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Beyond Content, Deeper than Delivery: What Critique Feedback Reveals about Communication Expectations in Design Education

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Abstract

In design education, the critique is a communication event in which students present their design and critics provide feedback. Presumably, the feedback gives the students information about their progress on the design. Yet critic feedback also serves a socializing function—providing students information about what it means to communicate well in the design education context. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study explores what critic feedback reflects about expected communication competencies in design studios. Results suggest that communication competence in this setting involves interaction management, demonstration of design evolution, transparent advocacy of intent, explanation of visuals, and the staging of the performance—all of which imply a communicative identity for students that is tethered to the content and delivery of the presentation, but has implications beyond the content and delivery to the broader disciplinary culture. Implications of this study provide insight for faculty and students involved in pedagogical spaces in which feedback plays an important role in the instructional process—suggesting its potential for shaping disciplinary identities, relationships, and social contexts.

Keywords

Communication across the curriculum, Critique feedback, Oral feedback, Communication in design, Communication in the disciplines

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Abstract

In design education, the critique is a communication event in which students present their design and critics provide feedback. Presumably, the feedback gives the students information about their progress on the design. Yet critic feedback also serves a socializing function—providing students information about what it means to communicate well in the design education context. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study explores what critic feedback reflects about expected communication competencies in design studios. Results suggest that communication competence in this setting involves interaction management, demonstration of design evolution, transparent advocacy of intent, explanation of visuals, and the staging of the performance—all of which imply a communicative identity for students that is tethered to the content and delivery of the presentation, but has implications beyond the content and delivery to the broader disciplinary culture. Implications of this study provide insight for faculty and students involved in pedagogical spaces in which feedback plays an important role in the instructional process—suggesting its potential for shaping disciplinary identities, relationships, and social contexts.

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Introduction

“What is this black thing? That’s the handle for the crane? Ok well, when I look at it like this, it looks like I might stab myself with it or something. Designers have to explain things all the time.” (Feedback given by critic to design student following critique)

Feedback such as this is common in design disciplines across the nation. This critic, in providing feedback to the student, is not only helping the student understand principles of design form and content, but is also providing the student with clues as to what it means to speak like a designer. Yet students are barraged with countless statements like this—and

are left to sort through their meaning and make decisions about how to move forward. What is the student in the above scenario left to do with this comment? What does it mean? What might the student do in the future to avoid this? In dealing with issues such as these, students often concentrate (understandably so) on the design itself—focusing their changes on what critics have said about the design form or concept. What is lost, then, is a focus on the communicative aspects of the critique—the presentation of the design. Yet it is clear, as illustrated above, that critics (faculty or industry guests) pay attention to these communicative aspects of the critique and often have ideas about the best way to present the design. They wonder why students don't "get it" when they provide feedback. They ask what they can do to make their students understand their expectations. And they lament about students who do not improve after intense critique sessions. As such, the issue of "feedback" for design faculty often brings to the fore important questions about teaching and learning.

One place faculty in other disciplines have the opportunity to ask such questions is within communication across the curriculum (CXC) programs that encourage faculty in other disciplines to collaboratively explore issues related to communication, teaching and learning. Broadly, the goals of many communication across the curriculum (CXC) initiatives focus on student learning of communication skills needed within specific disciplines (Dannels, 2001b). This discipline-specific approach to communication instruction implies that students could and should have access to a set of blueprints necessary for successfully communicating within their discipline. While these blueprints would be useful for students, it is unclear whether students are getting explicit messages about communication from their faculty or whether they are expected to cull through faculty feedback, lectures, and materials to understand the implicit message about what their discipline finds important (such as the example above). Therefore, it seems fruitful to explore the messages faculty are giving their students—either intentionally or unintentionally—about communication values and competencies.

This study does just that within a collaborative initiative between communication across the curriculum practitioners and design faculty. Using a qualitative methodological framework, our goals in this study were twofold: first, to explore what critics' (faculty) feedback revealed about valued communication competencies in design education; and second, to explore the implications of understanding "feedback" (theoretically and pedagogically) within design education and in the broader academic setting. Results of this study suggest that feedback reveals competencies of interaction management, demonstration of design evolution, transparent advocacy of intent, explanation of visuals, and the staging of the performance—all of which create a communicative identity for students that is tethered to the content and performance of the presentation, but has implications beyond the content to the broader disciplinary context.

