Reading Our Own Speech Critiques as Texts that Reveal Educational Goals, Instructional Roles and Communicative Functions

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Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol3/iss1/17
About twenty years ago I reviewed the prescriptive literature related to classroom criticism of students’ oral performances. Basically, it consisted of a set of questions about format, timing and wording of critiques that were answered in terms of each author’s preference: “Here’s how I always do it and it works for me.” Recently I had occasion to review the current literature in preparing the instructor’s manual for a basic public speaking text. I found that not much has changed. The advice that our field has is still largely anecdotal and consists of recommending techniques for universal application. The scant research that exists still seems directed toward building a general theory of what constitutes effective criticism of oral performance.

In that same ambitious spirit, I presume here to give the final answer to all of the following troubling questions: Who should criticize students’ presentations (instructor, peers, or self)? When should criticisms be given (after each speech, at the end of the class session, or at the next class)? How should comments be presented (written, oral, computer generated, during class, or in private conferences)? What should be said in a critique (content or delivery comments, negative or positive evaluations, personally or impersonally phrased)? My answer to all of these questions is “It depends.”

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**Reading Our Own Speech Critiques as Texts that Reveal Educational Goals, Instructional Roles and Communicative Functions**

*Jo Sprague*

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Volume 3, June 1991

Published by eCommons, 1991
In order to unpack the implications of this flip response, I invite a deeper scrutiny of our goals in the introductory performance course. This paper argues that much of the controversy over the effectiveness of various specific methods of speech criticism has been clouded by the absence of a consensus about goals. It seems that our research in both instructional communication and communication education has centered far too much on technique and far too little on questions of educational purpose. Pedagogical theory cannot develop without a strong strand of critical and philosophical work that provides standards against which to evaluate the practical techniques generated by teachers and scholars. Besides urging us to engage in on-going philosophical discussions of our purpose and priorities, the following discussion recommends some ways to examine our present classroom critiques as significant texts. Specifically, a close reading of written comments or transcriptions of oral comments can reveal instructors' assumptions about educational goals, instructional roles and communicative functions. The discourse analysis I suggest may be undertaken formally as part of systematic instructional research projects or it may be used more informally for purposes of self-reflection, curricular review, or training new faculty and TAs.

WHAT DO OUR CRITIQUES REVEAL ABOUT OUR GOALS AS EDUCATORS?

It is customary to include in discussions of classroom criticism, Holtzman's (1960) provocative question that teachers should ask, “What can I say (or write or do) that will result in this student’s improving his [sic] communicative ability?” (1). A prior question in my opinion is what do we mean by “improved communicative ability” in the context of the performance-oriented basic course? Are we able to articulate how
we expect our students to be different after taking our classes? Just as we cannot evaluate student oral performances without criteria, we cannot evaluate our own critical practices as instructors without clearly articulated goals of instruction. Specifically, it is helpful to consider the relationship between speech criticism and the goals of education in general, the goals of the performance-oriented basic course, and the goals of specific oral assignments. Our beliefs about the purpose of higher education are reflected in national policy, mission statements of particular institutions and in the educational philosophies of individual professors. There is no action without purpose. But there are differences among individuals in the degree to which we are aware of our purposes and there are differences in academic units about the level of consensus about purpose. Recognizing that there are many systems for classifying educational purpose, I have suggested four major goals that are perhaps the most frequently articulated (Sprague, 1990). These are transmitting cultural knowledge, developing students' intellectual skills, providing students with career skills, and/or reshaping the values of society. A commitment to one of these educational goals, or a belief in a certain prioritization among them, will greatly influence the rationale that we present for every educational decision, including the ways we choose to handle speech criticism. These are the values that become, in effect, the major premises for our arguments about how to spend class time in performance courses and how best to deliver criticism to students.\

