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Rethinking the Role of Theory in the Basic Course: Taking a "Practical" Approach to Communication Education

Shawn Spano

The separation of communication theory from communication practice is one of those false dichotomies that have plagued our field since the rise of logical positivism and behavioral science. There were, of course, a number of good reasons why the early practitioners of communication science sought to dislodge case study accounts of situated communication practice from their theoretical formulas and experimental procedures. As Delia (1985) notes in his history of the communication field, the move toward positivism was predicated on the assumption that the communication field could achieve scientific status and political credibility within both the academy and society at large by discovering universal principles and invariant laws of human behavior.

While this might very well have been a worthy goal at the time, it was one that was based on an erroneous conception of human communication and a misguided account of theory. In trying to "force" the communication process to fit within the prescribed structures of covering laws, theories and experimental methods, the move toward logical positivism distorted conceptualizations of communication, effectively limiting understanding of its multiple meanings and influence. To employ an analogy, it is a little like a young man or woman who approaches love purely in terms of lust, and whose excessive preoccupation with lust blinds him or her to the variety of splendors and sorrows that love provides. Aspects of

communication are certainly amenable to laws and experimental methods, just as romantic love surely involves a healthy dose of lust. But positivism blinds us to the multiplicity of communication, much in the same way that an obsession with lust prevents us from experiencing the multiplicity of love.

The narrow and constrictive view of human communication which attends the logical positivist agenda continues to influence communication inquiry today, more often than not with damaging residual effects. Clearly, the separation of theory and practice is one of those effects left to us by positivism. In the positivist approach, theory is a set of abstract principles expressed in the form of propositions. These propositions, which stand apart from practice, provide the essential ingredients for explaining practice. There is a fundamental duality in this system. Theory transcends practice and in the process is thought to achieve invariant, universal, even pristine qualities. Practice, on the other hand, is contingent, local, and forever mired in the ambiguous, messy, and paradoxical world of ongoing human affairs. In order to translate communication practice into the framework of positivist theory it is necessary to change the essential form of the practice itself. How else can an inherently open-ended process like communication be made to conform to an explanatory system that demands closure and certainty?

The separation of theory from practice in the positivist approach creates a tension of opposites that is solved at the expense of practice, not theory. Put differently, when concrete practices are pitted against abstract theory it is a practice which is sacrificed at the alter of theoretical rigor, prediction, and control. In order to conform to the structure of positivist theory, situated communication practices must endure the inevitable process of reification. And in doing so, they must give up their own embodied form and richly textured performance characteristics. Communication practices lose their

ontological status when abstracted from the contexts in which they originate.

Practice, of course, enters back into the research equation once theory has been codified into a set abstract, hierarchically ordered propositions. Here the communication scientist tests theoretical predictions against observed behavior to determine the validity of the theory. So subjects are asked to complete Likert scales on self-report questionnaires as a way to measure their perceptions, traits, or communication predispositions. These assumed "communication" behaviors used in hypothesis testing, however, are really nothing more than shadows, pale imitations of the real thing. The rich detail of the original communication performance is certainly not incorporated back into the research process. Those characteristics, the situated and embodied nature of communication, are lost in the maze of abstract propositions. The view of human communication given to us by positivist theory comes in the form of a fleeting glimpse. There might be something there, but without a firm grounding in the concrete world of context, self, and other, it is difficult to know if the thinly veiled image of communication shown to us bears any resemblance to our lived social experiences.

The problem of integrating positivist theory with communication practice extends to the basic course and influences speech education in some unfortunate ways. Is it really the case that abstract theoretical principles alone can assist us in teaching our students how to participate in ongoing communication action? Can a positivist based theory of communication competence provide our students with the abilities to be competent in the real world of social interaction? While my answer to both these questions is no, does it then follow, as some would suggest, that theory simply does not belong in the basic course? I disagree with this conclusion as well.

The problem, as I see it, is not that the communication practices of our students resist theoretical insight. Rather, the

problem is that the positivist approach to communication theory is not equipped to adequately deal with the situated communication practices that we expect our students to perform in the basic course. I believe that communication theory can be integrated into communication practice, but the integration must proceed from a very different view of theory from the one traditionally assumed.

