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Warren Sandmann
University of Iowa

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Critical Thinking Is/As Communication

Warren Sandmann

The basic course in communication serves a variety of purposes. It functions as a core course in most communication departments. It serves as a service course for communication and a variety of other disciplines. For almost all students, it is their first introduction to communication. Unfortunately, for many students, the basic course is the only communication course they take. The basic course is necessary in fulfilling all three of these functions, but it also has a fourth function, one that is of increasing necessity as education continues its trend toward increasing specialization. The basic course should and must serve as the basic course in a liberal arts education. This course must not only teach the skills and subject matter, it must provide students with the basic skills necessary to function not only as scholars and professional in their chosen fields, but also as reasoning, reflecting and acting participants in society. The basic course can do all of these functions by centering instruction and philosophy around the concept of critical thinking as a liberal art.

CRITICAL THINKING

This is a buzzword in contemporary educational theory. It has been defined by Ralph Ennis (1987) as "...reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 46). M. Carrol Tama (1989) defines critical thinking as a "...way of reasoning that demands adequate support for one's beliefs and an unwillingness to be persuaded unless the support is forthcoming" (p. 64). Joseph Eulie (1988) sees critical thinking as one side of a dichotomy. On one side is the

content matter, the stuff of education. On the other side are the "...thinking skills of reasoning, evaluating, drawing conclusions, making comparisons, and seeing consequences..." (p. 260). Virginia Rankin (1988) offers an even simpler definition of critical thinking, defining it as "...meta-cognition--thinking about thinking" (p. 28). What all these definitions have in common is a view of critical thinking as a process that is separate from any discipline or subject matter. Critical thinking is presented as a value-free process that can be used to evaluate knowledge. This dominant view of critical thinking fails to acknowledge that content matter is influenced by the pedagogy applied to it, just as the pedagogy one applies to a content matter. The importance of critical thinking in education pedagogy is noted by the prime position it has been awarded in a number of educational reform proposals, most notably "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." This 1983 report, issued by the *National Commission on Excellence in Education*, emphasizes the techniques of critical thinking in all five of the "New Basics" it proposes for the core of a national curriculum (p 14). It is the basic course in communication that offers the most appropriate venue for this teaching.

What makes the communication course the most appropriate venue for teaching critical thinking? The short answer is this: Contemporary communication theory teaches us that language/discourse is more than a mode of transmission for argument and evaluation. Discourse also functions to shape the issues being discussed. In short, discourse not only allows us to argue and evaluate answers to problems of public argument and policy, it also functions to determine what questions we can ask about the issues, what evidence is acceptable in supporting our claims, and exactly how the issues of public argument are framed.

Charles Willard (1989) offers one view of contemporary communication theory as it relates to critical thinking as an interdependent process of construction and critiquing issues

of public argument. Willard argues that societal conditions and constraints, those beliefs that function as "taken-for-granted" within a particular community, help determine what will be accepted as evidence — as "proof" for accepting a certain claim. Different communities, therefore, have different standards for what counts as "proof" — which means that in order for a person to argue successfully and completely within different communities, that person has to understand the societal conditions and constraints (p. 129).

It is through discourse/language that these societal conditions and constraints are both understood and created. As Ziman (1968) has noted, all "knowledge" is social knowledge which has been validated by a particular audience or public. Discourse is both the channel of social knowledge and the shaper of social knowledge. How language shapes the issues under contention encourages certain types of argumentative practices and discourages others; language privileges certain forms of evidence and marginalizes others; language creates some possible answers and obfuscates others.

McKerrow (1989) argues that we need to make the shift from a view of discourse as the use of power to "create" knowledge (p. 91). In a similar vein, Walter Fisher (1989) argues that it is through discursive practices — he uses the term "narrative" — that we create our own standards of evaluation (p. 63). Fisher terms these standards "good reasons" (see also Karl Wallace, 1963) and says that "...the production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture and character..." (p. 64). In turn, as argued by McKerrow above, it is discourse that also creates the communities (and their standards) we call history, biography, culture and character. As a brief example, consider the question of racially offensive speech on a college campus. This issue has received much public attention recently, and has seen a number of colleges and universities attempt to implement codes of conduct and expression designed to deter racist expression.