When the overall goal of education is articulated, it becomes easier to think about the next question. That is the issue of how a particular performance course in communication fits into the broader purpose of education. The speeches, debates, and panel discussions that students present in class can be justified in a number of ways. If we read our own catalogues or the introductory statements on our syllabi or if we listen to ourselves as we introduce our courses, we will hear statements like these: (1) “Students are learning to express
themselves so that they can join in the ongoing discussion over important public issues.” (2) “Students are becoming fluent and articulate so that they can be successful in their careers.” (3) “Students are learning communication skills to enable them to advance in their other educational experiences through the epistemic power of dialogue.” (4) “Students are learning to be critical listeners so that they can resist unethical attempts at manipulation.” And many more.

One useful way to think about the general orientations of communication performance courses is offered by Richard Fulkerson who is a director of an introductory course in composition. The following is drawn on his ideas as laid out in a research report (1978) and a later article (1979). Drawing a four part paradigm of literary criticism from M.H. Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), Fulkerson (1978) adapted the schema to the teaching of composition. The schematic below shows how the four elements in a communicative transaction — message, reader, writer and universe each imply an emphasis for literary criticism and in turn a possible emphasis in the teaching of composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transactional Element</th>
<th>Literary Emphasis</th>
<th>Composition Emphasis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reader (Audience)</td>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Rhetorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer (Speaker)</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universe</td>
<td>Mimetic</td>
<td>Mimetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Formalist</td>
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Fulkerson explains how he has adapted these categories from literary criticism to composition studies. Just by substituting the terms speaker for writer and audience for reader, I have found that these four approaches apply to oral composition as well as to written composition. It seems that we reflect one or more of these approaches as we select our textbooks, make
our assignments, and evaluate our students’ speeches. Here are the descriptions of the types of courses that reflect these orientations, modifying Fulkerson’s descriptions only slightly (1978, 6-8).

An introductory course that is built upon rhetorical principles would stress the fact that one speaks for an audience and that all decisions should be made on the basis of probable audience reactions. In their purest form, such classes would make heavy use of shift of opinion forms for evaluation of persuasive speeches and comprehension tests for informative speeches. Logically, in order to assess the impact of the speech, at least on the immediate audience, there would tend to be a heavy reliance on peer criticism of speeches.

An introductory course built upon the expressive theory would emphasize the value of speaking to the students’ own growth. The act of speaking to an audience may clarify values, help one see oneself better, or just make a person feel better. The expressive approach is consonant with the idea of helping students find their own voice. Such a course would probably emphasize personal experiences and speeches which develop positions on ethical and value questions. Activities to overcome communication apprehension and to build confidence would play a major role in such a course.

An introductory course with a primarily mimetic emphasis would have as its goal that the students’ speeches more accurately reflect the world after the course than before it. Here teachers take the view that students do not speak well because they do not think well; hence a course that works on making them clearer thinkers will make them better speakers. Students also need more information to speak well. They cannot speak until they do research and learn how it really is. Assuming that students speak “inaccurately” because they do not use words correctly, such a class often works on building a rich and correct vocabulary.

The final, and perhaps most traditional, course Fulkerson terms the formalistic. The assumption underlying this course

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is that a student is successful by understanding the forms or elements of good speaking. If a teacher says slang is bad, that is accepted without reference to any other element in the communication transaction, such as the audience or the speaker. Courses which emphasize this approach rely on “the non-contextual defense of topic sentences, or of outlining, . . . or of banning prepositions at the ends of sentences, or of listing certain never-to-be-used words” (9).

Most of the earlier work on speech criticism had looked at the dimensions of the manifest content of the critiques as evident in the four dichotomous categories of content/delivery, positive/negative, atomistic/holistic, and personal/impersonal (Book & Simmons, 1980; Sprague, 1971; Sprague & Schenone, 1981; Vogel, 1973; Young, 1974). Oral or written performance critiques can also be studied to reveal the unstated motivations that guide teachers in making the comments that they do. In various workshops, staff meetings and TA training sessions I have invited instructors to write comments on videotaped samples of student speeches and then to classify their own comments according to Fulkerson’s four part system. In each case, the subsequent discussion has moved from considerations of critiques as technical tools to an awareness of critiques as texts that reveal a great deal about the orientation of the writer.