Relevant Literature

Multiple forces have come together to spark the need for increased attention to communication across the curriculum (Cronin, Grice, & Palmerton, 2000; Dannels, 2001a). The popular press, over the past several years, has lamented the poor communication skills of college students (Mehren, 1999; Schneider, 1999; Zernike, 1999)—suggesting "mallspeak" reflects a deterioration of sound reasoning, critical thinking, and professional communication. Accreditation boards such as ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering

and Technology) and SACS (Southern Accreditation of Colleges and Schools) have highlighted the need for communication competence by making communication instruction and assessment critical for accreditation (<http://www.abet.org>; <http://www.sacs.org>). Yet, the popular press and accreditation boards are not the only stakeholders focusing attention on communication competence. Disciplines such as medicine, design, business, engineering, agriculture, and mathematics (to name a few) are becoming increasingly focused on oral communication competence (e.g., Bennett & Olney, 1986; Dowd & Liedtka, 1994; Krapels & Arnold, 1996; Kreps & Kunimoto, 1994; Winsor, 1999). Partially in response to these forces, CXC programs have seen a period of growth.

In addition to programmatic growth, there has also been an increase in research emerging from CXC activities. Early research provided insight into students' liking of communication instruction, perceived improvement after communication instruction, and self-reported content learning with communication instruction—all indicating promise for the CXC initiative (Cronin & Glenn, 1991; Cronin & Grice, 1993; Morreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Whitney, 1993; Steinfatt, 1986). More recent research has emerged from preprofessional disciplines such as engineering, business, medicine, and design (see Blatner, 2003; Dannels, 2002; and Lingard, Schryer, Garwood & Spafford, 2003 for a representative sample of such research). Specific to design education, researchers have recognized oral communication as a central part of the educational process—introducing students to the traditions, values, and performative rituals of design studios and future design workplaces (Dannels, 2005). Also central to design education is the “critique” process—the process by which students present their work and receive feedback on it in a public setting. The precise format of the critique (the proper name for presentations, sometimes referred to as juries or reviews) can vary based on the point in the design process at which the critique occurs. Regardless of the format, students provide some oral explanation of their design and students receive extensive feedback on the design.

Much of the design literature focused on communication skills emphasizes what Morton and O'Brien (2005) termed public speaking skills. The literature ranges from providing generic public speaking advice—prepare in advance, emphasize key points, and dress appropriately (Anthony, 1991); to more discipline-specific communication advice—explain the process, not just the product; prioritize information; illustrate command of the jargon; observe and listen; and separate the work from the self (Dannels, 2005). Yet very little research has explored feedback in design as its own communicative genre. Although there is minimal literature on feedback in the design discipline, research emerging from composition, public speaking pedagogy, English as a second language (ESL) and education provides some insight into feedback. Generally, feedback focused on speaking has been defined as “deliberate descriptive and/or evaluative comments given to a speaker following a presentation” (King, Young, & Behnke, 2000, p. 366). Beyond the practical definition, though, scholars have theorized feedback as a meaning-making dialogue between a teacher and student (Perpignan, 2003; Straub, 1996).

Beyond the theoretical conceptualizations of feedback, much research in a number of different disciplines has addressed the extent to which feedback facilitates student learning. Most of this research, though, suggests that the kinds of feedback commonly given in academic settings have been ineffective in terms of students' learning experience (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Paulus, 1999; Yoshida, 2008). For example, research in ESL has explored the types of feedback commonly given to students (Lyster & Ranta, 1997) and the impact of

those types on learning. According to Yoshida (2008) one of the most common types of feedback given in ESL settings is the “recast” (an immediate correction of the vocabulary) but students believe their learning would be better served with meaning-level feedback or if they had time to consider surface errors and make the correction themselves (Hyland, 1990; Yoshida, 2008). Similarly, scholarship in composition settings claim an over-reliance on error correction and suggest that meaning-level feedback seems to lead to more significant and positive revisions in student papers (Paulus, 1999). Additionally, a focus purely on errors does not accurately provide insight into students’ learning progress (especially in second-language development) because error-focused feedback does not consider broader language development skills (Bruton, 2007). The tone of the feedback seems critical, as well, with overly harsh feedback having a negative impact on student learning and motivating feedback having a positive impact (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Smith & King, 2004).