If this argument is framed as one where the goal is to create a better and safer educational atmosphere for minority students who have been victimized, and where the problem is discursively framed as one where incidents of racially offensive speech and conduct are representative of larger societal and institutional racism, and where the belief is that restricting racist expression and conduct will improve the environment and lead to a better society as well, then evidence of racial incidents are privileged as arguments for restricting speech, restricting speech is privileged as the best solution, and the overall goal of creating a safer educational atmosphere dominates the public argument. Creating a community of equality and safety prevails over possible restrictions to otherwise free expression of opinion.

On the other hand, if the issue is instead framed as one of the rights of the majority to express themselves in accordance with established First Amendment law, and incidents of racially offensive speech and conduct are discursively framed as isolated incidents of "sick" individuals, and the goal is presented as the preservation of free and open expression, then incidents of racially offensive speech lose their power as evidence, the 200-year tradition and language of the First Amendment overpower all other modes of argument, and the overall goal of protecting free expression dominates the public argument. Racially offensive expression is then seen as the "price" a society must pay — especially certain members — for the larger good of free expression.

To fully understand the role that discourse plays as both the medium and the means of public argument and critical thinking requires at least an essay-length treatment. Communication must be seen as more than simply a method by which critical thinking can take place. Given this view, the basic course in communication is the most appropriate venue for instruction in communication. Other disciplines rely on the power of discourse to create their means of investigation and their standards of evaluation. A communication course,

on the other hand, will teach students that it is necessary to not only understand how arguments are constructed and evaluated, but also how those constructions and evaluations are dependent on communication helping to shape social reality.

CRITICAL THINKING IN COMMUNICATION

In the field of communication pedagogy, critical thinking has traditionally been associated with argumentation theory (Warnick and Inch, 1989) and small group decision-making (Bormann and Bormann, 1980). Just as in the definitions above, these views of critical thinking try to create a process that can be applied to a subject regardless of the content of that subject matter. Warnick and Inch see critical thinking as a reasoning process that involves the testing, evaluation and critique of reasoned claims and support for those claims. Out of this process, they state, will come decisions that are better able to withstand reasoned scrutiny. In evaluating the work of decision-making small groups, Bormann and Bormann stress communication skills, social skills, cohesiveness and role development (pp. 149-150). While these definitions and uses of critical thinking have value, they are missing a key element that can distort critical thinking: Pedagogical processes cannot be separated from the content matter of education. Content and process are inseparably linked, with process helping to determine just what the content is and content influencing the pedagogical process involved. In evaluating a group decision, it is not enough to evaluate the process. The decision reached by the process has to be evaluated as well. The communication skills used in critical thinking cannot be seen as separate from the content of critical thinking, the outcome of the critical thinking process. The "what" of communication is not separate from the "how" and "why" of communication.

The practice of critical thinking must be both theorized and taught as more than just a technique. All techniques, all

practices of communication, area embedded in a social and cultural context that influences their outcomes. There is no such thing as a technique or communication skill that is separate from the information processed by that technique or the outcome achieved by that technique (Poster, 1989, p. 4). Too many of the authors and theorists mentioned above share Eulie's belief that the content matter of a discipline can be separated from skills of critical thinking. Critical thinking cannot be divorced from the subject matter with which it is concerned. In its historical practice in the development of communication, critical thinking was always seen as a meld of technique and content. Classical rhetorical theory, most notably that of Cicero, highlights the interdependence of content and technique. We see that skills used in evaluating the content cannot be separated from the content itself. We see in Ciceronean theory an approach that elevates critical thinking from mere technique to the heart of education: Preparing well-informed, reasoning citizens for participation in civic life.

PRECEPTS OF CRITICAL THINKING

Eulie offers some strategies for teaching critical thinking skills. Foremost in his approach, however, is the idea that "Content is the 'what' of education; critical thinking forms the basis of the 'how' or process of education and is the other side of the educational coin" (p. 260). Though Eulie puts critical thinking skills and content on the same educational coin, he places them in opposite sides, suggesting that they are two independent concepts. It is ironic, then, that one of the major strategies Eulie develops, the developmental lesson, operates according to his directions as a meld of process and content. Eulie wants to present historical occurrences as more than a list of facts. He wants to get to the "deeper comprehension" involved in understanding historical occurrences as more than simple collections of otherwise "isolated and irrelevant fact" (p. 261). To do this, Eulie requires students to relate historical

