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Karla Kay Jensen
Texas Tech University

Elizabeth R. Lamoureux
Illinois State University

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Written Feedback in the Basic Course: What Instructors Provide and What Students Deem Helpful*

*Karla Kay Jensen
Elizabeth R. Lamoureux*

As instructors of the oral communication course, we have a variety of specific goals to accomplish in our classrooms: for instance, we may want to develop students' cognitive abilities, assist students with career skills, help students find their own voices, or build student confidence. In reflecting upon these goals, we often turn to feedback and evaluation as primary tools for achieving these objectives. Although technological advances allow basic course instructors to use such innovative instructional resources as interactive video (Cronin, 1994; Cronin & Kennan, 1994) or computer-generated feedback (Behnke & King, 1984; Hallmark, 1992; Russell, 1992) to meet the previously mentioned goals, the basic communication course continues to demand a human element. One way this human element is exemplified is in the written feedback given to students. Our experience has shown that personalized written feedback continues to be students' most desired form of speech evaluation. Thus, when reflecting upon our instructional aims, we are reminded of Holtzman's (1960) timeless challenge, "What can I say (or write or do) that will result in this student's improving his [sic] communicative ability?" (p. 1). Any instructor who has labored over written

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evaluations only to wonder whether students actually read, used and/or cognitively processed the comments, can value from revisiting the issue of written evaluations. Because written criticism is a permanent record which is often used for later reference, it should be thoughtfully constructed. Thus, attention to the types of comments we offer, as well as the way our written criticism is received, is warranted.

This two-part study goes beyond anecdotal evidence to reveal the types of written feedback instructors offer students in the basic communication course as well as students' perceptions of the helpfulness of written feedback. Booth-Butterfield (1989) writes, "Written criticism may seem clear-cut and supportive from the perspective of the instructor who creates it, [but] it may be interpreted in a very different manner by the student recipient" (p. 122). As professionals we have the responsibility to investigate our own teaching practices for evaluation and improvement. Part of this investigation should include the perceptions of those we educate, our students. The added dimension of addressing student perceptions of written feedback enriches our understanding of the process nature of communication and has the potential to aid in our teaching effectiveness by allowing us see if we are indeed accomplishing the goals we have set forth.

REVISITING THE ISSUE OF SPEECH EVALUATION

The issue of speech evaluation has been a mainstay in communication education scholarship, because it is generally accepted that, learning cannot take place without evaluation. However, written feedback merits additional study for a number of reasons. First, much of the feedback literature has focused on oral, rather than written criticism (Book, 1983; Bostrom, 1963; Dedmon, 1967; Preston, Mancillas & William, 1985; Roubicet, 1990; Staton-Spicer & Wulff, 1984). Second,

the few studies on written feedback offer limited information on actual classroom practices or student perceptions of those practices (Book & Simmons, 1980; Miller, 1964; Palmerton, 1986; Rubin, 1990; Sprague, 1971; Vogel, 1973; Young, 1974). Third, studies in other disciplines such as English composition, business, and special education, have examined the educational benefit of written feedback (Bangert-Downs, 1991; Kulhavy, 1990; Leaby & Atkinson, 1989; Zellermayer, 1989); because of the unique circumstances of the public speaking experience, however, these studies cannot be generalized to the speech classroom. Fourth, of the limited studies on written feedback within our discipline, many were conducted one or two decades ago. In fact, in a eight-year review (1974-1982) of the research in communication and instruction, only seven of 186 articles dealt with the criticism or evaluation of student oral performance (Staton-Spicer & Wulff, 1984). This suggests a need to replicate these findings and confirm their applicability in the 1990's.

Despite the paucity of current research, Book and Simmons (1980) claim that written feedback can motivate student achievement and can induce significant change in speech performance. To test this claim empirically, this study explores the types of comments instructors provide and how students perceive the helpfulness of written evaluation by addressing the following research question:

RQ1: What forms of written comments do basic course instructors use in their evaluations of speeches?