Although much of the research on feedback has focused specifically on the learning of the content itself, there is some evidence that feedback can have broader implications. Sprague (1991) suggests that teacher feedback provides insight into the educational goals, instructor roles, and communicative functions of feedback within the overall social context. Additionally, Dannels and Martin’s (2008) study suggests that feedback in design education could compromise the professional goals of design pedagogy—creating expectations for collaborative settings that may or may not be reflective of the workplace. Additionally, composition scholars suggest that feedback to writing brings to the fore social, historical, and cultural contexts—both for the teacher and the student. Specifically, in one study of teachers’ responses to students’ writing, Anson (1989) suggests that “teachers’ underlying beliefs about why, what, and how students should write are powerful determinants of their actual [response] behaviors” (p. 355). If we consider this claim within the context of feedback to oral performance in design education, then it is critical to understand the teacher side of the feedback dialogue—exploring feedback as it potentially reflects underlying belief systems of those faculty who are giving it. Yet within public speaking and communication across the curriculum research and practice, conceptualizations of feedback often do not consider these broader social and cultural issues—often driven organizational and instructional comfort of focusing on “content” and “delivery.”

In sum, there is significant research on feedback emerging in settings for which communication (writing or ESL speaking) is the content. Yet in settings in which communication is not the content but rather the vehicle for expressing the content (e.g., design) and where feedback is a central part of the educational process, there is very little research that describes the kinds of feedback given to students’ oral performances, what that feedback suggests about the valued communication skills in that setting, and the implications of that feedback for the broader social context. Yet students have to figure out what the feedback means every time they give a critique! Herein lies a central problem for this setting—we know from prior scholarship that teachers’ feedback to oral performances could hold within it expectations that reach beyond the assignment itself. Yet in educational settings in which communication is not the content, those expectations are often woven within the complex feedback structure in which content is paramount—and thus they become hidden. Yet for disciplines such as design, where communication is a central activity, students need to understand those expectations and are therefore left with the difficult task of unraveling what is said in order to understand what it means. And all this happens orally—often without written record—and therefore it is ephemeral (Ong, 2002).

Students could benefit, then, from a communicative blueprint that begins to deconstruct these expectations. This study takes the first step in this process by working inductively with critics' feedback to explore what it suggests about expected communication competencies in design education. This study was guided by the following question:

RQ: What does teacher/critic feedback reveal about valued student communication competencies in the design critique?

In exploring this question, this study provides insight to teachers in design disciplines about a central teaching issue—what their feedback suggests about the communication blueprint they expect students to follow. Additionally, this study provides insight into broader implications of feedback for faculty teaching in other disciplines in which communication is important (even if not the content itself) and for which feedback is a common educational practice.

Methodological Process

This study occurred during the third year of a multi-phased project within the College of Design at a large southeastern university. In this project, we used a naturalistic, ethnographic framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to understand feedback as it occurred in design studios. The entire cross-curricular project was given human subjects approval and participants provided consent for their interviews, materials, and our field notes to be used for research purposes.

Setting

The College of Design that served as the site for this study was founded in 1948. During the year of this study, the college enrolled just under 750 students (500 of which were undergraduates). The College has been accredited by the National Architecture Accreditation Board (spring 2002), the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (spring 2002), and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (spring 2001). This particular college includes five departments: graphic design, industrial design, art and design, architecture, and landscape architecture.

This study reports results from third phase (conducted over a year-long period) of a larger research project. The purpose of the first phase of this project was to gain a baseline understanding of how faculty in this setting assigned meaning to oral communication. The second phase of the project involved videotaping student critiques in all five departments and interviewing students in order to better understand the student perspective on oral communication and the types of feedback given to students. Following these initial phases of collaboration with the college (which were solely for research purposes) the administration provided funding to continue research and instructional design work. Therefore, within this third phase of the larger project (this phase within which this project occurred) the authors/researchers were gathering data for research purposes and for instructional purposes. The project was given approval by the administration of the College of Design.

Data Sources

The third phase of this larger project focused on doing a pilot analysis of the feedback given

in critiques of two of the departments in the college in order to first, explore what it reflects about expectations for performance; and second, gather information from the feedback that would be useful for the design of instructional modules for design students. Future phases of the project will focus on a full analysis of all videotaped critiques, piloting instructional modules in targeted critiques, and assessing the design modules that will be developed in terms of student learning.

