

Critiquing Student Speeches: The Need for Supportiveness

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Abstract

The difficulties and the advantages of giving oral critiques of student speeches are discussed. The advantages of using oral critiques are such that many speech teachers will want to include them. It is argued in this paper that the difficulties associated with oral critiques can be overcome by using communication messages that are intended to reduce defensiveness and create supportiveness. Jack Gibb's model of defensive and supportive communication climates is used to discuss the characteristics of messages that promote supportiveness and assure that oral critiques of student speeches can be more useful and growth promoting rather than hurtful and problematic.

Critiquing Student Speeches: The Need for Supportiveness

Among the difficult decisions speech teachers face involves how to handle the critiques of speeches students have delivered in class. These are universal decisions that face all speech teachers regardless of whether they teach speech at the high school level or in a college or university. One problem associated with oral critiques delivered in class is that students who have just finished speaking are often emotionally aroused. In some cases, this arousal may be the result of powerful feelings of anxiety associated with speaking in front of an audience. The research of James C. McCroskey and his associates, for example, indicates that 1 out of every 4 or 5 high school and college age students experience communication apprehension at a rate high enough to negatively affect their daily lives and their performance in the classroom. Beyond this base level of anxiety, many high school and college age students are acutely concerned about and careful of the image they project to others, especially to their peers. In addition, students giving classroom speeches may be intensely aware that their performance and their speech are also being evaluated by the teacher. Both of these additional factors can cause the students' base level of anxiety to escalate appreciably.

Speech teachers often pursue a number of different learning objectives in the classroom. They are, for example, clearly interested in fostering the development of students' speech preparation and delivery skills, and at the same time, they are also interested that students learn to feel differently about themselves; that they learn to feel more confident, more self-assured, and less anxious about their speaking efforts. The crux of the problem facing speech teachers is how to deliver speaking critiques in the

classroom in a manner that can maximize what students learn about speech preparation and delivery and at the same time can protect the student's image, and can help the student become more confident, self-assured, and less anxious.

Now we can see why the question of how to handle classroom critiques represents such a daunting challenge to speech teachers. Indeed, the problem is so fundamental and difficult that many speech teachers have simply abandoned the practice of conducting classroom critiques in favor of just handing student speakers a standardized critique sheet and grade report at the end of class or at the class session following the speech. This would be the perfect solution to the problem if giving the student a private critique sheet at the completion of the speech was of equal pedagogical value to an oral critique delivered in class for both the student speaker and for the other students in the class who listened to the speech. The two methods are, unfortunately, not of equal pedagogical value for either the speaker or for the listeners of the speech. First, when speeches are critiqued in class, the critique comes at a time closer to when the speech was actually given. Communication experts have often noted the advantages of immediate feedback. It tends to be more accurate and detailed. In the case of classroom critiques, they come at a time when the memory of the speech is fresher in the minds of the speaker, the teacher, and the students in the class. As a result, the information is often more reliable and more useful. Second, listening to instructors' critiques of student speeches gives class members an opportunity to experience critical evaluation first hand. An important goal in the speech classroom is to help students to develop their own critical skills, to learn what is good and workable versus what is not good and not workable and the reasons for these

judgments. By helping students gain these skills, they develop the ability to evaluate other's speaking and, just as importantly, they develop the ability for self-evaluation from which they develop the all important capacity for self-improvement. The advantages of classroom critiques of speeches are such that many speech teachers will want to include them in their own classes, but the tricky problem of using classroom critiques in a way that maximizes the positive outcomes and minimizes the negative ones still remains. It is the purpose of the remainder of this paper to describe a technique that can help resolve this problem.