occurrences to a central or guiding idea or principle that is relevant to their lives. In his example, he uses the conflict between cartoonist Thomas Nash and the Tammany Hall ring of Boss Tweed. The historical facts and personages are all presented, but the students go beyond the recitation of facts to attempt to see this single historical event as part of a greater struggle, that between corruption of public officials and the need for vigilance on the part of the public to expose that corruption. To do this, students are involved in class discussions that go beyond recall of facts to focus on questions that are "often open ended in nature and designed to invite deep analysis and even to provoke disagreement" (p. 262). What Eulie fails to acknowledge here, however, is the relationship between the content matter and pedagogical approach being used. The content matter shifts from the historical facts of the case to the underlying values and assumptions because of the student critical thinking skills being used. The content has been altered because of the process. It has become less a recall of an historical event and more a recreation and creation of a value conflict.

Eulie goes on to describe another strategy, that of problem-solving, which he describes as the "highest form of thinking," because "it requires the use of every level of critical thinking" (p. 264). Once again, in his description of this strategy, Eulie dissolves the distinction he previously created between process and product. In describing problem-solving, Eulie states that it "requires not only the solution of problems presented but asking questions or even creating a problem" (p. 264). In giving this description of problem-solving, Eulie is implicitly forced to acknowledge the link between the process involved and the content to which it is applied. "As in all matters of educational methodology, content and process become intertwined. The steps of problem solving must be delineated, and the problems selected have to be meaningful to students" (p. 265). This closer look to critical thinking has demonstrated the interdependence of process and product. By attempting to

posit a process that operates independently of the content matter, proponents of critical thinking often miss to downplay the relations between the two, and thereby distort the pedagogical approach by failing to take into account the reciprocal effect that content and approach have on one another.

JoAnn Krapp (1988) also discusses the precepts of critical thinking as it relates to the process of problem-solving. She separates the process into four steps. While all four steps are important to the process, it is the second step that moves this approach above simple technique, that demonstrates once again the relationship between process and product. The second step calls for "[u]nderstanding the ideas contained in the problem. This involves the student's possession of relevant information and with (sic) the transfer of selected portions of his or her store of knowledge related to the problem at hand" (p. 33). This understanding ties the process and the products together. (Note, however, the computer analogy that runs throughout the quotation, demonstrating the process dependency of even this approach.) Krapp's strategy requires both the skill of critical thinking and the context in which the critical thinking takes place: the knowledge base.

Lenore Langsdorf, a member of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking (NCFECT), comments on the traditional split in critical thinking between the process and the substance (1991). She notes how many critical thinking courses have evolved from courses in formal and informal logic to courses in "practical reasoning," showing that those in the forefront of the critical thinking movement are beginning to understand the problems inherent in approaching critical thinking as a process independent of a context. However, when she cites a definition of critical thinking offered to members of NCFECT, the emphasis on a process still remains, despite acknowledgments of the necessity to include context:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matters divisions. . . . It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning (p. 27).

As soon in this statement, there is acknowledgment that knowledge may be "generated" rather than simply transmitted, but that brief acknowledgment is overshadowed by the emphasis on process — applying, analyzing, synthesizing, evaluation — and by the statement that "universal intellectual values that transcend subject matters" guide the most exemplary form of critical thinking. There is no acknowledgment here of the role that communication plays in creating and empowering these "universal values." In this statement, we have Platonic reasoning reasserted as the dominant mode of evaluation and assessment. What is needed, then, is to shift the emphasis from those unproblematic universal values to an emphasis on the role that communication plays in the creation and empowerment of those values.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO CRITICAL THINKING

As noted above, the standard approach for the teaching of critical thinking separates the process of critical thinking from the specific task under consideration. In language that may be more familiar to communication professionals, the standard approach conceptualizes critical thinking as a field-invariant process (Toulmin, 1958, p. 14). This means that the process does not depend on the content or the context. As exemplified in the standard approach, then, critical thinking posits a set of specific skills which can be taught, a specific practice or sets of practices which can be followed. These spe-

cific skills are then transferred to any situation. These specific skills are, in general, the skills of formal and informal logic analysis of the specific case or argument at hand in order to determine if the argument is valid — in other words, to check the argument for the existence of fallacies which would make the argument invalid or unsound¹

There is no denying that to examine arguments for logical validity is a worthwhile process, and one that requires a trained mind employing a set of specific skills. The problem, however, is that to detect a fallacy in an argument may rob that argument of its logical validity, but it often does little to rob that argument of its power. The condition that this specific argument is addressing still remains, and to detect one or more fallacies in an argument is not to solve the problem at hand. As John McPeck (1990) notes, ". . . even if a *bona fide* fallacy is discovered in a given argument, one can still not infer from this that the opposite point of view is correct . . . At best, all that one can infer is that *this* particular argument is fallacious, but for all that the general point of view could still be true (or preferable)" (p. 7.)