The purpose of this essay is to advance the notion of "practical communication theory" and demonstrate how it might be used in the basic public speaking course to teach oral communication competencies. In this way the essay is not only an attempt to break down the theory-practice dichotomy, it also seeks to develop a form of communication theory which is responsive to the practical needs of our students, our discipline, and the societies in which we live.

The argument advanced in this essay rests on the assumption that the principles and concepts used in the basic course must be worked out in situated communication practices involving teachers and students. The move to locate theory in patterns of pedagogical discourse has implications not only in terms of the kinds of theories we teach, but how we teach them. In the first two sections of the paper I outline the assumptions guiding practical theory, especially as they relate to speech education. From this discussion it will become clear that practical theory involves a complex arrangement of communicative practices that are more than a system of teaching techniques, tips, or guidelines. In the final section I provide an extended example of how practical theory can be used to teach students to give oral criticism. This is just one example among many that could be used to show how practical theory works in the basic public speaking course.

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF THE THEORY-PRACTICE DICHOTOMY?

While the distinction between theory and practice has its contemporary origins in twentieth-century positivist philosophy and the rise of modern social science, its historical roots actually date back to the pre-modern, classical period. Positivism, like all other intellectual moves, arose within a social-historical context that was itself shaped and molded by prior social-historical developments. This legacy is important to our understanding of the present dilemma because any attempt to reconcile theory with practice is doomed to failure as long as we adopt the traditional positivist approach to theory and the classical views on which it is based. Importantly, classical writings not only provide negative evidence for the present theory-practice problem, they also offer clues for working out a satisfactory solution to the problem.

Social scientists within the positivist tradition situate human communication within the domain of what Aristotle called *theoria* (Bernstein, 1983; Pearce, 1994). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle wrote that *theoria* describes that part of the world that is immutable and unchanging — things cannot be other than what they are. The method or goal of *theoria* is *episteme*, which is factual knowledge and the capacity to demonstrate truth logically. Given this account, it is difficult to see how communication can be comprehended within the domain of *theoria* by way of *episteme*, but this is apparently the approach favored by communication scientists trained in the positivist tradition.

Aristotle maintained that scientific disciplines, as opposed to practical ones, belong to the realm of *theoria* (Craig & Tracy, 1995). The status normally given to scientific disciplines and the elevated position of *episteme* in Western

culture might help account for why communication scientists were quick to embrace the tenants of logical positivism.

It would seem that communication scientists have either lost track of or ignored Aristotle's discussion of *praxis*. Aristotle believed that particular domains of the world are not immutable but contingent — things can be other than what they are (Bernstein, 1985; Pearce, 1994). This contingency defines the world of *praxis*, where the observer is intimately engaged in the products of observation and where human affairs depend on what people do when they act together. *Praxis* applies to disciplines which are essentially pragmatic in the sense that they are concerned with particular kinds of processes and outcomes that result from various forms of human action. I am totally convinced that Speech Communication is a practical discipline (if Aristotle were around today I am sure he would agree). Unlike the positivist obsession to move the study of communication into the domain of *theoria*, we should reclaim the central focus of our discipline around the concerns of *praxis*. Nowhere is the reclamation of *praxis* more central than in the area of speech education.

The kind of knowledge that fits the domain of *praxis* is *phronesis*, which is practical wisdom or the capacity to use good judgment in situations that require choice and deliberation. *Phronesis* involves a kind of flexibility that can only be carried out in particular situations depending on the myriad of contingencies that the situation and the people involved in the situation must respond to. Because *phronesis* is concerned with the practical, here-and-now of communication action, and because there are an infinite range of contingencies surrounding such action, there are no general principles — no positivist theories — that can fully account for *phronesis*.

This does not imply that general principles cannot be used to teach *phronesis*. The key is to ensure that general principles always remain responsive to situated practices. According to Leff (1994), the goal is "to encourage a fluid

interaction between precept and practice in which the precepts take on life only as they come into contact with and are altered by practices" (p. 12). Notice the difference between the practical approach favored by Leff (1994) and the one favored by positivist approaches to theory building. Instead of altering the nature of communication practice so that it fits the demands of theory, it is the educator's/researcher's responsibility to bring theory down from its lofty perch of abstraction to meet the concrete needs of communication practice.