We used intensity sampling (Patton, 2002) to gather and analyze data for this study. As mentioned, the second phase of the project involved videotaping critiques in one studio from each of the five departments. We purposefully chose critiques that ranged in level (one freshman, ID; two junior/senior; GD and ARCH, one senior, LA; and one graduate, AD) in order to have representation of critiques from the novice and expert studios. Within each studio students completed three to four individual projects. For each project, there were three to four critiques (with the earlier critiques being less formal than the end-of-project critique). Therefore, in total we videotaped 9-12 critiques in each studio. Critiques lasted 2-4 hours each and consisted of two parts—a student presentation and a feedback period. The student presentation of the work typically only comprised about 20% of the time of the critique and the remaining time focused on the critique of the work.

To complete the initial pilot analysis of feedback for this project, we chose two of the above departments—one novice and one expert (ID and LA respectively). We transcribed the videotaped critiques and used the transcriptions for analysis. For this project, we analyzed critics' feedback, but transcribed the full critique in order to understand their feedback in context. The critics who provided feedback for each studio included the faculty member teaching the course, a guest faculty member (ID) and professional designers (LA).

Data Analysis

We analyzed the videotaped transcripts using a typological analysis framework – an inductive analytical framework committed to three general flows of activity: reducing the data and identifying its source, creating thematic categories, and drawing conclusions (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first step involved reviewing the data and coding units of feedback (whether it was a sentence, paragraph or phrase) for the research question. Second, we used constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code the units into categories of communication competencies. We then identified names for the categories and created operational definitions for each of the category names. All efforts were taken to assure data were collected and analyzed in a systematic way. Given this was a pilot analysis, though, we make no claims that these results are fully representative of each department within the College of Design in this study. It is also important to note that these results are reflective of the situated, context-specific data gathered in this particular institution—and although they could suggest similarities with other institutions, they should not be understood as generalizable across contexts.

Following the initial analysis and creation of categories of communication competencies, we did member checks with individual faculty members in both departments to discuss our draft, and then incorporated their suggestions, both for content and wording. Care was taken at this point to ensure that the language we were using matched the language used by designers, and not from communication. For example, we had used the phrase “narrative fidelity,” and although faculty members liked the term (with some saying they were going to start using it), the wording for that point was ultimately changed to the phrasing that design

faculty members would more naturally use with their students.

Results

Results from this study suggest five important communication competencies within the critique: systematic demonstration of design evolution, comprehensive explanation of visuals, transparent advocacy of design intent, credible staging of presentation, and appropriate interaction management. The following section provides a definition of each competency and several excerpts from the data to illustrate critics' comments that reflect the need for students to use specific competencies.

Systematic Demonstration of Design Evolution

One competency deemed to be important in design critiques was the ability to systematically demonstrate the evolution of the design idea. Students needed to engage in a process of ideation – forming, relating and describing the ways in which their design concept emerged from its initial states to the current iteration. Faculty critics supported this by suggesting that students thoroughly describe their thought process in an orderly manner, instead of chaotically describing their artifacts. Within this competency was the need for students to arrange their visual design so that it complemented the organizational story they were trying to tell about their design evolution. Critics revealed the importance of this competency with students in the following examples of feedback:

“Display your drawings so they read like a story...I would have liked to see more variations – more alternatives and more alternatives. I’m delighted that you did the Photoshop “dream”. You might move it so it’s not quite in the center and then you are defining the end.”

“I like these elevations because they start to show character, but some things are missing so I don't really get it. And then spatially that perspective starts to do something but I don't get a sense of scale yet because there's no people or cars so I can't tell if it's a big space or a little space just yet. ”

“You understand? It's about graphically how we read things. That drawing is fantastic. It's a very horizontal dynamic thing. You've done the right thing in terms of its horizontality, but then in this section tells us it's a little too close to the building. So you have to remember each drawing tells you one piece of information. It doesn't always tell you everything.”

“You start somewhere and that takes you somewhere and that takes you somewhere else. And you started with this pattern of repetition and rhythm and went to something very minimal and simple and then we went back to something more complex and then we’re to something else here.