There are other weaknesses to this approach. To examine a position statement or a claim for fallacies, it is first necessary to break that statement down into parts, into individual arguments, and then usually to continue the process by analyzing each argument according to proper syllogistic form. The problem here is apparent. In order to analyze arguments in this fashion, extremely complex conditions are rendered into almost simple yes-no formulations. Therefore, the skills of formal and informal logic, of validity testing and fallacy-hunting, serve well on simple issues, but fail the test when the issue is more complex, as most issues that require true critical thinking are — at least the issues that are spoken of when educators and politicians call for the teaching and employ-

¹See, for example, Francis Dauer, *Critical Thinking: An Introduction to Reasoning*.

ment of critical thinking skills (McPeck, p. 11; NCEE, p. 11). These issues require a knowledge base that cannot be separated from the process of critical thinking.

Kenneth Johnson (1986) has identified another problem with this process-oriented approach, one that has to do with the very nature of the language we use to analyze the argument: Language imparts qualities to the things observed and discussed. We often forget, however, that these things do not have the qualities we impart to them. We are discussing our observations and reactions (p. 359). Additionally, as Johnson notes, critical thinking in the traditional mode generally requires that we fit a situation to a pre-existing mold, or that we begin the process by imparting to the object our observations. In a sense, we create "verbal maps" of the problem. What happens then, Johnson states, is that we focus on the verbal maps we have created of the problems. These verbal maps are one-step abstractions from the problem. Additionally, these verbal maps are often static and fixed, while the actual problem is dynamic and fluid. The verbal maps we have created of the problem abstract us from the problem and guide us to certain more convenient solutions because of the static nature of the verbal maps. In essence, we solve the problem we have created — not the problem as it existed prior to our fitting it into our own system. This was just a brief overview of the traditional approach to critical thinking and an analysis of some of its failings. The next section of this essay offers an alternative to the traditional approach, and begins to show us how the communication arts are the ideal place to teach and practice critical thinking.

In short, the alternative to the traditional approach to critical thinking outlined above, the approach that emphasizes process as a field-invariant set of specific skills, is to approach critical thinking as an exercise in the acquisition analysis, and critique of the knowledge necessary to effectively "solve" a problem of public controversy and importance (McPeck, p. 35). As McPeck notes, ". . . in most everyday prob-

lems worthy of public debate our quandary is seldom about validity, and almost always about the truth of complex information, concepts, and propositions . . . We are not analyzing arguments so much as evaluating data, information, and putative facts" (p. 11). Critical thinking in this mode requires (starting with the basic disciplines that have traditionally formed the liberal arts, the curriculum of most high schools and the core of courses required of virtually all students of a liberal arts school: ". . . an informed study of natural and social sciences, together with history, mathematics, literature, and art"²

Critical thinking in this model is then best taught, not as a separate method, and not even as a separate course. Critical thinking is what *should* come out of a traditional liberal arts education. McPeck is well aware that currently this is not always the result of a high school or college education (pp. 28-31). His argument, however, is that it is not the notion of a liberal arts education that is at fault, but many of the current educational practices. Teaching content is too often seen as the simple imparting of knowledge (facts) from the mouth of the teacher to the ears of the student to the mouth of the student to regurgitate on command — the brain comes into play nowhere. Additionally, content-based education is too often plagued by the "Trivial Pursuit" phenomenon: the idea that knowledge does consist of little distinct bits of fact that can be swallowed in bite-size morsels by the student.³ Addi-

²In emphasizing traditional liberal arts and the notion of a core curriculum, McPeck sidesteps the controversial issue of what "facts" should constitute this core. See, e.g., Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education*. McPeck's emphasis on the traditional notion of the liberal arts, however, suggests that the core curriculum would be a very traditional one. This is natural given his view that critical thinking — indeed, education in general — is most necessary to fulfill the goal first set by Thomas Jefferson, that of creating citizens capable of taking part in the preserving a democracy (29).