WHAT IS PRACTICAL THEORY?

A practical, social constructionist approach to communication theory offers a way out of the false theory-practice dichotomy perpetuated by positivist, communication science (Cronen, 1995; Craig & Tracy, 1995). It does so by situating speech communication within the domain of *praxis* rather than *theoria*, and by focusing speech education on the teaching of *phronesis* rather than *episteme*. It is important to recognize that the use of the term "theory" in the descriptive label "practical theory" does not refer to either Aristotle's conception of *theoria* or the positivist notion of abstract theory. While it is possible to simply dispense with the term "theory" altogether to avoid confusion and the intellectual baggage the term conjures up, I am satisfied that the use of the term "practical" sufficiently modifies the term "theory" beyond its traditional scientific meanings.

The Reflexive Orientation of Practical Theory

Using the above framework as a general introduction, we can now seek to clarify in greater detail the particular focus of practical theory. The first issue to note is that practical theory

was developed as a complement to the social constructionist perspective on human communication. Given its social constructionist roots, practical theory necessarily embraces reflexivity as a fundamental feature of communication, communication research, and communication pedagogy. Reflexivity, as Steier (1995) notes, is a robust concept that has the potential to enrich communication inquiry at many different levels. Practical theory shares this view.

Extending Steier's optimistic assessment, I want to suggest that the reflexive orientation of practical theory is ideally suited to the integration of theory and practice. The use of reflexivity suggests that practical theory is concerned with working out the implications for developing theoretical principles that inform communication practice while simultaneously using practice to inform communication theory. The theoretical principles developed can never stray beyond the grounded, practical concerns of situated communication action because they will cease to be a guide to subsequent practice. It is my belief that all theory is reflexive in the sense that the products of the theory enter back into the act of theorizing. Aristotle's *theoria* and positivist conceptions of theory, however, fail to recognize their own reflexivity, choosing instead to assume an "ignorance is bliss" research posture. By contrast, practical theory is aware of its reflexivity; it embraces it, celebrates it, and seeks to exploit its liberating qualities.

Another facet to consider is that the practitioner of practical theory is reflexively involved in the act of theorizing such that he or she becomes part of the research process. There is no place for the objective bystander in a practical approach to theory. This means that theorists must relinquish the quaint but fictitious notion that they can remain comfortably insulated as spectators on the sidelines. The question for practical theory, then, is not whether theorists influence the research process, but rather how they are going to influence it. It is critical that theorists attend to ethical and pragmatic implica-

tions when entering the field to participate with their subjects. This is an especially important point to consider when we move practical theory into the basic course and recognize speech teachers as practical theorists.

Practical Theory and Speech Education

Cronen (1995) has recently identified five features of a practical communication theory. In what follows I list each of the five features with a running commentary about how these features apply to speech education and the basic course. I am not aware of any research that has applied practical theory to this area of communication.

1. **"PRACTICAL THEORY IS CONCERNED WITH THE WAY EMBODIED PERSONS IN A REAL WORLD ACT TOGETHER TO CREATE PATTERNS OF PRACTICE THAT CONSTITUTE THEIR FORMS OF LIFE" (P. 231).**

Applied to the basic course, practical theory deals with the situated performance of both students and teachers. This situated classroom performance constitutes a "real world" of interaction, and should not be misconstrued as an experimental lab or workshop situation. This sense of "real worldness" has implications because the "patterns of practice" conducted in the classroom have entailments in terms of creating "forms of life." While the communication practices we promote in the basic course might be awkward and difficult to negotiate at the outset, it is important that they become integrated as a normal part of the students' communication practices both in and out of the classroom. Developing new communication practices in the classroom holds out the possibility that we can create with our students different forms of life, different ways of experiencing the world beyond the classroom.

Another implication of focusing on embodied communication practices in the basic course concerns how we teach students and evaluate their learning. Teaching speech and assessments of student learning must be conducted primarily in terms of performed communication interaction, not written texts such as exams, papers, and the like. While these latter methods might be useful in some situations for some tasks, we should always privilege embodied forms of communication, both in terms of how we teach speech and the kinds of practices we engage in with our students.