Specifically, the following types of comments were examined: positive vs. negative comments; content vs. delivery comments, and one-word vs. multi-word comments. These categories were adapted from the work of Sprague (1971) who proposed a category system based on four dichotomies: 1) content-delivery, 2) positive-negative, 3) personal-impersonal, 4) and atomistic-holistic. Sprague's

categories have been utilized in earlier speech evaluation research: evaluation from instructors (Vogel, 1973), evaluation from peers (Book and Simmons, 1980), and evaluation of student preferences for written comments (Young, 1974). Specifically, Sprague (1971) found that comments given by instructors most frequently involved content (75%), were atomistic or specific (95%), were impersonal (99%), and were almost equally divided in valence. Because of the general tendency of instructors to provide impersonal and atomistic feedback (Book, 1983; Book & Simmons, 1980; Preston, Mancillas & William, 1985; Sprague, 1971), the current study focuses on the more debated categories of content-delivery and positive-negative feedback. Additionally this study examines instructors' use of one-word vs. multi-word comments for two reasons: first, we wanted to assess the degree of detail provided by instructors; and second, we wanted to learn about students' preferences regarding length and detail of instructors' written feedback.

Regarding the second part of this study, previous research has produced limited findings specifically related to students' perceptions of the most and least helpful written feedback, whether students actually read the comments, and how they used them. These concerns provided four additional research questions:

- RQ2: What types of written comments do basic course speech students find most helpful?
- RQ3: What types of written comments do basic course speech students find least helpful?
- RQ4: Do students read written comments in the basic speech course?
- RQ5: Do students use written comments to help improve their public speaking skills?

Accordingly, Sprague (1991) challenges basic course scholars to study and report findings related to student perceptions of classroom criticism. Book's (1983) review suggested that the "common-sense folklore" about providing feedback is not always congruent with results of feedback research. For instance, instructors may think that positive comments are perceived by students as more helpful than negative comments, when this is not always the case. Specifically, Preston, Mancillas & William (1985) found that positive feedback promoted good feelings, but was limited in fostering improvement. Young's (1974) study showed that students regarded positive criticism more helpful than negative criticism when directed toward speech content but negative criticism was more helpful than positive criticism when directed toward delivery. No preference was given for content or delivery comments, since students found both equally important (see also Bock & Bock, 1981). Additionally, students regarded specific comments more useful than general comments and the impersonal approach significantly more helpful when addressing delivery, while the personal approach was seen as significantly more helpful when discussing content. Although the results of this research are valuable, they are difficult to generalize because of small sample size (Preston, Mancillas & William, 1985), the use of peer critiques (Book & Simmons, 1980), and the hypothetical nature of some studies (Young, 1974). Thus, the current study seeks to enhance generalizability by relying on actual teacher comments from actual student evaluation forms, and by asking students to indicate, in their own words, why comments were or were not helpful.

METHOD

Sampling Procedures

The sample of 114 students from a large, midwestern university was drawn from ten sections of the basic communication course. Volunteers ranged in age from 18 to 21, with a mean age of 19. Participants supplied a photocopy of their speech evaluation form which included written comments. Evaluation forms were gathered from 48 males and 66 females, all of whom read and signed informed consent statements ensuring their confidentiality.

The evaluations provided a representative sample of comments from ten course instructors (teaching assistants) as well as speeches across the entire grading scale. Eleven to twelve forms were gathered from student volunteers in each of the ten participating sections. Evaluation forms were collected from the third of five speeches of the semester, a 5-7 minute informative presentation. The third speech was selected for study because of the potential for atypical written comments in the first or final speech evaluations. The first speech is a "trial run" for both the student and the instructor, since both are assessing the student's capabilities and potential; thus, these first comments may be exceedingly encouraging or general and therefore not representative. The final speech may be equally unrepresentative, since it often exemplifies greater polish, and may therefore garner disproportionately more positive comments from the instructor. Consequently, the middle speech appeared to be an appropriate selection for our research since a certain level of mastery is expected, yet comments also focus on future goals and improvement.

In addition to providing their evaluation form, the students also completed a survey which asked them to respond to the following items: (1) With regard to this speech evaluation

form, identify three comments made by your instructor which you found to be the most helpful. (2) With regard to this speech evaluation form, identify three comments made by your instructor which you found to be the least helpful. (3) Do you read all the comments written on your speech evaluation form? Please explain your answer. (4) Do you use the comments on your speech evaluation form to help improve your public speaking skills? Please explain your answer. Students answered these questions by referring directly to the instructor's comments written on their own evaluation form; this eliminated the need to recall feedback from a previous speech.