³An interesting example of this sort of "Trivial Pursuit" knowledge is found in the "factoids" that the Cable News network and the Headline News

tionally, McPeck acknowledges that even when a liberal arts education can impart knowledge that goes beyond the "Trivial Pursuit" phase, it is still a process of knowledge transmission — there is no need in that sort of model for critical thinking.

The cure for this problem, as noted above, is not the addition of a course in skills of critical thinking, but instead a returning of the teaching of the traditional liberal arts. In short, McPeck would have teachers of the traditional disciplines shift their emphasis from the imparting of knowledge as "facts" to an emphasis on the discussion, analysis and critique of the specific knowledge bases endemic to each discipline. McPeck refers to this as a returning rather than a revolution, as most education reformers prefer to term an emphasis on critical thinking. It would be a retuning, McPeck states, since it requires only a shift within the specific discipline, a discipline the teacher is already familiar with, rather than the mastering of an entirely new discipline or set of skills (p. 32). Additionally, this new emphasis on analysis and critique would acknowledge and focus on the epistemic foundations of each of the various disciplines. In other words, this approach would require not the transmission of pre-existing knowledge, but the acquisition and criticism of what passes for knowledge and claims of authority in each discipline — How do I know what I know? Why do I believe this and not something else? It would involve the "reflective skepticism" mentioned above in McPeck's approach to critical thinking, and would also have to include something on the order of Wayne Booth's "rhetoric of assent". Critical thinking, in short, would be the ability to understand and utilize the specific knowledge bases of each discipline; the ability to question what knowledge does have authority; the ability to understand why certain knowledge claims have more power than others; and the knowledge of

Network transmit as filler material before commercial breaks — and in the newswriting style of *USA Today*.

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what this authority says about the specific discipline and about the larger culture in which it operates. Education would not be the simple imparting of given knowledge, by the self-aware understanding and utilization of knowledge to live in and transform society.⁴ This approach to critical thinking has roots in the sophistic training of ancient Greece, roots which are explored in the next section of this essay.

CICERO AND THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING

Cicero, in his most thorough book on educational theory and practice, *De Oratore* (1988), as well as in a shorter and briefer exposition on the same subject, *De Partitiones Oratoriae* (1982), expounds at length upon the need for the intertwining of the content matter of education and the process by which that content is used, evaluated and obtained. Cicero, in presenting the contrasting views of Antonius and Crassus, argued for the completely educated citizen-orator, one not only skilled in the techniques of oratory (the tools of critical thinking), but also a master of ". . . all important subjects and arts. For it is from knowledge that oratory must derive its beauty and fullness, and unless there is such knowledge well-grasped and comprehended by the speaker, there must be something empty and almost childish in the utterance" (1988, p. 17). In advising his son in *De Partitiones*, Cicero again returns to the theme that knowledge and skill are inseparable: "Moreover, what readiness of style or supply of matter can a speaker possess on the subject of good and bad, right and wrong, utility and inutility, virtue and vice, without knowing these sciences of primary importance?" (1982, p.

⁴For a more detailed description of the manner in which this process of education would function, see Henry Giroux, *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life: Critical Pedagogy in the Modern Age*; Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

412). Cicero wanted, in other words, to make sure that his son understood that skill and knowledge were inseparable.

This inseparability is best seen, as was noted earlier, in Cicero's presentations of the views of Antonius and Crassus. The two views are not necessarily oppositional, but they do contrast. Crassus wants a totally educated orator, a speaker who is both eloquent and wise. Crassus notes that ". . . excellence in speaking cannot be made manifest unless the speaker fully comprehends the matter he speaks about" (1988, p. 27). Moreover, while good speakers can communicate with polish and style, "[y]et this style, if the underlying subject matter be not comprehended and mastered by the speaker, must inevitably be of no account or even become the sport of universal derision" (p. 39). Quite simply, Crassus is arguing for the complete mastery of skill and substance. Antonius, on the other hand, sees education as an exercise in pragmatics. A wide knowledge base is nice, Antonius argues, but is not necessary. Technique and skill are the vital elements for an educated and effective orator, ". . . since ability to speak ought not to starve and go naked, but to be besprinkled and adorned with a kind of charming variety in many details, it is the part of the good orator to have heard and seen much and to have run over much in thought and reflection, as well as in his own reading, not acquiring this as his own possession, but tasting what belongs to others" (p. 155). The skills of oratory are separate from the knowledge base. ". . . I simply say that theirs [philosophy] and ours [oratory] are two distinct things, and that consummate eloquence can exist quite apart from philosophy" (p. 169).