2. "A PRACTICAL THEORY PROVIDES AN EVOLVING GRAMMAR FOR A FAMILY OF DISCURSIVE AND CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICES. THE GRAMMAR OF PRACTICAL THEORY SHOULD BE INTERNALLY CONSISTENT AND DEFENSIBLE IN LIGHT OF DATA" (P. 231).

The term "grammar" in practical theory is attributed to the later Wittgenstein (1953) and his notion that language is a rule-governed activity. Applied to the speech education and the basic course, it suggests that the rules which constitute a given grammatical practice in the classroom emerge within ongoing discursive and conversational practices. In order to participate in "educational" communication practices, one must have the ability to use a grammar and the ability to join with others so that they can learn the grammar.

Bringing practical theory into the classroom essentially entails bringing in a "family" of communication practices that enable participants to create patterns of coherent interaction. The simple test of whether a practice works or not is whether it allows students and teachers in a public speaking class, for example, to talk about socially significant issues in ways that make sense, in ways that are coherent.

The grammatical practices employed in the classroom emerge in use; they can be continued, altered, substituted or stopped at any time. The distinction between "discursive" and "conversational" practices is intended to show that some practices are formalized and instantiated (discourse), while others are more fluid and open to change (conversation). The focus on internal consistency indicates that not all grammatical practices are equal. For example, some practices are more useful than others for teaching students how to offer substantive oral criticism to their peers or how to use evidence and reasoning in their presentations. Practical theorists should be able to offer reasons why a particular practice or method for teaching communication is more useful than another.

3. "THESE PRACTICES CONSTITUTE A FAMILY OF METHODS FOR THE STUDY OF SITUATED SOCIAL ACTION WHEREIN PROFESSIONALS JOIN WITH PARTICIPANTS AND CLIENTS. AS SUCH, PRACTICAL THEORY RESPECTS THE CENTRALITY OF THE GRAMMATICAL ABILITIES OF PERSONS IN CONJOINT ACTION" (P. 231).

Communication practices take a variety of different forms. As noted above, some of the practices might be formal and structured while others can be more open-ended. It seems reasonable to assume further that some of the communication practices used in the basic course will employ conventional grammars, while others will be more unique to a particular instructor or educational approach.

It is interesting to note how these practices are developed by teachers depending on their level of experience. The first few times they teach the basic course, instructors generally stay close to the conventional practices and, in fact, spend considerable energy learning the grammar of these practices from textbooks, instructors' manuals, conversations with

teaching mentors, other instructors, and the like. This is a natural and necessary part of teacher training. Graduate student Teaching Associates and other new speech instructors must at some point learn basic principles of oral communication (i.e. organization, evidence, reasoning, etc.) and some standard instructional practices for teaching these principles. Having mastered these practices, however, most teachers then experiment with less formal and less conventional forms as they expand their grammatical abilities.

The constellation of practices together comprise a family of methods, or a methodology. These methods constitute the teacher's tools, what she or he brings to the classroom to promote and encourage learning. In order to avoid the "law of the hammer," teachers should have a repertoire of methods — communication practices — that can be adapted to the different situations and problems they encounter. Just as a practical theorist uses a variety of communication practices or methods to study situated action, so too does the speech teacher use a variety of practices or methods that enable students to learn how to communicate.

This implies that *teachers in the basic course not only employ practical theory, but they also are engaged practical theorists themselves*. The teacher as practical theorist, as opposed to the traditional positivist use of theory in the classroom, joins with his or her students in order to "play out" the theory. There is simply no other way that practitioners can use a practical theory except in situated communication practices with others. And this is exactly what is required of the teacher as practical theorist: the ability to enter into communication with students so as to change, alter, and enlarge their communication abilities.

Respecting the grammatical abilities of our students, of course, does not mean that we are satisfied with their abilities. It does mean that we should understand and honor the abilities students bring to the classroom. Moreover, teachers can tailor their practices and methods to fit the unique abili-

ties of individual students. In order to open a space in which learning can occur, the teacher as practical theorist must find ways of talking with students in a grammar that makes sense to them.