What has emerged from these conversations is the insight that we frequently send our students confusing messages when we highlight one goal in our textbook selection, another in our lectures, another in making an assignment and yet another in our criticism of speeches. Perhaps the most common tension I observe is between a rhetorical emphasis in our lectures and the use of formalist standards in evaluation. “Why do I have to state a thesis sentence in my introduction,” they justifiably ask, “if I was successful in persuading my audience without it?” Why indeed? Probably, surface inconsistencies of this sort go back to a teacher’s beliefs about the broader categories of educational purpose and about the interconnections of...
among goals. That is, how do institutional goals, course goals and the goals of particular assignment fit together? Only when teachers are required to articulate their priorities among competing goals and the connections among goals can they clearly address the question of what sorts of criticism will be most useful.

Even if it is possible to have several complementary goals for education as a whole and for a course, when it gets down to a specific performance assignment, we are virtually forced to set some priorities. This occurs in a gross way, I think, when most teachers use some sort of warm up assignment that has a clear goal of getting students to feel comfortable. Criticism of these speeches is almost universally brief, supportive, positive, global. (It helps that such speeches are usually ungraded or given a token weighting.) As courses go along, students are expected to meet multiple (sometimes incompatible) goals in every speech and teachers are challenged as to which successes and failures to comment upon. Several difficult questions arise. Given my primary goals for higher education and my primary goals for this course, what goals should I realistically set for a series of assignments? What experiences do students need to have immediately and which can wait until later in the course or even later in life? Which assignments need to be done in the context of a formal audience setting and which can be done in a conference or workshop setting? What kinds of comments should be shared publicly and what should be transmitted privately? The kind of goal analysis referred to above can bring some clarity to the consideration of these questions.

Consider the example of the student who wondered why a stated thesis sentence was necessary in a speech that “worked” without one. Perhaps that course was taught by Professor A who sees education mainly as intellectual skill development, and further is comfortable with the selection of formalism as the course goal most likely to develop those skills. Her priority is to provide students with a set of intellectual
building blocks and communicative tools. She reasons that these component skills can later be deployed rhetorically for ends such as advancing a career or transforming a society. This completely justifiable goal structure, if consciously identified and articulated, would nonetheless almost force the teacher to reconceptualize the student performances as drills or exercises. There is no pretense that class members are actual audience members to be persuaded. They are fellow learners who can assist in monitoring mastery of the component skills using the kinds of checklists and categories that accompany formalist approaches to invention. If Professor A is clear enough about this goal for a particular assignment, or class experience, or entire course, then her students will recognize the skill practice schema which they have encountered throughout their lives as learners. (“These are the pre-game drills not the actual competition.” Or, “we need to practice the musical scales before writing a symphony.”) Her critical comments would center around how well a speech met pre-set criteria. Her students would probably receive public oral feedback on how they met those criteria and she would reinforce the basic principles of speaking so that all her students could transfer them to more realistic situations later. The fact that a student expressed his or her inner self or moved the audience would not be important in this setting. Just as the near universal “warm-up” assignment generally subordinates issues of structure to the goal of helping each student find a public voice, so most of Professor A’s course assignments would foreground formalist goals at the expense of other goals.

