

Creative Genius: Steve Jobs' Memorable Stanford Commencement Address

In June of 2005, Steve Jobs gave a commencement address to the graduating class of Stanford University, a world-renowned academic institution in Northern California. The commencement address is considered to be “one of the most venerable – and respectable – traditions of American academia, particularly at elite institutions” (Naughton) and presenting it is a privilege rarely bestowed upon a college drop-out with no formal academic credentials, like Jobs. Steve Jobs is remembered today as the cofounder and creative genius behind Apple Inc., which is currently the world's largest computer and software conglomerate. He dropped out of Reed College after his first semester and went on to cofound the technology companies NeXT and Apple Inc. as well as Pixar Studios. Like the firms he founded, Jobs' speech was creative, innovative and memorable. He tells the audience three very personal stories about his life. This speech has a lasting impression because it is authentic and completely devoid of filler. The important messages delivered are not anecdotes based on personal luck or talent, but rather are centered on living up to one's full potential. Speaking confidently in a reflective, laid back tone, Jobs uses simple and specific examples of his own life to outline common realities that new graduates often experience, providing advice and a vision forward.

I believe that one of the reasons why Jobs' speech is so effective is because he is able to instill the importance of education to an intellectually confident, newly-credentialed audience that is largely ready to leave the formal educational sphere and enter the workforce. He does so in an extremely uncanny and unorthodox way, by proudly describing why he dropped out of school. Jobs explains that he dropped out of college because he “couldn't see the value in it” and instead went on to study calligraphy and other things that truly interested him. Jobs then used

this knowledge as he created word processing software by including various options for fonts, a hallmark feature that differentiated the technology from typewriters. Jobs demonstrates how a valuable addition to society can be made, as impractical as the concept may be initially, by coupling passion with knowledge into fulfilling a societal need or want. The legendary investor Warren Buffet has frequently said it is paramount to “know what success really means”. Jobs’ version of success was being able to learn as much as he could about the things he was interested in and then apply them in a unique and innovative way. He really focuses on this in his first story of “connecting the dots” not only by emphasizing the importance of having confidence to follow your desires but also a willingness to venture out and learn, as personal fulfillment will occur throughout this process, even if wealth and fame do not. This intriguing and inspiring message connected well with the audience, leaving a lasting impression.

Jobs’ speech is also effective because he cleverly uses repetition in a relaxed and personal tone to convey his ideas in a way that would intrigue the audience. There are two simple phrases he repeats during his speech. The first one is centered on a piece about how to live a satisfying life, which is “do great work, don’t settle”. The second one, which is repeated three times including in his last sentence, is “stay hungry, stay foolish”. These statements perfectly encapsulate the inspiration Jobs attempts to leave his audience with, a sense of willingness to continually develop and utilize creativity and knowledge. However, the content of the speech is only part of the picture. A good speech also depends on how well the information connects with the audience. Jobs is able to deliver this message very well because he understands his audience’s point of view. One of Britain’s leading speech and presentation consulting groups emphasises the importance of offering the audience something good that they can gain from listening to the speech. According to the organization *Speak Like a Pro*, “too many people

concentrate on what they want to speak about, which is usually them.” By using a relaxed and personal tone instead of sounding preachy and self-absorbed, Jobs was able to fill the role of a compassionate and experienced elder with interesting and very applicable information that young graduates genuinely wanted to hear because it fascinated and benefited them.

Lastly, Jobs’ speech is memorable because the content is innovative and expands on the simple cliché “follow your dreams, kids” talking point that is all too common at events like these. Jobs is able to differentiate himself by promoting a different, original path to success to a group of eager, young graduates. Arianna Huffington, President and Editor in Chief of the *Huffington Post Media Group* argues that following your passion is bad career advice and that instead the “metrics of well-being, wisdom, wonder and giving back” should be included. I would argue Jobs agrees with this statement, as he offers a powerful and deeply personal monologue of experiences that lead listeners to look inward to find their paths in life. He discusses pride, embarrassment and fear of failure as barriers that prevent greatness from occurring, a discovery he made after realizing he had cancer and that death could come at any point. The detailed story and advice Jobs provides using his entrepreneurial experience about living life to one’s fullest are unique in that they move beyond anecdotal life tips that commonly circulate the leadership sphere in post-secondary education and thus allow for intimate connections with the audience based on mutual feelings of appreciation for each other’s circumstances.

Jobs’ speech to the Stanford graduating class of 2005 is made memorable because the content is candid, unique and innovative and it is delivered in a way that emphasises a personal connection to the audience. At the time of the speech, the iPod, perhaps Apple’s most famous invention had swept the MP3 market and was at the forefront of the rapidly developing digital music industry. Being an extremely narcissistic individual with a God-complex, Jobs’ tendency

would have been to spend the time exclusively discussing his personal successes and what he hoped to work on in the future. While that may still have been notable at the time, it would have been a quickly forgotten speech. I believe that his personal overriding desire to connect with the audience in front of him is perhaps the greatest propelling factor that enabled the success of his companies in the first place.

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