“Now we have a jury in a week and we don’t see the linear process and we wonder ‘wow where did that come from?’ So don’t be shy about bringing in your stuff. Show us what you have because it tells us a story. . .it’s nice to see where she [student designer] came from and the huge leap. Process is important.”

As illustrated, critique feedback suggested the importance of design process—and the ability

for students to describe—in a coherent way—the evolution of the design.

Comprehensive Explanation of Visuals

Another competency that was important for students to master in design critiques was the comprehensive explanation of visuals. Critics' feedback suggested that this involved being clear and specific with language and coordinating oral content with the visual materials. For example, it was important they let the audience know exactly what they were referring to in their presentation. Instead of saying: "in one of the middle drawings," students needed to say: "in the second drawing from the left where I sketched a series of song birds." It was also important that students did not talk about visuals that were not on the wall but that they did talk about all of the visuals that were on the wall. The oral presentation, in other words, should have correspond directly with the visuals. Critics suggested this in the following feedback to students:

"Some more things about when you are doing your presentations...if you put up all of this work then you have to point to them [the visuals]. Put the connection from this thing to this thing. If there is something up here you are not going to talk about - take it down. I don't want to see quantity for quantity's sake because time is of the essence. We need to be concise about what is being said here. So if they are up here they need to be spoken about."

"Another thing is to be clear when you are pointing to things. Be clear about what you are discussing."

"In your images, just point stuff out so we know what you're talking about."

"You're going to need a context map just like everybody else that we've talked about, Because again you're going to lose everybody just talking about this one little portion."

Given the emphasis on the visual in this educational setting, it makes sense that students were expected to be comprehensive and thorough about their explanation of the visuals on the wall.

Transparent Advocacy of Design Intent

Critics in this study also suggested that it was important for students to provide a clear and persuasive rationale for how their design choices realized their intended design concept. The burden, then, was on the student to make the argument about how their design reflected the intent, solved the design problem, or provided a new way of thinking about the problem. Feedback revealed that students who are hesitant about fully describing how their concept realized the design problem left the audience with some hesitation about the design itself. Critics' feedback suggests the importance of this persuasive process in the following examples:

"If he's going to go with a concept he needs to really exaggerate it...really play it up - don't mess around. Don't allow anything to look like an afterthought."

"Don't compromise your idea because you can't think of a way to do it in the shop. Don't let the process limit you . . . tell us your goals."

"This is what I'm talking about with the concept of displacement. When you think of gas cans you think of clunky – but he's [student designer] taken the essence of it and refined it so you have an elegant form...I can see you are in your element. I'm glad you took it to this level."

"I have a hard time thinking of gas cans and cream. But you can convince me of it and you will."

"If that's the diagram – the red one – you never really told me that was a real issue or problem and then suddenly you're just saying 'I'm going to just go toward transportation.'"

"I'm glad that at the end you started to talk about dominance because one thing that really stands out is what is really supposed to be dominant in these things and I'm not sure yet. . .what are you really trying to achieve though? You kept mentioning effect but never told me what that feeling or effect is that you want."

Students in this setting had the burden, as illustrated, of showing how their design concept (or particular choices they made in the design concept) realized the particular problem of the assignment and provided an artful response to it.

Credible Staging of Presentation

Another competency critic feedback revealed as important in design critiques was to engage the audience – both visually and orally – by credibly staging a presentation performance that was both persuasive and clear. For instance, students who were able to do this understood that every aspect of the presentation impacted the audience – what they chose to pin up on the wall, how they presented themselves physically, how carefully they designed the visuals, etc. Critics suggested the importance of this staging process in the following examples:

"The box for me is just... terrible. I mean I expect Count Dracula to come out. You know, think about those things. These compositions are so beautiful. You want to think about your typography the same way you think about the composition on the page. You wouldn't draw a boomerang that looked like that 'd' there for instance. Make everything as beautiful as you did up here."

"The only other thing I would change is the toxic waste dump you left down below. [instructor points to the left over construction materials on the floor] Think about that stuff too."

"Also you might want to put your alternative earlier models off to the side and the final shelf should be a different color. Force difference because you don't want the client to say, 'oh I like that one better.'" [Instructor points to an earlier model. He then knocks the earlier models off the shelf to make a point].

"Nothing says you have to keep your original work on the wall. I mean photocopy this and cut it down and make a nice board."