In 1961, Jack Gibb, an expert in group interaction, published an article in the *Journal of Communication* entitled "Defensive Communication" which over the years has had an important impact in the communication field. Defensive behavior arises when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in social interaction. This perception or anticipation of threat leads the person to expend increasing amounts of energy to defending himself or herself, and this defensive posture, in turn, leads others to respond with increasingly defensive behavior of their own. In addition, because defensive feelings cause people to focus on the self and on the motives of others, defensiveness often prevents listeners from focusing on the message. As a result, defensive listeners frequently miss messages and often distort the messages they do receive. In short, classroom critiques that are perceived to be threatening and which engenders defensive behavior from recipients may create a spiraling increase of defensiveness in the classroom generally.

The antidote for the defensive communication climate is its opposite, the supportive communication climate. The more supportive the climate, the less the listener feels the need to protect the self, and the less likely he or she is to distort the message. Consequently, classroom critiques that will maximize learning value for both the student speaker and for the other students in the class will be critiques delivered in a supportive climate that minimizes the level of threat. Furthermore, developing communication skills in six specific areas can help teachers assure that a supportive climate can be maintained during classroom critiques. These six areas are labeled description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism

Description Not Evaluation

Messages that seem to the listener to be evaluative increase defensiveness. Furthermore, the appearance of evaluation may come from a number of different message parts. For example, word choice, tone of voice, facial expression, and body movement are all message factors that could cause a listener to perceive that the message implies an evaluation or judgment. In fact, the tendency to perceive others in an evaluative way is so common that people may, at least at first, have difficulty forming messages that others perceive as supportive. The key to constructing messages that are not evaluative is to focus on describing our perceptions and feelings. Descriptiveness helps teachers direct their critiques to the speaker's behavior instead of making personal judgments of the speaker or the speaker's actions. A teacher could say, for instance, "By my calculation, your introduction took two minutes and the rest of your speech took three minutes." This is a straight forwardly factual statement; it is a concrete description of what was

observed. Statements of evaluation, such as, “Your introduction was too long,” or “Your speech was too short,” on the other hand, are higher order abstractions that draw an evaluative inference about what was observed. In delivering critiques, a supportive climate is fostered by the use of descriptive language and the avoidance of inferences that imply evaluation and judgment.

Problem Orientation Not Control

Control messages are ones in which the speaker manipulates, coerces, or attempts to persuade the listener to take a particular course of action. Control messages are aggressive messages that attack the listener in order to force the listener to act in a way the speaker wishes, and in doing so, controlling messages deny the right of the listener to make his or her own choices. The antidote for control in speech critiques is to maintain a problem orientation in speaking. This means that instead of trying to control the student’s behavior, the instructor focuses on participating with the student in an attempt to identify and define mutual problems that can be solved through cooperation. As an example, a control statement might sound like this, “If you don’t learn to use more physical movement and gesture you won’t improve as a speaker and your grades will reflect that.” Conversely, taking a problem orientation in the critique might sound like this, “Let’s talk about why you seem to use so little physical movement and gesture in your speaking and see if we can work out something that you’ll find helpful.”

Spontaneity Not Strategy

Strategic messages are ambiguous and often involve hidden agendas and multiple motivations and as a result, it is hard for listeners to know how to make sense of these

messages. Such confusion, especially when it involves the motivations of the speaker, is bound to increase listener defensiveness. No one wants to be duped, and so strategic messages lead listeners to feel vulnerable to speakers who may not be honest and straight forward with them. Strategic communicators are often seen by listeners as fake, as taking a role, or as playing a game. A strategic message might sound like the following, “You don’t cite all of the really important authorities in your arguments.” Defensiveness, on the other hand can be reduced by spontaneity. Spontaneous messages are unfiltered responses to a situation, responses characterized by openness and honesty. They indicate to listeners that the speakers meaning is clear, straight forward, and unambiguous. A spontaneous message, for instance, might sound like the following, “I think my book on this problem could have been useful to you. It outlines most of the major arguments on the issue.”