4. "PRACTICAL THEORIES ARE ASSESSED BY THEIR CONSEQUENCES. THEY ARE DEVELOPED IN ORDER TO MAKE HUMAN LIFE BETTER. THEY PROVIDE WAYS OF JOINING IN SOCIAL ACTION SO AS TO PROMOTE (A) SOCIALLY USEFUL DESCRIPTION, EXPLANATION, CRITIQUE, AND CHANGE IN SITUATED HUMAN ACTION; AND (B) EMERGENCE OF NEW ABILITIES FOR ALL PARTIES INVOLVED" (P. 231).

In keeping with the tradition of American pragmatist philosophy, practical theory is not so much concerned with Truth (with a capital 'T') as it is with consequences. Moreover, practical theory is focused on broad social, cultural, and political consequences instead of isolated, short-term consequences. My sense is that those of us in the basic communication course are in an excellent position to promote the kinds of social action that will help to make human life better. For example, elsewhere I have recently speculated on how the basic public speaking and argumentation courses in my department at San Jose State University operate as a kind of microcosm of larger cultural issues involved in the transformation of democracy within an ethnically diverse society. It is possible to attend to this issue more closely by assessing how the use of practical theory in the basic course can help to bring about positive social change in a multicultural environment.

The recognition that practical theory leads to the "emergence of new abilities for an parties involved" is important for rounding out my discussion of the teacher as practical theo-

rist. While recognizing that teachers must join the grammar of their students in order to enlarge their students' communication abilities, I have failed to mention how the communication abilities of the teachers emerge in concert with the abilities of the students. Whenever a teacher explores ways of adapting to the grammars of their students they necessarily assume the position of learner. Viewed from this perspective, communication abilities have an emergent quality which cross back and forth between teacher and student as each opens a learning space for the other. This way of "doing" practical theory implies that the communication practices used in the classroom emerge through a dialogical process.

5. "A PRACTICAL THEORY COEVOLVES WITH BOTH THE ABILITIES OF ITS PRACTITIONERS AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF ITS USE, THUS FORMING A TRADITION OF PRACTICE" (P. 232).

A practical theory must evolve if it is to stay grounded in situated communication interaction. Indeed, a practical theory that does not change in response to the consequences of its use will eventually lose its vitality and ability to negotiate social change. Here again we can note how practical theory differs from the traditional ideal of theory. In the positivist approach, any theoretical change comes in response to empirical validation efforts carried out through hypothesis-testing procedures. Internal validity is the criterion of choice. In the practical approach, evolution of the theory is gauged in terms of how well it allows the practitioner to join social practices. While tempting, we must be careful here about using external validity as the criterion for theoretical change. To claim that a theory has external validity is essentially to say that, "the theory over here provides an accurate representation of the practice over there." There is no separa-

tion of this sort in practical theory because the theory is itself a practice and can be assessed only in terms of its uses and consequences.

The evolution of practical theory in the basic course is intimately connected to the communication abilities of both teachers and students. Teachers as practical theorists must embrace *praxis* and employ *phronesis* as a way of teaching their students how to act competently in a contingent world. The ability to act competently in contingent situations, of course, is also a manifestation of *phronesis*. As noted, the requirements for demonstrating *phronesis*, for both teacher and student, cannot be captured in a formal set of abstract principles because the situations in which it applies are infinitely various. *Phronesis* must be demonstrated in concrete situations and the consequences of its use can only be assessed within the confines of that actual situation. How a practical theory is to evolve depends on how teachers and students are able to use the theory in classroom communication practices. The theory is useful to the extent that the practices lead to better teaching and learning.

HOW CAN PRACTICAL THEORY BE INTEGRATED INTO THE BASIC COURSE?

It would seem that practical theory is ideally suited to the basic communication course. It dispenses with the theory-practice dichotomy and seeks to develop discursive and conversational practices that enhance the communication abilities of both teachers and students. In this section I discuss a model for practical theory developed by Craig and Tracy (1995) and illustrate how it can be used in the basic course.

Craig and Tracy (1995) define practical theory as "a *rational reconstruction* of practice," and state that the "ultimate test" of a practical theory is "its usefulness for practice and

reflection" (p. 252). "We propose, then, to conceive of grounded practical theory as a rational reconstruction of situated practices for the purpose of informing further practice and reflection" (p. 264).

