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AUTHOR Rollman, Steven A.
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ABSTRACT

One of the thorniest problems facing teachers of public address and other speech performance courses concerns students' reticence in classroom criticism and discussion of fellow students' performance. Many teachers believe that discussing the speeches in class provides valuable feedback to the speaker and helps foster critical thinking skills in the audience members. The following suggestions can help students feel more comfortable with the concept of public criticism: (1) have students discuss the video-taped speeches of strangers before discussing one another's presentations; (2) announce that comments made in class will not affect the speaker's grade; (3) explain to students that honest criticism is an act of friendship; (4) explain that the most helpful comments are "constructive"; (5) the better students know one another the more they will offer critical comments; (6) ask a class "What was good about this speech?" rather than asking "What was wrong?"; (7) consider assigning specific listening roles; (8) explain that positive comments are also examples of "criticism"; (9) emphasize that criticizing the speech is not criticizing the person; (10) allow speakers the option of not having their speeches discussed; and (11) ask specific rather than general questions. Finally, when teachers make comments, they should consider whether to make them in private or in class, and bring up only as much as the student can manage at one time. Throughout, students should be left with the impression that speaking well is not beyond their abilities but, rather, is a skill which they can master. (SR)

LEADING CLASS DISCUSSIONS WHICH EVALUATE STUDENTS' ORAL PERFORMANCE

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Steven A. Rollman
Department of Human Communication
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807

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Steven A. Rollman

One of the thorniest problems facing teachers of public address and other performance courses concerns the classroom criticism and discussion of students' performance. Many teachers believe that it is desirable and important to have class members discuss the speeches because it provides valuable feedback to the speaker and because it helps to foster critical thinking skills in the audience members. When speeches are discussed directly after their presentation the speaker receives immediate feedback which demonstrate reaction from many members of the audience rather than from just one critic- the teacher. The activity is also useful for listeners in that they sharpen their sense of what audience members note, what's important to them, what they find to be praiseworthy, and what they find to be distracting. In short, discussing presentations is apt to make the course more valuable for speakers and listeners alike.

Unfortunately, there are numerous factors which mitigate against the successful discussion of students' performances. Normally talkative students are often stone silent when asked to offer criticisms of their fellow classmates. Early in a course I recently asked students to describe some of the factors which might account for their reticence. Among the concerns most often mentioned were the following:

"It is "wrong" to criticize people in public."

"If I am harsh on a classmate, he or she will be harsh on me when I present my own speech."

"I don't know enough to serve as a credible critic."

"I can't think of anything really helpful to say."

"I don't want to adversely affect the grade of a classmate."

"I don't want to be seen as an ogre."

It is useful to discuss and seek to dispel some of these notions. Doing so is apt to help students feel more comfortable with the concept of public criticism. Individual instructors should also seek to be consciously aware of what techniques do and do not work well for them. Doing so enables one to improve pedagogical technique from year to year. Based on two decades of trial and error I offer the following suggestions:

Before asking the students to discuss one another's presentations, have them discuss the video taped speeches of strangers.

The non-threatening nature of this activity makes for an excellent introduction to communication evaluation and effectively serves as a warm-up for later discussions. Most text publishers can provide tapes of sample speeches. One could also ask colleagues to tape some speeches in their classes, or one could create a library of taped speeches for use in future classes.

Announce that comments made in class will not be used to determine the speaker's grade.

If students believe that their remarks will be used to raise or lower each other's grades, comments are apt to be overwhelmingly positive whether deserved or not. Using "discussion" in this way mitigates against honest criticism. If students' comments are the basis for grades, it won't take long for clever students to form pacts in which they will lavishly praise each other's efforts. The resulting exercise in gamesmanship will do nothing to improve student's speeches or listener's critical thinking skills.

Explain to students that honest criticism is an act of friendship.

