricks one can be exposed to, he himself has both humour and wit; and not least a great love for this remarkable forum and a most infectious desire to engage foreigners in speech regardless whether they are Japanese tourists, joggers or retired business men. Armed with his comment and advice, our students were well primed. On Sunday morning we warmed up both with a sort of "Morning PE" for voice and body in the park, with a "walk and talk" on the way to and from the hotel, and with some last minute polishing in smaller groups.

### **How is it going?**

On the day itself impatience and excitement were intense, and when we got over to Speaker's Corner good use was made both of breathing exercises and focussing techniques. Allan, although quite a young student, seemed to be both fearless and confident, (possibly as a result of his musical training,) and broke the ice by laying on a funny speech about good manners. With generous gesticulations and a clear voice with a home-made Scots accent, he quickly attracted 50-60 listeners to his side. "Come closer, come closer. I have something important to say to you." After that everything went with a swing.



*Allan jumps up onto one of the beer crates we brought with us and in the blink of an eye collects a large and very interested audience that Sunday in Hyde Park: he is extolling “Good manners” in his speech (Photo: Sine Carlsen).*

Our speakers stood out from the regulars in the park by being relatively young, and because of their including a good many women. Among the regular flock of speakers there was just one woman, Diana, who speaks engagingly and passionately but about tidings that hardly anyone can grasp the point of – probably something to do with religion.

The students’ speeches about equal ‘opportunities’ and ‘stress’ definitely fell outside the traditional style of Speaker’s Corner, and several aroused massive resistance. “This is Women’s Corner!”

For example, Christina, a young girl with long, blond hair. She spoke quietly but firmly about women’s right to have a career, even though they have children and a family.

“Why have children, if you are going to abandon them anyway” came quick as a flash from one listener. “Haven’t you got a boy friend?” came from another, who no doubt would have liked to suggest himself.

So Christina had to fight hard both for her position as speaker and to hold her line. She listened, answered, and even repudiated comments a couple of times. “I’ll come back to that later”, “Really, that’s too ridiculous!”, “Why don’t you just listen to what I am saying?” She talked for a long while and won great respect, precisely for her ability to be accommodating while holding her ground.

A pair of our students on the first trip were international students on a residential visit to Roskilde University. One of them, Samuel, from Quebec, speaks eagerly and warmly for a federation of peoples, not of nations, as the UN is made up today. He is enthusiastically insistent, and sees himself as a political idealist and “*mondialiste*” – citizen of the world. He was met by a stream of comment. “It’ll never work”, “If you were my son, I would kill you.” At one point he was wrangling with a heckler to the point that it resembled a shouting match or a proper fight. The only

one to take the whole thing casually was the heckler's little dog, which he held in his arms. It must have been there before.

The hecklers are listeners (often themselves hard-baked speakers), who have made an art form out of interrupting to see if a speaker knows his stuff; or else they are out to de-rail him and possibly make him a laughing stock. It accords with tradition at Speaker's Corner that interruptions and questioning go right to the wire. And you certainly don't get away without the odd coarse, personal insinuation.

But it also happens that a heckler then stops of his own accord, or is put in his place by another heckler - "Go and find your own soap-box" - and the speaker is invited to continue. There is a great deal of inquisitiveness: Do the young people really have these things at heart? Katrine, who was making a speech about prejudice, and especially about trying to look her own prejudices in the eye, was interrupted towards the tail end of her speech by a notorious heckler with sun-glasses, Rastafarian-style hair-do, and terrific volubility. He was rapidly taking over the whole scene with his caustic incursions, but then, clear against expectation, turned round and wound up praising Katrine for her courage in speaking her mind. Yes, he was very much in agreement and would like to say "Thanks very much!"

### **The theory comes to life**

Speaker's Corner also offers a fantastic study in rhetorical argumentation. It is one thing to read a text about argumentation; to study instances, assertions, and authorities set out in a fine, manageable model, followed by a numbered list of common forms of counter argument. But on such a Sunday in the park, theory came alive and we experienced a wide assortment of the tricks of argumentation.

Some are aimed at undermining the speaker's personal ethos. The speaker is tried particularly hard at the outset.

"Who's the next fool?"

"You are much too young to know anything about it."

"Why talk about culture? We would rather hear about politics."

"Why don't you get to the point?"

It was especially in the appeal to ethics that our students were met with comment that had its own agenda. Annette spoke about prostitution, about the obscuring myths there are about prostitutes, and about how it should be a criminal offence to be able to buy someone else's body. She was quickly met with a mass of comment." Don't you like sex?", "What about dustmen? - We are all prostitutes for selling our bodies as wage-earners". An attempt at a fine little "reductio ad absurdum" straight out of the book.

We experienced nonetheless great respect when the speaker held his line and could stand up for himself with down-to-earth answers.

"Yes, but prostitution is women's oldest occupation" offered an older man, decidedly.

"No", said Annette, and pointed straight at him, "you are mistaken. Farming is."

That shut him up.

Lisbeth spoke about homosexuals' right to artificial insemination. It is too bad if the law forbids "equal rights" to homosexuals. "Are you speaking from experience?" This with a tight little smile from a heckler who was out to embarrass Lisbeth by involving her personally (classic *ad hominem*). But she looked him in the eye: "No. I am speaking out of passion!" This exchange caused a ripple of admiration among those present and her subsequent arguments, drawn from both passion and logic, were heard out.

"That a study tour to London was included in the course was perfect. I had never believed that I should find myself standing in front of a flock of strangers, and speak with so much spirit. It was a very special and fantastic experience that I will not forget. I will be thinking of that trip whenever I speak in the future. Thank you for a really wonderful experience".

*Anne Kristine*

### **Putting things in perspective**

Joining in public debate is not without its risks. It is certainly not without risk to set up young students at Speaker's Corner and let them talk to an unpredictable public; to move education out of the "safe area" we teachers know so well from university, and out into the street. An examination situation round a green baize table has relatively well-defined parameters: Speaker's Corner is always an experiment.

We had not, beforehand, made it compulsory that everyone should stand up and speak publicly from their beer-crate, even though each student had brought a prepared speech from home; but as the day wore on everyone, on both trips, did give their speech. The feeling of "If you dare do it, so do I", hung in the air. The atmosphere was intense; people supported one another and clumped closer together- especially when comment was sharp.

No-one appeared to lose listeners; many actually pulled in a really large audience and were able to hold on to it for a good long while. We also experienced the fact that that colourful flock of listeners and passers by were, in the great majority and – admittedly - rather surprisingly, very sympathetic, kind and seriously interested in listening to the speakers. None of our students left there feeling that it had gone badly, let alone been a waste of time. Thus Speaker's Corner proved to be a many-sided, vigorous, sparkling rhetorical scene with room for all, and to spare. Perhaps quite a normal Hyde Park Sunday, but an unforgettable day for us as teachers.

Seen from outside, maybe a beer crate is not the most significant rostrum in the world - but seen from within and as students, it can be a very meaningful step to stand up on the crate and dare to speak in that very special place. As onlooker one can, from time to time - feel the whirring of history's pinions - and how basic democratic principles here stretch their wings, sometimes against a stiff breeze. And as a teacher of rhetoric it is sensational to see students who, after only ten days committed run-up, dare launch themselves into thin air and soar up under a blue sky on their own powerful new wings.