We could imagine another instructor, Professor B, who has nearly opposite prioritization of course goals. She might believe that the most important educational goal is to prepare students to criticize and transform their world. Perhaps she sees a speech class fitting into that goal through taking a primarily expressive orientation with a secondary mimetic focus. Her goal would be for students to find their own voices,
to recognize their unique way of seeing the world and to feel empowered enough to speak from their inner experience and in their own idiom. Incidentally, she might also want them to master the tools of critical thinking and to discover the “real truth” about our social institutions. In this class, the things that need to be achieved first have to do with building confidence and discovering truth. The formalist refinements, this teacher assumes, will come later when the right to speak and the need to speak are fully internalized. Her class might be expected to make use of small support groups to develop confidence in one’s expression of ideas, but there would also be times to speak to a large group to provide experience with the kind of “publics” one must address in order to transform society. It follows that criticism in this class will be directed toward helping students find out what they really believe and in supporting them when they express themselves courageously. Much of the post-speech discussion will be directed toward the content of the speeches in an effort to test the validity of ideas. Probably very little classroom criticism will be related to formalistic considerations such as outlining, transitions, or the use of standard academic speech codes.

I could go on to Professors C, D, E and F who embodied various combinations of overall goals for higher education and different opinions of how speech communication best enabled those goals. Of course, each professor would have a slightly differing prioritization of the secondary and tertiary goals of instruction. My point here is not to try to describe every possible course orientation, but to make the point that we cannot gauge the effectiveness of decisions made about classroom criticism without some explicit identification of goals.
WHAT DO OUR CRITIQUES REVEAL ABOUT HOW WE SEE THE TEACHER’S ROLE

A great deal of the controversy over the proper timing, mode and phrasing of criticism can be understood in terms of the multiple and contradictory roles that teachers must play. While teachers of every subject struggle with intra-role conflicts, communication teachers seem to face an unusual set of problems. Some of these are identified by Weaver and Cotrell (1989) who identify five common tensions that basic course instructors face. In communication performance courses particularly, we are often torn between our desire to be supportive of students who place their fragile egos on the line each time they speak and our desire to be honest, rigorous and/or challenging. To supplement the understandings of these role conflicts drawn from my own experiences as a teacher and my observations as a course director, I conducted another round of informal discourse analysis of the same sample of speech critiques. Again, instead of looking at the content dimensions of the statements I read them as a research text attempting to decide what sort of role relationship between teacher and student was implied by each comment. The majority of comments fell into three categories that I have labeled the coach, the judge and the articulate audience member. These titles are fairly self explanatory. The following examples should illustrate how these three roles may be inferred from the nature of a teacher’s critical discourse. Where the coach would say “try to find ways to bring the technical terms into common vocabulary,” and the judge would say “failed to define terms adequately,” the articulate audience member might say, “I was with you through your introduction but when you began talking about UFRG’s and AAC’s, I kept trying to figure out what you meant. After a while I decided that UFRG’s must be some sort of grant, but I didn’t have a clue what AAC’s were.”

When a teacher acts as a coach, she or he is telling a student what to do, making suggestions, demonstrating alter-
natives. When a teacher acts as a judge, she or he is comparing the students’ work to some established standards. In the language of educational evaluation, the criticism and comments received from a coach constitute formative evaluation; the comments of a judge exist to justify and explain a summative evaluation. The tension between these two roles is most pronounced when I find myself in the classroom trying to grade a speech that I have seen develop through several drafts of an outline or heard practiced in my office. (Sometimes a student who received a low grade from the judge confronts the coach in anger, saying, “why didn’t you tell me what I was supposed to do?”) The third role that I have identified — the articulate audience member—does not seem to be in such direct conflict with the other two. This person merely gives a self-reflective account of how the presentation affected her or him. The modifier "articulate" is an essential part of this instructional role. It is assumed that because instructors are trained observers of rhetorical events, equipped with analytic frameworks and rich vocabularies, that their conscious commentaries will be more instructive than those from typical audience members. Despite the expertise that would normally be reflected in an experienced critic's comments, the comments of a teacher in this role are less privileged, or at least more contestable, than those of either the coach or the judge. In the final analysis, all comments are subjective reports. The articulate audience member, however, formulates comments in a way that acknowledges this fact that typically remains concealed.
WHAT DO OUR CRITIQUES REVEAL ABOUT HOW WE SEE THEIR COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION?