It is important to note that Cicero, in presenting the views of Antonius, was not simply creating a foil for Crassus — or for himself. It is better to see the views of Crassus and Antonius as arguing for the positioning of skill and substance. Crassus argues that you cannot replace knowledge with skill; that the use of skill and technique without the requisite knowledge is, at best, useless and, at worst, a harm to the

citizenry. Antonius argues that skill and technique should be viewed as paramount, but that there also needs to be some sort of base behind the skill — not necessarily equal in importance, but of some importance. This is the crux of the distinction between teaching critical thinking as simply a process and teaching critical thinking as an interdependent mix of process and product. Teaching critical thinking as simply a process is open to the same attacks that have been traditionally offered against rhetoric: form at the expense of substance.

CRITICAL THINKING IN/AS THE BASIC COURSE

Jo Sprague (1990) identifies four fundamental goals of education in general and communication education in particular: transmitting cultural knowledge, developing students' intellectual skills, providing students with career skills, and reshaping the values of society (pp. 19-22). Although all four of these provide opportunities for the mixture of both skills and content of critical thinking, the first and fourth goals are most fitting. In order to transmit cultural knowledge, instructors, students and the public in general will have to decide just what passes for cultural knowledge. They will have to choose, evaluate and defend their choices. This is especially important in the United States, in that our educational practices and our society in general are based on the theory of pluralism and multiculturalism. When elements of our culture appear to be in conflict, which elements do we choose to transmit?

At the same time, the fourth goal, reshaping the values of society, is also ripe for the implementation of critical thinking. There is a key assumption here. Education is always subject to values. We, as teachers, are always teaching values. We are always transmitting cultural values, and we are always changing cultural values in our teaching. There is no such

thing as value-free education (Friere, 1970, p. 15). Because of this assumption, the goal of reshaping values, is, essentially, an inevitability: we are reshaping values. The key is to be aware of this fact and to be aware of what effect our teaching has on cultural values. In order to reshape the values of a society, therefore, one must first comprehend just what those values are. One would also have to be aware of the historical and rhetorical development of those values and the positive and negative consequences those values have demonstrated. The effect of removing or adapting those values would also have to be considered, and an organized and well-developed argument would have to be constructed to argue for the changing of those values and for the inclusion or adaptation of new values. In sum, the entire process of critical thinking, with the addition of a relevant and interdependent knowledge base, would have to be brought into play to meet the two goals that Sprague has outlined. That is one reason why the basic communication course is an ideal location for the implementation of critical thinking.

National surveys of instructional practices in the basic communication course have indicated that the majority of basic communication courses are taught as an introduction to public speaking (Trank, 1990; Gibson, Hanna and Huddleston, 1985). This is the second reason for the inclusion of critical thinking in the basic communication course. In order to avoid the accusation of Plato's descendants, that communication has no subject matter, and that rhetorical skills are, at best, mere technique and at worst an instrument for distorting the truth, basic communication courses need to emphasize both the process and the product, the techniques of critical thinking, which are quite similar to the techniques for effective public presentation, and the knowledge base that makes those techniques worthwhile. An approach to critical thinking that emphasized both the content and the process, that acknowledges and even celebrates the interdependence of the two, makes the basic communication course the place for

instruction in and practice of critical thinking. The following example offers one approach for making the basic speech communication course a course in critical thinking as a liberal art.

TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE BASIC COURSE

One approach would focus the course around the interdependence of critical thinking skills, traditional public communication skills, group discussion and decision-making skills, and a body of knowledge that would be germane to those skills. The mix of communication skills emphasized in this approach makes this approach appropriate for a basic course focused on public speaking skills, a hybrid course which mixes public speaking and interpersonal and group communication theory and practice, or even a course that is focused on communication theory. Additionally, the emphasis on a body of knowledge — a content — outside of the specific communication skills makes this approach appropriate for basic courses at a variety of educational institutions, helping the instructors tailor the course to the need of individual students. Instructors serve as facilitators, helping students see the interdependence between the knowledge and the skill. Traditional texts could still be used in the course, since they do a fairly effective job of providing models for topic selection, research organization, and presentation — which are basic critical thinking skills. The extra material would be brought into the classroom by the students and would be particular to the student's individual project. In this manner, the students would see the way in which the process influences the product and the product influences the process.