Identifying Categories

The coding scheme used for this study was adapted from the work of Sprague (1971).

Since observation indicates that some instructors provide comments including general remarks, as well as observations about outlines, bibliographies and time, Sprague's (1971) content-delivery dichotomy was adapted to accommodate these additional references. Because written evaluation comments also reflect a variety of forms and lengths, we included an analysis of these dimensions as well. Given these adaptations, this study explored comment type, valence, length and form (see Table 1 for operational definitions). Specifically, the following types of comments were examined: positive vs. negative comments, content vs. delivery comments, and one-word vs. multi-word comments.

Coding Procedures

The unit of analysis for this study was the topical phrase, that is, a comment that can stand alone (a word, phrase or

Table 1
Operational Definitions for Coding

Unit of Analysis — A topical phrase that stands alone; such as, a word, phrase or clause that relate to one topic in the evaluation. Examples: Fine; Interesting topic; Polish for greater fluency.

Comment Type:

- 1) *Content* — Any comment dealing with ideas, reasoning, supporting material, organization, or language. Examples: Appropriate selection and use of support materials; The main points were difficult to distinguish.
- 2) *Delivery* — Any comment dealing with the physical and vocal elements of communication such as eye contact, gestures, posture, poise, dynamism, sincerity, confidence, rate, volume, fillers, inflection, articulation and pronunciation . Examples: Excellent eye contact; Work on articulation.
- 3) *Outline, Bibliography, Time (OBT)* — Any comment which addresses the outline, bibliography or time constraints. Examples: Outline has nice structure; Bibliography needs to be alphabetized.
- 4) *General* — Any comment which views the speech as a whole. Examples: Your efforts are appreciated. More preparation would have resulted in a stronger speech.

Comment Valence:

- 1) *Positive* — Any comment which compliments or expresses approval of the speaker or the presentation. Examples: Professional stance; Great enthusiasm; Original topic.
- 2) *Negative* — Any comment which expresses disapproval or makes a suggestion for improvement. Examples: Work for greater vocal variety; Use more transitions so audience is able to follow your speech.

Comment Length:

- 1) *Single-word* — Any comment which is limited to one word. Examples: Strong; Great; Weak; Focus.
 - 2) *Multi-word* — Any comment which uses two or more words. Examples: Solid credibility; Incorporate visual aids earlier.
-

clause that relates to one topic in the evaluation). The comments were then content analyzed for type, valence and length. Thus, a statement such as (1) good introduction, (2) but you needed more eye contact, (3) and a clearly stated thesis, would be coded as three, separate constructs: (1) content/positive/multi-word/statement, (2) delivery/negative/multi-word/statement, (3) content/negative/multi-word/ statement.

In the first part of the study, the number of comments per evaluation ranged from 5 to 54 with a mean of 24 comments. The mode was also 24. Three trained coders were familiarized with the coding categories and purpose of the study. A total of 2,933 comments contained on 114 evaluations were coded for all three dimensions. Intercoder reliability, calculated according to Holsti's (1969) formula, was .91.

In the second part of the study, each question in the survey was content analyzed by two independent coders with a .88 reliability. The operational definitions for coding the constructs were identical to those in part one. Student responses for Question 1 (Which three comments did you find most helpful?) and Question 2 (Which three comments did you find least helpful?) were coded according to the operational definitions and further defined for specific characteristics. For instance, negative content comments were broken down into specific aspects of content (such as thesis, main points, support materials, conclusion). For Question 3 (Do you read all the comments?) and Question 4 (Do you use the comments to help you improve?), a classification scheme was created and responses were coded according to such categories as comments were read for improvement, to get a better grade, to focus on weaknesses, and the like.