These feedback examples illustrate the importance of the full performance of the critique, not simply the design or the designer but the full picture — the setting, props, audience and

presenter.

Appropriate Interaction Management

From the data we observed, students successful in the critique had good participatory and relational communication skills. This not only involved engaging the audience with the presentation itself, but also being able to manage the audience's perceptions, responses, and feedback. Successful students, then, managed to evaluate themselves, evaluate their peers, and respond appropriately to their audience. Critics' feedback suggests that students who mastered this competency proactively engaged in the cycle of feedback – making sure to place value on the comments from the audience in order to see their own work from a different perspective. Instead of being defensive, students who mastered this competency are reflective and honest in their interaction. Respecting the ritual of the critique, they also gave pertinent and thoughtful responses to other's work. Examples of interaction management are as follows:

"What are your impressions? Part of what you should do is give feedback to each other. This is what you would have to do in an office."

"Feedback. What do people think? We are going to do focus on each person's version here. You are supposed to be critiquing each other's work because it makes you think about your own work."

"Talk long enough to keep their interest. But not so long you let their mind wander. You should probably talk about 45-60 seconds. This is to help you try to engage the audience and learn how to talk to people. This is not easy to do. I hate it myself. I'd rather just look at and work on the wall - but it's something we have to do [referring to talk after receiving feedback]."

"If you have questions or you think there is something we're not touching on – say it. So that we have a dialogue."

As the name suggests—the "critique" is all about the feedback. And students in this setting were expected to manage the feedback interaction in their own presentation style, in watching other students, and in learning from responses to their own and others' work.

Discussion and Implications

As assessment becomes more and more critical for cross-curricular scholars, it is imperative that we consider multiple and varied methods of understanding what is expected in terms of students' communication competencies in particular disciplines. Starting from an emic – or insider – perspective (Patton, 2002) this project lays the groundwork for future student learning assessment by providing a descriptive analysis of critique feedback. Yet the implications of this analysis are significant beyond the situated context in which the feedback was given. Specifically, results of this project have implications for scholarly inquiry focused on feedback in design education, theoretical conceptualizations of feedback, and instructional implementation and reflection on feedback practices in multiple disciplines.

First, results from this project lay a new foundation for scholarly inquiry on feedback in

design education. Given the importance of feedback to the educational processes in design (Anthony, 1991; Dannels, 2005) and the centrality of communication competence, it is critical to have a clear understanding of how the feedback shapes and reflects the communicative expectations and norms of the discipline. Faculty expect their students to be competent designers and competent communicators (Anthony, 1991). Yet often it is the latter that faculty struggle with given their self-perceived lack of communication training and expertise. Based on this study, though, it seems clear that faculty had clear and patterned expectations about what it means to be a competent communicator. Competent communicators (in this setting, at least) would be able to weave together skills of relational analysis (interaction management), disciplinary knowledge construction (demonstration of design evolution; transparent advocacy of intent), and multimodal performance (explanation of visuals; staging of presentation).

The feedback suggests, then, that competent communicators were not simply expert designers, superb artists, or smooth talkers—they needed to display a tapestry of interdependent competencies—a communicative identity, rather than a peaceful coexistence of skills. This finding supports prior research in other disciplinary contexts that suggests that oral communication activities are not simply performative, but actually connected to disciplinary knowledge construction (Bazerman, 1988; Winsor, 1999). In this setting, though, it is clear that knowledge construction activities were not limited to the design itself—but rather critics' feedback was shaping an understanding of disciplinary and professional communicative identity that seems important for students to understand. Although this study provides the foundation for the messages given to students about what that persona should look like, future research would benefit from exploring students' perceptions and responses to the feedback—in order to interrogate the extent to which students understand the expectations and embody them in their critique performances.

Second, results of this study provide insight for considering new theoretical conceptualizations of feedback—especially feedback on oral performance activities. In composition studies, there are several theoretical conceptualizations focused on response to and assessment of writing—response is “transactional” (Probst, 1989) in that it is characterized by mutual influence and mutual meaning creation between the teaching and student. Others conceptualize feedback to writing as a “dialogue” between teacher and student (Straub, 1996). This study explores, in more depth, one side of this dialogue—the teachers' (critics') feedback. What we know from this magnified view of critic feedback is that the feedback does much more than provide “content” and “delivery” suggestions (as often considered standard. While tethered to the design, the feedback did reach beyond it—providing a glimpse of that which students perhaps cannot see from their stationary time-bound place on the ground—to more expansive scenes of future professional personas, valued academic communicative identities, and communicative disciplinary norms.