The course would begin with one to two weeks of introductory activities. The instructor would explain the purpose of the course, and the class would take part in activities designed to increase group cohesion and individual disclosure.

Class discussion would focus on relevant issues of local or regional concern. This requires students to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant issues. The issues would be restricted to those of local or regional matters to encourage the students to do research in the field, rather than depend on library sources. If a student desired to focus on more of a national or international issue, that student would be required to demonstrate the local nature of that issue, to tie it to an issue of local concern. Students would also be encouraged to see the connection between these issues and their own lives (Makau, 1990, pp. 205-239). These first few weeks then would focus simultaneously on the content of these problems.

The next phase of the class would involve research into the problem area chosen. Students would be encouraged to engage in field research by getting involved at the immediate level with the issue they had chosen to investigate. Classroom discussion would focus on the topics being discussed as well as techniques for researching and organizing the research. The lectures and discussion in the class would look at such areas as distinguishing between credible and non-credible sources, and tests for the inclusion of evidence. What is important is that these discussions would not be taking place concerning abstract issues. The information the students gather would be the subject of these discussions. Test for evidence would be conducted not simply according to traditional standards, but also in light of the particular project and the particular use to which the information was being obtained.

The first presentations would take place approximately the fifth or sixth week. They would be in the form of a symposium. Classroom discussions of the various topics would allow both the instructor and the students the chance to observe similarities and differences among the individual projects, allowing for the grouping of the presentation around central themes. The advantages of these symposia would be for both the content *and* the process. Students would get a chance to present preliminary research findings, to receive critical

comments from both the instructor and other students, and to see what the other students had gathered for information. This interchange between the students should lead to improved research techniques and further research. On a technical level, the symposia would give the students the opportunity to see how different students had arranged similar information, since at least some of the projects would be similar. This could be the focus of a classroom discussion of the topic of arrangement.

The next phase of the class would be focused on further research, refining the research techniques, and discussing the organization of the gathered information. Class discussions would focus on the difficulty of drawing the distinction between information and persuasion. Students, in gathering their material, would be forced to realize that what are often presented as two separate modes of discourse are not as clear cut as they seem. Students would also begin preparing for the next public presentation, an individual informative speech. This would allow the student to refine the information gathered, to evaluate what information is most relevant, to consider the arrangement of the information in a speech, and to begin considering the role of the audience. Since all the students are now aware of the other individual projects, audience adaptation becomes a factor. Students will be encouraged to point out the similarities and differences between their individual projects, to draw distinctions where they might not have noticed them previously.

By this time, students have become familiar with both the content of their projects and the techniques of critical thinking and the skills of public presentation required of them. The next step is to prepare for the final public presentation, an individual persuasive speech. This final speech has a number of advantages. It requires the students to continue considering the fine and wavering line between information and persuasion; it requires the students to consider even more thoroughly the audience with which they are working. Most

importantly, it requires the students to make a commitment to their project. Up to this point, students could at least attempt to maintain an objective viewpoint toward their project. By moving into the persuasive phase, they are required to take a stand on their issue. This is an important step both for the practice of critical thinking and the presentation of the material. Students will have to be prepared to defend their interpretations of the evidence and their conclusions. They will also have to consider more thoroughly the consequences of the proposals they are offering. In short, the persuasive phase of this project requires the students to bring together both the total skills of critical thinking and as much knowledge as possible concerning their individual project.

Critical thinking: A buzzword for educational theorists, educational reformers, and the public in general. Critical thinking was a concern for classical educators. It is a concern for educators today. It is an opportunity for communication instructors to return their pedagogy to the practice of classical educators who prepared students to be functioning citizens of a changing society. The basic communication course, as highlighted in the example above, offers the best location for the teaching of critical thinking, not just critical thinking as a technique devoid of any relation to or consequences of the result. Critical thinking as taught in the basic communication course would be critical thinking as a true liberal art: The reasoned consideration, discussion, implementation and evaluation of communicatively-derived actions. Communication instructors need to grasp this opportunity to make education effective and active. The match between the need for critical thinking skills for our students and the inclusion of content in our communication courses is simply too good to pass up.

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