Even when a teacher has thought about the goals of instruction and has conceptualized the teaching role, is it still not possible to make decisions about critical practice without having a set of categories that capture the *purposive* nature of critical acts. In contrast to the earlier research that asked *what is being said* in speech critiques, I am proposing that we now ask a question reflective of a great deal of contemporary communication theory: *What is getting done?* When we respond to student performances, what are we up to? What function do we see our comments serving? Barnes (1990) drew on Speech Acts theory in her analysis of the comments teachers make on student’s written compositions. She identified directives, designed to get the student to do something, and verdictives, speech acts that provide an evaluation of something (159). The two subcategories of the former were editives and revisionals. Praise, dispraise and grades comprise the verdictive acts. I suspect that we would find similar—but not identical—speech acts implicit in teachers’ critiques of oral communication.

Even without applying a sophisticated analytical schema or attempting to find exhaustive categories, it can be instructive for oral communication instructors to strip transcribed critical comments down to grammatical kernels. Consider these two comments: “Stop shifting back and forth,” and “Perhaps try to be just a little clearer in introducing your sources and explaining where all of those wonderful statistics come from.” Despite all the differences in content and tone, both are commands: You do X. Other comments serve to judge or classify: A is B. (“Your introduction was wonderful!” or “Your articulation seemed a bit slurred at times.”) Teachers’ comments also describe, entreat, make threats or promises and serve a number of other apparent functions. Moving from an examination of these underlying imperative, declaratory or
interrogative thrusts of comments to their actual phrasing shows the functional nature of speech style. Why does a teacher go to the trouble of saying “it seems to me that you were just a little fast and perhaps you might consider slowing down a bit at times” instead of “You’re too fast. Slow down”? Presumably, the words that qualify or soften the basic message serve relational functions such as saving face or building solidarity (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

For the purposes of reflection or training, the main goal of analyzing critiques is to examine an artifact of one’s own teaching practice in order to gain some critical distance. Any of a number of frameworks may be loosely applied to provide an answer to the question: If I did not know the person who wrote this, what could I reasonably assume about his or her goals for teaching, perceived role as an oral communication instructor, and beliefs about the communicative functions of speech comments? A staff meeting or training session could use a set of questions like those in the Table 1 to guide such a discussion.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Worksheet for Analyzing Speech Critiques as Discourse</td>
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**What is the content of this critique?**
- Which comments are about content? Delivery?
- Which comments are positive? Negative?
- Which are phrased personally? Impersonally?
- Which are atomistic? Holistic?

**What goals for speaking are implied by this critique?**
- Which comments suggest a rhetorical orientation?
- Which comments suggest an expressive orientation?
- Which comments suggest a mimetic orientation?
- Which comments suggest a formalist orientation?
What instructional role is implied by this critique?
- Which comments suggest the teacher as coach?
- Which comments suggest the teacher as judge?
- Which comments suggest the teacher as articulate audience member?

What communicative function is implied by this critique?
- Which comments give orders, suggestions, advice?
- Which comments report judgments?
- Which comments report reactions?
- Which comments include language that seems to serve a relational purpose that goes beyond the referential meaning of the comment?

Questions for discussion:
1. Were there features of your critiques identified though this analysis that surprised you?
2. Are there any mixed messages or contradictions you may be sending in this critique?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having one clear educational goal, instructional role and communicative function as a critic in an oral communication class?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a variety of educational goals, instructional roles and communicative functions as a critic in an oral communication class?