Table 2
Frequencies of Written Feedback Categories

Category/Example	Number of Constructs (2933 total)	Percent of Total
Content "Good job on research;" "Nice work on transitions;" "Where is your preview?"	1849	63%
Delivery "Don't lose your eye contact;" "Good gestures;" "We can't hear you!"	822	28%
General "In all, this was an effective presentation;" "Work harder in all areas;" "Your effort is noticed and appreciated."	90	3%
Outline, Bibliography, Time (OBT)	172	6%
TOTAL		100%
Positive "Relevant information;" "You have nice eye contact;" "Your outline looks great."	1520	52%
Negative "Need transitions;" "Where are your sources?" "The visual aid is too small to see."	1413	48%
TOTAL		100%
One-word "Good;" "No;" "OK;" "Nice;" "What?" "Long."	318	11%
Multi-word "You related the topic to us well." "What was the thesis?" "Vivid examples."	2615	89%
TOTAL		100%

RESULTS

Part 1: Instructors' Written Feedback

RQ1 asked what forms of written comments basic course instructors used in their evaluations of speeches. Results show that instructors provided significantly more written comments directed toward content (63%) than toward delivery (28%), outlines, bibliographies, and time constraints (6%) or general comments (3%) ($\chi^2 (3) = 2,702, p < .001$). Additionally, positive comments (52%) were slightly more prevalent than negative remarks (48%) ($\chi^2 (1) = 3.9, p < .05$). The evaluations also contained significantly more multi-word (89%) than single-word (11%) comments ($\chi^2 (1) = 1,800, p < .001$). Table 2 represents a summary of these frequencies as well as examples from each category.

Part 2: Student Perceptions of Written Feedback

RQ2 asked which instructor comments students found most helpful (see Table 3). This research question was examined from several perspectives. First, attention was paid to frequencies from broad categories, specifically content and delivery, and valence of positive and negative. In addition, more detailed sub-categories assumed under each of the broader categories were examined, such as introductions, conclusions, transitions, and support materials (content) as well as eye contact, gestures, posture and movement (delivery). (Authors can be contacted for a complete list and results of sub-category analyses.)

Regarding the categories of content and delivery, students selected proportionately more delivery comments, 17.5% (144 out of 822), as more useful than content comments, 8% (151

Table 3
Frequencies of Constructs and Percent Selected
as Most Helpful and Least Helpful Comments

Construct	Produced		Most Helpful		Least Helpful	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Content	1849	(.63)	151	(.08)	98	(.05)
Delivery	822	(.28)	144	(.18)	68	(.08)
General	90	(.03)	0		0	
OBT	172	(.06)	3	(.02)	0	
Positive	1520	(.52)	37	(.02)	39	(.03)
Negative	1430	(.48)	258	(.18)	127	(.09)

out of 1,849). Thus, findings indicated that, despite the fact that instructors provided nearly three times as many content comments, students noted delivery comments as most helpful.

Considering the helpfulness of positive and negative comments, students selected 18% (258 of 1,413) of negative comments as more useful than positive comments, 2% (37 of 1,520). Again, despite the fact that instructors produced more positive than negative feedback, students selected proportionately more negative comments as most helpful. When content and delivery comments were crossed with valence, students found negative comments aimed at delivery to be the most valuable of all. Outline, bibliography or time comments, as well as general comments comprised only 2% (3 of 172) of the feedback deemed most helpful.

RQ3 asked what types of written feedback basic course speech students found least helpful. Findings revealed that, of the content comments provided, students selected 2% (39 of 1,520) as not useful. Of the delivery comments given, students declared 8% (127 of 1,413) as least helpful. (See Table 3.) It

should be noted that although students were asked to provide three comments they found least helpful, some chose to provide only one or two. This may imply that students regarded most comments as having merit.

RQ4 asked whether students read all the comments written on their evaluation form. Eighty-six percent of the responses indicated “Yes —Because” Students cited reading the comments for general improvement (30%), for helpfulness (28%), for grade improvement (11%), and because they respected the instructor (8%). Additionally, comments were read to focus on weaknesses (6%) and for encouragement (3%). Fourteen percent of the responses were justified by a “Yes — But . . .” statement. Specifically, these students

Table 4
Students’ Reasons for Reading Comments

Category	Number of Constructs (n-96)	Percent of Total
86% Indicated “Yes — Because . . .”		
In order to improve skills	23	30%
Comments perceived as helpful	27	28%
To get a better grade	11	11%
Respect for teacher	8	8%
Want to focus on weaknesses	6	6%
For encouragement	3	3%
14% Indicated “Yes — But . . .”		
Desired more comments	5	5%
Comments were too negative	4	4%
Comments were irrelevant	2	2%
Comments were read only later	1	1%
Comments were illegible	1	1%

remarked that they did read the comments, but they desired additional feedback (5%), the comments were too negative (4%), the comments were perceived as irrelevant (2%), the comments were read but only later (1%), and the teacher's penmanship was difficult to read (1%). (See Table 4.)