Empathy Not Neutrality

Neutral messages often seem like a useful technique to use in making a critique of a speaker’s work because neutrality appears to be objective and unbiased. But, this unbiased objectivity is the problem with these messages. Neutral messages increase defensiveness by indicating to the listener that the speaker lacks concern, interest and understanding of the listener. Students want and need to be perceived as having worth and value and that they are worthy of friendship, warmth and affection. When speakers adopt messages that are clinical, detached from the listener, or treat the listener as an object these needs are thwarted and defensiveness ensues. The teacher who says, “It doesn’t matter how busy you are, you simply must find more time to put into developing

and delivering your speech,” has used a neutral message that reflects little caring or understanding of the student. The antidote to the defensiveness that arises from neutrality is to use messages that convey empathy and respect for the listener. Empathetic messages indicate that the speaker identifies with the listener and understands, accepts, and even shares the listener’s feelings. It should be noted, however, that attempts to reassure the listener or to convince the listener that he or she should not feel the emotions they are experiencing are not true empathetic messages because they maintain objectivity and a lack of acceptance in that they imply that the listener’s feelings are false, wrong or inappropriate. Empathetic messages have the quality of accepting and participating with the listener in experiencing the feelings and resolving the problems. A teacher who says, “I can understand how busy you are and how frustrated you are. What if we sit down together and try to find a half hour each day that you can work on your speaking assignments,” has used an empathetic response.

Equality Not Superiority

A superiority message is one that communicates that the speaker feels superior to the listener in intellectual ability, strength, power, physical characteristics or in a number of other ways. Primarily because these messages imply that the speaker sees the listener as inadequate and dependent, they arouse defensiveness in listeners. Furthermore, these messages also increase defensiveness in listeners because they imply a perceived separation and remoteness between speaker and listener that indicates that the speaker may not be willing to become involved in a personal way with the listener, or to enter into a shared problem-solving relationship. An example of a superiority message would

be, “I know what is best and you must follow the procedures I’ve given you, anything else is just not right.” The antidote to the defensiveness generated by Superiority messages is to use equality messages that imply cooperation, respect, preserves individual worth, and communicates a willingness to become personally involved with the other. An example of an equality message is, “How do you think we could help you organize your information more usefully.” A special consideration in using equality messages is to recognize the difference between a person as an individual and a person’s role in a particular social situation. Social roles, such as teacher and student, always carry assumptions about the amount of power and authority an individual in the role has at his or her command. But, we also understand that the role is a social construction and is not the same as the individual who takes on the role. It is the individual behind the role that is of greatest importance here. It is the individual to whom we afford equal worth regardless of the roles he or she takes on. In essence, equality messages emphasize the equal worth of individuals rather than the authority expectations derived from social roles.

Provisionalism Not Certainty

Certain or dogmatic messages create defensiveness in listeners because they imply that the speaker has made up his or her mind and lacks the flexibility and interest to consider other points of view. This inflexibility is often perceived as a need to be right, a need to win the argument, and an unwillingness to engage in shared problem solving. Certainty messages often reflect the language problem that general semanticists call *allness*, the belief of the speaker that he or she possesses all the required information,

all the required facts and truth, and that his or her judgments and statements must, therefore, be completely accurate. A teacher who says, "Further practice of your delivery would be pointless," has used a message that shows certainty. The teacher can reduce defensiveness by using messages that suggest that he or she is willing and even eager to change his or her own behavior, ideas and attitudes, and is especially interested in hearing and considering the point of view of others. Provisional messages are inclusive rather than exclusive of others' points of view and indicate an experimental or exploratory attitude. The teacher who says, "I think that further practice of your delivery may not be very useful until we solve the problem of developing adequate speaking notes, what do you think?," has used a provisional message.

The impact of the above discussion is clear. Using messages that arouse defensiveness thwarts open, honest and useful communication by turning individual concern in on the self. Teachers who want to include oral critiques of student speeches in the classroom can overcome the difficulties of doing so by using supportive messages that convey a sense of worth, acceptance and a willingness to become involved with and work with the student. Developing a supportive climate in the classroom takes time and the teacher should lay the groundwork for it starting the very first day of class. This can be done by using messages that are descriptive, indicate a problem orientation, show spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism.