DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 553 CS 213 758

AUTHOR Stewart, Penny
TITLE Cross-Curricular Grading: H. P. Grice's Principle in Every Teacher's Repertoire.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum; *Cooperative Learning; *Grades (Scholastic); *Grading; Higher Education; Holistic Evaluation; Models; Student Evaluation; *Theory Practice Relationship; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Grice (H P); Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Teachers often act more like artists, in the sense that they tend to jump back and forth between new trends in pedagogy and theory. Meanwhile, the public, concerned that student evaluation as manifested in grading procedures rests on shaky ground, are losing faith in the credibility of their children's teachers. One way for teachers of all subjects to establish credibility in student evaluation is to rest grading practice on the "Cooperative Principle" theory of H. P. Grice. Grice lists four maxims for his principle as it relates to conversation: quantity, quality, relation and manner. Grice's analysis of speech and ordinary conversation can be easily adapted for use in grading student's written assignments. The maxims are internally recognized by members of a culture as essential to successful communication, and writing can be clearly judged and critiqued according to Grice's model. Early in a semester, the teacher should introduce the students to Grice's concepts, so that they begin by knowing how their writing will be evaluated. These principles can also be easily transposed across the curriculum into other academic fields. In short, teachers concerned with writing can easily utilize Grice's model as a means of exploiting what they already know and internally understand about everyday conversation. (HB)

Cross-Curricular Grading: H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle in Every Teacher's Repertoire

Penny Stewart, Ph.D.
High Plains Writing Institute
Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

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Andrea Jordan prefaced her "Triple Read Outline" (High Plains Writing Institute, June, 1992) with a compelling observation that, unlike medicine, teaching lacks the stability of a broad theoretical base. Even among teachers, we cynically wonder what the fashion will be next year. Ho-hum! Last year it was one thing, this year another. We wonder what each catch word/phrase means, whether the latest means the same as the one in vogue a couple of years before. We often hop from one trend to another without any more reason than the fact that the newest approach sounds like it might work.

We teachers, often behaving more like artists whose work "feels right," sometimes follow trends without first measuring them against a reliable standard of excellence. During recent years, we have seen ourselves flitting from *cooperative learning* to *collaborative learning*, to *re:learning*, to *whole language*, to *integrated learning*, to *writing across the curriculum.* Sometimes demoralized, we helplessly face a mass of professional literature because each trend furnishes one more catchphrase to try to equate with terminology gone by. The energy demanded to sort one set of ideas from another requires more time and energy than most busy classroom teachers can afford. Meanwhile, the concerned public, wondering what we base our evaluations of their sons and daughters on, lose faith in the credibility of their children's teacher. In turn, we teachers have to agree, when pressed hard, that our teaching practices rest on shaky ground, are not always well grounded in research.

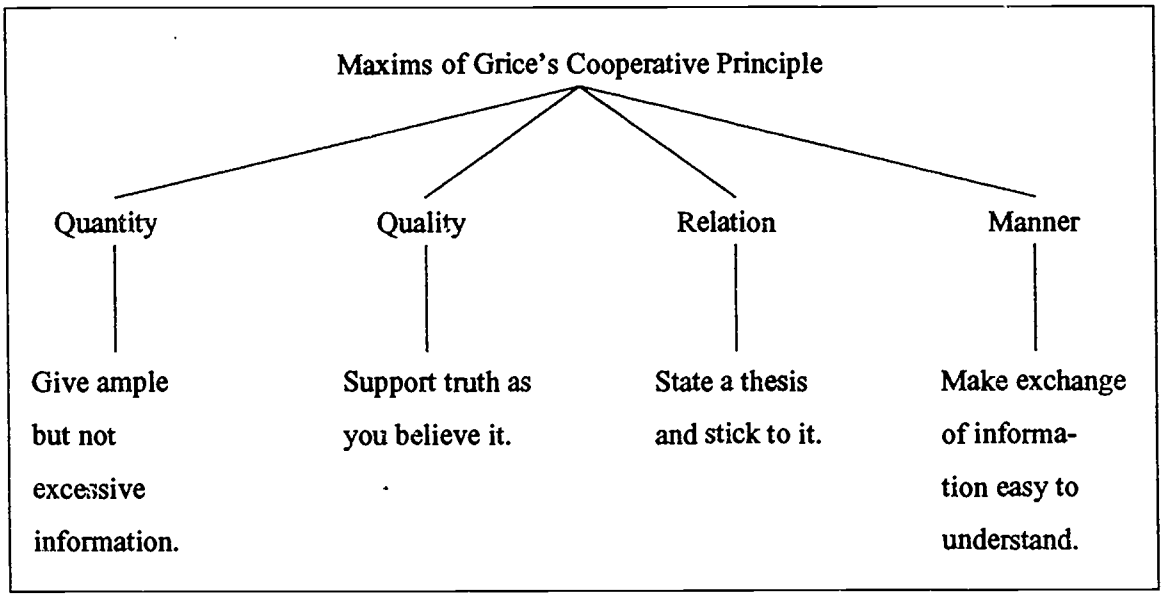
One way for teachers of all subjects to establish credibility is to demonstrate that classroom practices rest solidly on theory. One such particularly applicable theory is that of H. P. Grice, a speech act theorist. His Cooperative Principle (CP) not only describes conversational behavior but also articulates what teachers expect of students' work.

If two theories, *A* and *B*, are proposed to explain a phenomenon *C* and each of the theories DOES explain *C*, the simpler-the-theory with the smallest number of rules (assumptions)--is considered the best theory. For example, both Isacc Newton's inverse square law of the solar system and Albert Einstein's theory $E = mc^2$ of the solar system accurately describe the revolution of the planets about the sun. But Newton's theory does so in the least number of rules. Therefore judged simpler, it is the accepted one.

In the 1967 Harvard William James Lectures entitled *Logic and Conversation*, Grice maintained that conversation coheres because a set of general principles, perhaps universal, governs audience expectations:

> Contribute to a conversation according to the purpose, the occasion, and audience expectations.

This, Grice explained, governs four sets of conversational maxims, condensed and summarized in this schema:



The CP governs four sets of conversational maxims: those of Quantity, of Quality, of Relation, and of Manner. That of Quantity demands that conversationalists furnish the information necessary to meet the purposes of the conversation. At the same time, a speaker should not furnish superfluous information, should not be overly talkative.

The maxim of Quality demands that we tell and support the truth as we believe it. People expect sincerity in regard to what we assert. In other words, Quality has to do with sincerity and support for something we believe in.

The maxim of Relation demands that a conversation[/composition] have a sole clearly stated point and that everything in the discourse pertain to it. So important is this that our culture provides conversational gambits, unacceptable in formal writing, by which we request a change of subject--*by the way, speaking of X* (when no one has even mentioned X), *guess what Y said,*

etc. Listeners expect speakers to declare the point just as readers expect writers to declare the point of non-fiction.

The maxim of Manner demands perspicuity. Grice specifies three qualities of perspicuity: clarity, brevity, and orderliness--the latter also closely connected to the maxim of Relation. There may be, according to Grice, other qualities as well. This maxim means that what we say should be easy to understand.

In *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1976), Mary Louise Pratt extends Grice's analysis of ordinary conversation to "display texts," those oral/written pieces individuals compose for others' enjoyment. She fully develops the notion that the language of everyday life and the language of literature do not differ as much in content as in degree.

According to Pratt, the CP applies to literature because these general rules govern "all verbal discourse and indeed all goal-directed cooperative human behavior" (Pratt 125). Since public writing, composed for audience other than the author alone, is goal-directed, it holds that the maxims of the CP work for both writing and for its evaluation as well. In addition, according to Pratt, "One of the main virtues of Grice's model is that it offers a way of describing the breaches [in its observance]" (Pratt 132).

On one hand, teachers can apply the CP as an effective tool for writing, revising, and editing. On the other hand, students themselves are more apt to understand why their teacher suggests changes when they realize that the suggestions are not whimsical but based on speech act theory. Results are more likely to be uniform across the curriculum if teachers base instructional and evaluative practices on the CP applicable to all rational human behavior.

Internally recognized by members of this culture, these maxims underlie everyday speech. We don't like people who talk too much because they breach the maxim of Quantity. We don't like liars or phonies because they breach the maxim of Quality, do not tell the truth as they believe it. We don't like talking to people whose remarks ramble, who either do not declare the point of a story or do not stick to the point. If we are equals, we urge, "What's the point." We don't listen to public speakers who ramble nor read anything wordily convoluted because rambling breaches the maxim of Manner.

The maxims of the CP pertain to standard requirements of writing. Writing experts advise writers to state and to support a thesis (Relation); to elaborate (Quantity and Quality); to write about what they believe in (Quality); to stick to the point (Relation), and to punctuate, spell, and

construct sentences so that a reader is not distracted from the ideas of composition develops. To satisfy the maxim of Manner in writing further, we include standard mechanics--spelling, punctuation, paragraphing for clarity and order, diction, etc.; without such, writing is hard to understand. In fact, some mechanical errors may either mask meaning or create ambiguity where none is desired, e.g., *there* for *their*. In addition, we expect writers to construct sentences whose syntax complements meaning. Such requirements compose a body of common knowledge among those who wish to write well.

Early in each semester, I present a mini-lesson entitled "How to Make All A's or How to Do What the Teachers Want." Drawing a tree diagram on the chalk board as I talk, I tell them about Grice's CP. I want them to know that they have already internalized the principle and its maxims, so this is nothing new to them. I mention examples of people we do not like to be around because they talk too much, too little, wander from the point, or make matters hard to understand. Then I apply the four maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner to a hypothetical composition to meet the requirements of the class they are enrolled in.

Applying this principle and its four maxims to teaching and learning across the curriculum should provide the basis for uniformity in instruction, in evaluations of student work, and in students' learning strategies--a universal standard which we have hitherto seldom articulated. Since subjects of inquiry such as mathematics, statistics, social sciences, and physical sciences also compose "rational human behavior," it stands that the CP also applies to these subjects.

In the case of mathematics and statistics, for instance, teachers apply the maxims of the CP without articulating it as such. Upon giving a quiz, they expect students to show solutions (Quality--truth as they believe it); to provide accurate work (Quality, Relation, and Manner); to provide sufficient proof (Quantity); to solve one problem at a time (Relation); and to make their work easy to understand (Manner).

By extension, we suggest that teachers across the curriculum, who deal with learners at all levels of intellectual development, will find it accurate to judge students' work in the same way as teachers of writing, literature, math, and statistics. In fact, all of us already measure student accomplishment according to the CP and its maxims although we may not express our "standards for grading" in Grice's terms.

Therefore, depending on students' level of accomplishment, we should early explain that the CP serves as the basis of grading, distribute copies of the CP--prose or schema--and teach

students to evaluate their work by these maxims. Most important, teachers should clarify that the CP is already in the repertoire of students, so they know more than they sometimes think. Because students already know the rules of conversation, they are culturally knowledgeable. Self-respect will increase when they realize that they bring significant behaviors to the classroom. We should also show them how the maxims of the CP apply to our behavior and to our expectations. In short, we teachers should show our students how to exploit the rules of ordinary conversation.

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