Finally, RQ5 asked whether students used the written feedback to help improve their public speaking skills. Eighty-six percent indicated they did use the feedback. Students specifically cited using comments for improvement (43%). Twenty-two percent simply stated "yes" but offered no explanation. Additionally, students indicated using comments to focus on weaknesses (5%), to get the teacher's opinion (5%), and to get a better grade (4%). Students also revealed that the comments were used because they were helpful (4%) and that they would be used for later speeches or presentations outside the classroom (3%). Eight percent of the responses revealed that the comments were sometimes used for improvement. Only 6% of the responses indicated that the feedback was not used for improvement. (See Table 5.)

Table 5
Do Students Use Instructor Comments? And How?

Category	Number of Constructs (n-97)	Percent of Total
Yes, for improvement	45	47%
Yes, used comments (no explanation)	21	22%
Sometimes	8	8%
No	6	6%
Yes, to focus on weaknesses	5	5%
Yes, out of respect for instructor	5	5%
Yes, to get a better grade	4	4%
Yes, but not immediately	3	3%

DISCUSSION

The results illuminate a variety of issues concerning instructors' written speech evaluations and students' feedback preferences. To begin, the finding that instructors offer more positive comments than negative comments reflects previous research that recommends the use of positive feedback. Specifically, comments that are encouraging and personalized tend to be perceived by students as most effective and yield more positive attitudes toward the speaking experience. Yet the negative comments are also beneficial. For example, learning theory indicates that allowing undesirable behavior to continue without comment reinforces the behavior (Young, 1974). Also, some might argue that excessive praise may have damaging effects, resulting in a lack of further motivation and/or overconfidence. The current study found that instructors are offering virtually the same proportion of positive and negative comments today as twenty-five years ago (Sprague, 1971). Perhaps this is due to an ongoing belief that negative comments should be balanced with positive remarks.

Positive comments in large quantity, however, are not necessarily desired by students. For example, 88% of the comments cited as most helpful were negative. This was among the most striking conclusions of the study and perhaps can be explained by Farson (1963) who indicates that praise, while often appropriate, is not always the greatest motivation for improvement. He suggests that too much positive feedback may have a damaging effect resulting in complacency, overconfidence, and restricted creativity. Instead, students desired feedback that focuses on weaknesses and that offers specific suggestions for improvement (See also Albright, 1967; Preston, Mancillas & William, 1985; Young, 1974.) In fact, Levie & Dickie (1973) reported, when instructors point out incorrect or inappropriate behaviors and provide students with recommended alternatives, students are more inclined to

learn from the experience and correct those behaviors in subsequent speeches. In addition, Young's (1974) results showed that anxious students perceive instructor criticism as particularly helpful. Further, Preston, Mancillas and William (1985) found that complimentary feedback promoted good feelings, but was of limited value in helping students improve their speaking skills. It may also be true that, for some students, positive comments lose their impact when given in quantity and are taken less seriously than fewer negative comments.

In addition to the findings on valence, this study indicates that speech evaluations tend to have significantly more content comments than any other type. This may mirror the emphasis placed on content at the university under investigation. Still, these findings are consistent with Sprague's (1971) research which reported that 73% of the content-delivery comments focused on content. Since one goal of a basic public speaking course is to teach students to develop a well-organized, well-researched speech, this finding is encouraging and not surprising.