While there are some minor differences between Cronen's (1995) and Craig and Tracy's (1995) characterization of practical theory, the two appear to me to address essentially the same issues in roughly the same ways. One difference is the uses to which the two approaches are put. Cronen (1995) uses a practical coordinated management of meaning theory in therapeutic intervention settings involving family or organizational social groups. Craig and Tracy (1995) appear to be more mainstream by comparison. They investigate a specific academic discourse community and the kinds of practices that attend "intellectual discussions" such as colloquia, research seminars, and symposia.

The "problem-centered model" developed by Craig and Tracy (1995) identifies three interrelated theoretical levels through which a practice can be reconstructed: the technical level, problem level, and philosophical level.

At the *technical level* "a practice can be reconstructed as a repertory of specific communicative strategies and techniques that are routinely available to be employed within the practice" (p. 253). This is the most concrete level. It is the level at which speech acts are made and procedures are followed in order to produce particular outcomes. Reconstructing practices at this level, of course, does not mean that the strategies or techniques are successful. It simply highlights the fact that the production of practices result from strategic action.

In the basic course, this is often the level that commands the most attention. Indeed, it is common for instructors to introduce the basic course by telling students that the goal is to "learn how to develop and present speeches to an audience." This way of framing the course addresses the fundamental question asked at the technical level: how do I do it? While this is certainly a central objective of the basic course, and one

that students are likely to focus on, it suggests that the course operates solely on the technical level, a feature which is commensurate with a skills approach to learning. As the next level of the model indicates, however, the technical level should follow from the identification and reconstruction of specific problems that students and teachers encounter in the basic course.

At the *problem level* "a practice can be reconstructed as a problem logic or interrelated web of problems that practitioners experience" (p. 253). This is the most important level in the model because it is here where the identification of "real world" problems leads to responses that often result in philosophical reflection (level three) or the development of specific strategies and techniques (level one). It makes sense from a practical point of view to begin with the problem level because it is here where people must respond to contingencies embedded in the social situations they encounter.

Applied to the basic course, there are a number of fundamental communication problems that we and our students face. Experienced teachers recognize familiar patterns of problems, but they also know that every semester is likely to bring some new and different problem that they have never seen before. The point is that there are many communication problems of various types that can give rise to the rational reconstruction of a practice. The basic question that is applicable to the problem level and reflects instruction in the basic course is: What problems do our students experience when learning how to enhance their communication abilities?

It is at the third level, the *philosophical level*, where "a practice can be reconstructed in the form of elaborated normative ideals and overarching principles that provide a rationale for resolution of problems" (p. 253). This is the most abstract level in that it consists of situated ideals, moral imperatives, or philosophical positions. These ideals, imperatives, and positions, like the strategies and techniques at the technical level, come about as a result of reflecting on

the problems identified at the second problem level. Here the instructor might respond to a reconstructed problem by calling forth a set of moral principles that help students negotiate their way through multiple and competing goals (level two to level three). Applied to the basic course, the basic question asked at this level is: What situated ideals can be developed that will help students resolve or cope with the problem at hand?

In what follows I explore how the problem-centered model can be used to illuminate a particular type of communication practice typically encountered in the basic course. Consider a speech teacher who notices that students in a basic speech class are reluctant to ask questions or offer comments in response to the oral presentations given by their peers. How can this practice be reconstructed in the form of a problem? The instructor might begin by hypothesizing that students in the class have multiple face saving and face threatening goals that become especially acute in public speaking episodes. This initial hypothesis could be generated through interviews with students, conversations with other instructors, reading research literature, or direct observation conducted by the instructor. In any case, the initial hypothesis should be construed as an informal assessment, not a formal prediction to be tested and verified.

Within this face-saving hypothesis, students are viewed as reluctant to ask questions because they do not want to threaten the self-presentations of others. Their silence is thus seen as a strategy performed so that they can avoid threatening the self-presentations of other students in the class. The teacher might also think that the strategy is enacted to serve other goals as well; namely, to secure their own opportunity for a non-threatening episode when it is their turn to speak. Not surprisingly, the problem logic at play here serves to reconstruct an episode in which oral criticism is avoided so as to ensure a non-threatening classroom environment.