Given those glimpses are oral, though, and within the often stressful context of a high-stakes critique (Anthony, 1991) they could be considered fleeting and coded. Yet students' future success rests on their ability to grasp the full meaning of the feedback given to them. For this reason, future theoretical conceptualizations of feedback would benefit from a broader exploration of the cultural implications of feedback (beyond the assignment itself) and the social and mediated context in which feedback on oral performance is given (e.g., oral feedback, technological feedback, written feedback).

Before understanding the theoretical interplay between those who give feedback and those who receive it, it seems important to consider what the process of giving feedback does— theoretically and pedagogically. Theoretically, an understanding of feedback within public speaking pedagogy is underdeveloped and often reduced to the simple dialectic of “content” and “delivery.” What we know from this study is that there is potential for feedback to implicate communicative identities and relational expectations—issues perhaps masked by the content/delivery conceptualization of feedback. This project provides a starting point for theoretically exploring the potential for feedback in design education (and more broadly in other educational settings) to reflect and shape communicative values and disciplinary norms.

Finally, pedagogically—results of this study have important implications for faculty and students in a variety of disciplines for which feedback on oral performance is part of educational practice. From the faculty perspective, it seems clear that what critics say matters—not only to the assignment at hand. Teachers have the potential of sculpting communicative identities of students—and when critics respond to communicative performances, those responses (as tied to the content as they might be) give students messages about who they should be as a member of our discipline and how they should relate to others who are listening. How many times do teachers consider that when they open their mouths to tell students how their business proposal needs improvement or that they did a good job on their poster presentation? As teachers as well as researchers, we have experienced the challenges of fitting in all of the students’ performances within a set time period; balancing critique with praise; taking into consideration the individual anxieties, processes, and development of students; and feeling overwhelmed and robotic in responses to common mistakes.

We ask ourselves the same questions we present from this study-- how often do we consider, within the complex social context of our classrooms, that our feedback could potentially shape our students’ understanding of who they are as disciplinary members and educational participants? Based on the work we did on this study, we consider more carefully the feedback we give to our own students—asking ourselves how the feedback constructs identities—not just presentations. We also try to help faculty participating in our communication across the curriculum initiative see the ways in which their feedback has broader implications than the content or delivery—asking them to be reflective and strategic as they talk to students about their oral performances. In short, this study has called us to consider carefully, reflectively and perhaps strategically, the broader implications of what we say when students speak.

For students, the implications of this study are similar—suggesting that feedback to oral performance (in any discipline) can and probably does include insight into the communicative identity of the discipline. Students in engineering are expected to embody a different communicative identity than students in psychology. In some courses those identities are explicitly laid out for students (especially in courses for which communication is the content). But for many courses where communication is not the primary content of the course, but is nonetheless a graded part of the course assignments, students can gain insight into who they are expected to be—communicatively—by listening closely to the feedback given to them. For these implications to be realized, though, faculty and students would need to be open to the recognition that feedback can be a central teaching and learning tool that assists not only in meeting student learning outcomes for an assignment

or course, but also in shaping disciplinary norms, identities, and behaviors.

Conclusions

Results of this project provide insight into the teaching and learning of communication in design—into the messages faculty give to students (through their feedback) about communication, and into the ways in which those messages help to construct a disciplinary communicative identity. In this setting that identity included interdependent expectations of relational analysis, disciplinary knowledge construction, and multimodal performance. The results of this study provide a communication blueprint for students trying to make sense of critics' feedback, design faculty in multiple institutions wanting to better articulate their expectations, and cross-curricular practitioners in need of protocols for implementing and assessing communication in the disciplines. Results also provide important insight into theoretical conceptualizations of feedback on oral performance—bringing to the fore questions about how feedback could shape and reflect the social, relational, and cultural trajectories of the disciplines (and the individuals deemed “expert” in those disciplines—teachers). As a pilot blueprint, this study provides data for further theoretical, pedagogical and empirical exploration, in order to gain more insight into the ways in which what teachers say can be used—strategically and reflectively—to design who students are, within and outside of academic classrooms.

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