For communication researchers, however, the analysis of critiques as texts serves only as a first step. A fuller understanding of criticism in oral performance classes requires us to link the features of discourse to the various educational goals, instructional roles and communicative functions. Observing how teachers select from among the types of speech acts and how they appear to assume the three roles could provide a fairly sophisticated framework for analysis of teachers’
critiques. Combining these categories with the former static categories of content/delivery, positive/negative, atomistic/holistic and personal/impersonal raises the possibility that teachers do have reasons for selecting different kinds of messages to meet different specific goals. A teacher may be more likely to use a suggestion than a command when dealing with a negative aspect of delivery. The role of judge may be more appropriate than the role of coach in making a final holistic statement about a speech that will not be repeated. Certain of these speech acts may be more likely to appear in written than in oral criticism, and politeness forms might be more evident in public than private settings.

**WHAT DO OUR CRITIQUES SEEM TO TELL STUDENTS TO DO?**

The foregoing recommendations to view critical comments as purposive speech acts that reflect teachers’ assumptions about their roles necessarily focus on the intent behind classroom criticism. My final suggestions remind us that we should also situate our critical practice in an understanding of the students’ perceptions of comments. What do they think our criticism is doing and how are they supposed to make sense of it? Such a shift in perspective moves us from a consideration of intent to an analysis of communicative effect, or, in speech acts language, from an assessment of the illocutionary force of critical statements to an examination of their perlocutionary force. Once again, the insights that I have to offer on this issue come from teachers of composition.

Sommers exposes a set of problems that composition teachers seem to discuss widely, but that we rarely address in speech communication classes (1982). Based on her review of English teachers’ comments on papers she identified two major problems:
(1) Teachers’ comments can take students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus attention on the teachers’ purpose in commenting (149).

(2) Most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text (152).

She observes that teachers appropriate students’ writing and make it their own by editing it so that students give up their ownership and just say “tell me how to change it so you like it.” Worse yet, students do not know how to go about changing the text because of the conflicting messages they receive. Illustrating this problem with an example of a specific student paper, she notes that the teacher’s interlinear comments ask for quite specific editing at the sentence level, yet the marginal comments suggest that there are serious problems with the basic arguments. Why would a student want to polish the language of something that is about to be substantially redrafted?

These different signals given to students, to edit and develop, to condense and elaborate, represent also the failure of teachers’ comments to direct genuine revision of the text as a whole . . . Moreover, the comments are worded in such a way that it is difficult for students to know what is the most important problem in the text and what problems are of lesser importance. No scale of importance is given to the student with the result that a comment about spelling or a comment about an awkward sentence is given weight equal to a comment about organization or logic . . . . The comments encourage students to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing . . . . The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a single trivial activity . . . (151).

The problem that Sommers is addressing is one that we can surely apply to our own responses to assignments. But
beyond that, I am certain that in classes involving oral performance, many of our critiques are just as confusing to the student. When we comment for instance on the fact that a student lacked evidence to support a certain point, we may be saying a number of things. Maybe, (as coach) we are suggesting that the student go find more evidence for a later presentation of the same speech. Maybe, (as judge) we are warning this student that in the future on other topics it would be a good idea to do more research so you don’t blow it like you did here. Possibly we are not really making a comment to help the present speaker at all but are giving a mini-lecture to the rest of the class on the importance of evidence, using that student as a case study. Whether a teacher intends critical comments to function as a verdictive or a directive, for example, is ultimately less important than the student’s feelings, thoughts or actions that actually result from the communication. (See Gaines, 1979, for a useful schema for classifying perlocutionary acts.)

Both Sommers and Fulkerson indicate that student writers are frequently confused by mixed messages they receive from their instructors’ comments. If student speakers are experiencing similar confusion, we need to discover ways to eliminate inconsistencies and to clarify priorities among diverse comments. Koch and Brazil’s (1978) list of priorities for diagnosing student writing begins with global concerns such as unity, focus and coherence. It then moves to structural concerns of paragraphs and sentences. Only when these serious issues are resolved do teachers address writing errors, mechanics, usage, and dialect features. A similar consciousness of our priorities for student oral presentations (again, obtainable only through extended reflection and dialogue about purpose) could guide an instructor or a department in thinking about how best to conduct classroom criticism. Our checklists or random stream of consciousness notes to students frequently lack a sense of the relative importance of our comments. When our goals are clearer, perhaps we can com-
municate more explicitly about what students should do first and what they should do later, which comments relate to the essential features of oral composition and which are minor points of polishing or refining the presentation.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL PRACTICE AND COURSE STRUCTURE**