It is important for class members to realize that telling a person how to do something better is not a hostile act but a friendly one. If students understand this point they will be much more comfortable providing evaluative comments to each other. The spirit of the entire enterprise is for class members to help each other to improve their skills and this is most likely to occur in an atmosphere conducive to the application and implementation of constructive criticism.

Explain that the most helpful comments will be "constructive."

Everyone will probably agree that criticism should be constructive but few students will understand what that means. Spend some time explaining that constructive criticism will provide a speaker with information regarding how to improve. Provide some examples of constructive criticism and non-constructive criticism. For example, "The introduction stunk." is not apt to be a very useful comment. On the other hand, "The introduction would be stronger if you were to do more to relate the topic to the lives of those in your audience." is prescriptive and much more helpful.

The better students know one another the more apt they are to offer critical comments.

Based on this notion, teachers would do well to engage in some of the many relationship building activities which help students come to know one another better and trust one another more.

Asking a class "What was good about this speech?" is much more likely to produce responses than asking "What was wrong?"

Students are often comfortable sitting in silence when the "What was wrong?" question is posed but will not let much time pass before providing responses to the "What was good about this speech?" question. The latter question is therefore a better choice for initiating discussion. Once the conversation has begun, one can then move to discussion of the weaker aspects of the presentation.

Consider assigning specific listening roles.

One might assign different students specific aspects to note and report to the class at the end of a presentation. For example, one student will be asked to tell us at the end of the speech what he/she considered to be the strongest aspect of the presentation. Another student might reveal

what he/she considered to be the area which could most use improvement. Other students might be asked to listen for and then reveal their perceptions of the speaker's main point, the organizational structure, or what they think they'll most remember from the speech.

Be sure that students understand that positive comments are also examples of "criticism."

Many students believe that criticizing something refers to pointing out its shortcomings. Explain to pupils that discussing what was good about a message is also a legitimate act of criticism. Valuable class comments can relate to why a speaker made wise rhetorical decisions. It is also helpful to discuss what is worthy of emulation in a speaker's delivery, organization, or approach to the topic.

Emphasize that criticizing the speech is not criticizing the person.

One of the greatest factors inhibiting fruitful evaluative discussions is the belief that it is the person rather than the work which is under evaluation. Emphasize that comments will judge the quality of the work, not the quality of the person. "Good" people can present "bad" speeches; "bad" people can present "good" speeches. Comments made are not intended to judge the speaker's worthiness to walk among us.

Allow speakers the option of not having their speeches discussed.

Occasionally one will run across a student who is terrified at the concept of being criticized in public. I find it helpful to announce that I will exempt students who ask that their work not be evaluated by the class. I simply ask that they let me know before their speech. Over the years, very few students have chosen this option. The existence of this option is helpful, however, in that the vast majority of students who do not select it imply that they are open to hear suggestions from their fellow classmates and this helps everyone to feel more comfortable offering ideas.

Ask specific rather than general questions.

Students, in response to a broad question such as "What did you think of Joe's speech?" will often make comments related to the speaker's delivery but may need prompting in order to render remarks which pertain to the management of ideas. Teachers might ask specific questions which relate to issues such as the appropriateness and clarity of the speakers goal, the speaker's adaptation to the audience, the organization of the message, the support which was provided, or the effectiveness of the introduction and/or conclusion.

A Final Word

Teachers will probably elect to render comments in addition to the issues which were raised by the class. Some of the things which a teacher would point out to a student are better communicated in a written evaluation or a private conference than in front of the entire class. A speaker might, for example suffer from a speech impediment and not be aware of it. While bringing this to the student's attention is valuable, there is nothing to be gained by pointing this out in front of everyone. In their own remarks, teachers should focus on raising those issues from which everyone might learn. Finally, teachers should not mention everything they noticed but instead should bring up only as much as the student might sensibly manage at one time. If one notices twenty things about a speech which could have been done better it makes no sense to overwhelm a student with all of them. Instead, choose a few of the most meaningful suggestions. Throughout, students should be left with the impression that speaking well is not beyond their abilities but, rather, is a skill which they can master.

END

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