If this is the rational reconstruction (practical theory) at the problem level, one way for the instructor to go forward is to develop specific communication techniques that require the students to practice giving and receiving oral criticism in ways that are constructive but not personally threatening. This is a move from the problem level to the technical level. In order to accomplish this, the teacher might introduce the techniques to the class, perhaps through modeling initially but after that the techniques could be performed by other people in other ways. Notice that the technique was offered as a response to a real problem exhibited in the classroom, not as an end in itself. Moreover, the success of the technique can only be gauged in communication practice. That is, by how well students can perform the actions of giving and receiving constructive criticism, and by how well the teacher can enlist students in practices that lead to this outcome.

Another way of addressing the problem is to incorporate reconstructions at the philosophical level. Here the instructor might move to level three by eliciting a "democratic ideal of constructive criticism." One way to do this is by developing an assignment that requires students to explore, perhaps through historical, contemporary, or personal exemplars, actual situations in which criticism was encouraged and/or censored. For example, students might read case study accounts of the discourse surrounding Joseph McCarthy and how failure to criticize his communist subversion propaganda ruined careers and created unfounded paranoia. Through this kind of investigation students are encouraged to assess the various affects — both good and bad — of open and closed criticism on ethics, decision making, and policy formation in a democratic society.

From this assignment, the class might then develop its own set of ethical principles that establish the situated ideals associated with giving and receiving criticism in the classroom. These ideals serve as philosophical responses (they can be moral or political ideals) to a practical communication

problem. It is necessary to recognize, of course, that the philosophical ideals must still find their way into the communication practices of the class. Thus the actual implementation of level three reconstructions will eventually involve techniques and strategies at level one. Ultimately, the test is whether students are able to integrate these ideals into their communication practices so that they are able to engage in productive oral criticism.

When introduced into the basic course, the problem-centered model of practical theory highlights how technical and philosophical dimensions respond to practical problems and how these problems are negotiated in the ongoing communication practices of students and teachers.

CONCLUSION

In discussing the uses of practical theory in the basic communication course it is clear that what I am advocating is both new and old. It is new in the sense that it pushes directly against the grain of positivist thinking and the traditional social scientific paradigm that has influenced communication instruction for the last 25 or so years. It is old because it continues the classical tradition of *praxis* and calls for the teaching of *phronesis* in communication education. Aristotle clearly recognized that rhetoric and public speaking belong to the domain of *praxis* and that *phronesis* is the proper form of knowledge for demonstrating competence in these practical arts. A similar argument could be made in terms of tracing strands of practical theory and the social constructionist perspective back to the Sophistic tradition (Pearce & Foss, 1990).

Whether we turn to Aristotle's notion of *praxis* or the teaching of the Sophists, the outcome is clear: speech communication discarded its classical roots as a practical discipline and jumped on the positivist bandwagon in an

attempt to pursue theoretical rigor and scientific respectability.

The irony of this move has not gone unnoticed, nor have some of its negative consequences. During the past few decades there has been growing recognition in the humanities and social sciences that positivism is limited when applied to the realm of human action and, conversely, that the theory-practice dichotomy must be reexamined. Many influential writers outside our field are now turning to the domain of *praxis* and issues of speech communication — the same domain and the same issues that the field relinquished in the rush to embrace positivism — to fashion a renewed pragmatist philosophy (Bernstein, 1983).

To be fair, many in the field, particularly in speech education and classical rhetorical studies, never ceased working with communication as a practical art. Instead of following their practice (no pun intended), these renegades were instead ushered off to the margins of the discipline (Sprague, 1993). "Had we stuck to our business of teaching communication as a practical art," writes Leff (1994), "we might have understood the legacy we inherited from past teachers of the art, and we might have led the way in correcting the theoretical psychosis of the modern academy" (p. 14). If speech communication is to emerge as a discipline capable of healing the "theoretical psychosis of the modern academy," as Leff suggests, we must return to our roots in communication education and begin working with more practical forms of communication theory.

I am optimistic that the alternative voices among us are prevailing and that we are finally recognizing how our future is inexorably tied to our practical past. Within a practical approach to theory there is an explicit awareness of this reflexive shift to move both backward and forward at the same time; a movement that seems to always circle back around *praxis*. The development of practical theory seems to me to be a step in the right direction, perhaps made easier knowing that we are following in the footsteps of others.

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