These suggestions to read our own critiques as texts reflect the importance of basing decisions about speech criticism on a clear understanding of course goals. We need to talk to others in our educational communities about how we see our mission—as a profession, as campus colleagues, as departmental faculties, and as instructors of a certain course. We also need to build a research base to understand the effects of various critical practice in terms of the goals that we set for ourselves. That research base cannot be limited to studies of how different content features of speech criticism relate to certain static teacher and student characteristics. Situated inquiries using methods drawn from discourse analysis and classroom ethnography must be designed to see how the process of classroom criticism is given meaning by the participants in the event.

The results of the kinds of discussions and of the sustained inquiry recommended here will almost inevitably lead us to a re-examination of the structure of our performance courses. It seems, for example, that any one of the general course orientations I have borrowed from Fulkerson—rhetorical, expressive, mimetic or formalistic—would require much more formative evaluation and less summative evaluation that the typical speech class format provides. At Basic Course Conferences for years one refrain has been that there is no pedagogical justification for the widespread model of having twenty-five students sit through twenty-four other
speeches, give one speech, receive feedback on it, and then move on to a completely different assignment. Such a scandalous waste of time would never be tolerated in organizational settings where presentation skills are being taught. Everything we know about skill development supports the value of frequent trials with extensive formative feedback. Our counterparts in English work with numerous drafts and revisions, using peer writing groups and individual conferences with the instructor. We are constrained by academic schedules and inflexible space and by the fact that assembling some sort of fresh audience for subsequent “drafts” of speeches is much more complicated than just re-reading student papers. Still we have not been imaginative in our use of peer support groups and practice teams, in using mini-audiences (Dubner & Mills, 1984) or even in using videotaping (which all too often is relied upon to reflect on a speech already given rather than to prepare for upcoming speeches).

At the same time, I am not as critical as I used to be of the practice of keeping our classes intact for much of their interaction. Turning classes into skills workshops or speech labs modeled after corporate training programs comes at a price. That price is the further privatization of learning at a time when there are virtually no public forums for communal discussion to occur. Reclaiming neglected insights from John Dewey, Greene (1988) and Giroux (1988) remind us of the important potential of schools in opening public spaces for communication. I believe that the public speaking classroom can be a site for empowering students to move beyond their own narrow discourse communities and to expand their sense of the possibility of collective action.

This essay has argued that the recurrent discussions of the mechanics of classroom critical practice need to be situated in a broader discussion of goals and priorities. Goal identification necessarily requires dialogue about educational values. As with so many issues in education, the questions of classroom criticism need to move out of the arena of technique.
and into the arena of reflection on purpose. The process of reflection can be aided, though, by analyzing our present discourse in classroom critiques to reveal the implicit assumptions about goals, roles and functions. When we really understand and agree upon “why,” we will open up countless new possibilities for “how.”

**NOTES**

1. Two fine summaries of this work are Book (1985) and Rubin (1990).
2. Greenberg’s analysis of basic course manuals (1989) exposes considerable lack of awareness of the ethical and philosophical assumptions undergirding our courses and states that for her, this absence of explicit discussion of values is more worrisome than the contradictory nature of the rhetoric of the manuals.
3. In 1990, Fulkerson revisits his earlier classification of the goals and states that teachers of composition studies have virtually achieved consensus on rhetorical perspective for their basic courses, although they are deeply divided over the pedagogical means to achieve their goal.
4. There has been research dealing with student perceptions of the helpfulness of certain critiques (Book & Simmons, 1980; Young, 1974) as with student characteristics influencing their interpretation of critiques (Booth-Butterfield, 1989).
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