Interestingly however, although more content comments were provided, students regarded delivery comments as proportionately more helpful. This finding is inconsistent with Sprague (1971) who found that critiques with significantly more content comments were rated by students as the most helpful. Perhaps the current finding can be explained by Young (1974) who discovered that from a student's perspective, delivery is often a reflection of their total being. Hence, for the students who place great importance on appearance and peer acceptance, delivery comments may be most salient. Thus a focus on physical presentation may actually override substantive content for some students.

Third, this study revealed that written evaluations contained significantly more multi-word than single-word comments. This indicates an awareness on the part of instructors regarding the need to clarify feedback by providing detailed remarks. This finding was welcomed since students

demonstrated a definite preference for detailed evaluation. In contrast to the above mentioned categories (content-delivery, positive-negative), it appears that, only in the category of multi-single word, are instructors providing the type of comments students find most helpful.

Overall, it is affirming to know that students do indeed read written feedback. This study found the majority of the students read the comments in order to improve their speaking skills. Perhaps more revealing were those students who qualified their statements. The "Yes — But . . ." comments were directed toward instructors and how they can make the feedback more useful. Further, instructors should be pleased to know that the majority of the students not only read, but also indicated incorporating teacher suggestions into subsequent speeches. It is heartening to find that students indicated a genuine desire to improve and, in order to do so, read comments which focused on their weaknesses. Considering students' preoccupation with grades, it is interesting to note how few students mentioned grade as a motivating force for reading and employing teacher feedback in future speeches.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Helping students improve their oral communication skills is a main objective in the basic course, and written criticism is a permanent record for helping students achieve that end. One way we can accomplish this instructional objective is to write criticism with a purpose instead of merely pointing out what a speaker has done well or has done poorly; that is, to have the student feel some satisfaction with his or her performance and, in turn, move toward improving some particular aspect of his or her communicative behavior. With this in mind, the current study sought to understand the nature of

such satisfaction by focusing both on instructors' evaluations as well as students' perceptions of that written feedback.

When comparing the types of comments instructors provide with the types of comments students find most helpful, there were two important distinctions. First, part one of this study revealed that instructors provided more content than delivery comments. After reviewing students' perceptions of the most helpful comments, it was determined that students actually desire more comments directed toward delivery. Perhaps students feel the need to receive a greater number of delivery comments because their physical presentation is so much a part of their personal identity.

In an effort to achieve personal improvement, students in this study overwhelmingly desired written comments aimed at problems and weaknesses in their oral presentations. Further, students cited the lack of specific comments regarding their weaknesses and the need for teachers to provide more detailed suggestions on how to improve. As previously noted, 88% of the comments students deemed as most helpful were negative. In contrast, it was revealed that instructors offered only 48% negative comments in an average evaluation. Additionally, much of the "positive" criticism that instructors provided, and that students found least helpful, merely listed behaviors, such as "stated thesis," or "used gestures," rather than stating how or why such behaviors were effective.

Young (1974) proposed that "a student's receptivity to criticism and, perhaps [the] utilization of that criticism, may greatly be affected by the degree to which the criticism meets [student] needs and preferences" (p. 234). The results of this study should invite us to reflect on how we teach the basic course and how we train our teaching assistants or new instructors. Specifically, there are two main implications for how instructors might provide written feedback that is perceived as most helpful. First, students rarely identified positive statements as useful, thus indicating that instructors should avoid giving exclusively positive criticism and include

more negative, constructive comments in their evaluations. The same findings also suggest the need for these negative comments to be more specific and detailed, offering concrete suggestions for improvement. Second, it is clear that instructors are writing more content comments, while students are citing delivery comments as most helpful. Instead of reducing the number of content comments, instructors might offer an additional number of delivery comments or at least provide more descriptive delivery comments in order to meet students' needs. Overall, considering written comments as a whole, students should be left with the impression that speaking well is not beyond their abilities; rather, speaking effectively is a skill which they can master.

Exploring the types of written comments we offer, as well as the way our criticism is received, is advantageous when reflecting on our instructional goals and their achievements. Can instructional goals be accomplished in part through the use of written feedback? Can a teacher develop students' cognitive abilities, assist with their career skills, help students find their own voices, and/or build student confidence? These findings suggest, regardless of the instructor's objective, goals may be better achieved when instructors study the feedback they give as well as learn about their students' expectations for and perceptions of those written comments.

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