Theory and Practice in Communication Analysis

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In opening one of their recent articles on communication analysis, Dean and Benoit lament, "there is a dearth of information available to assist the coach and student" in preparing this type of speech. At about the same time, a work group at the National Developmental Conference on Forensics struggled with the same sorts of issues: How does a critic judge a round justly? What standards should be used to evaluate student speeches? Several of the participants endorsed the idea of developing specific criteria for each event and encouraged research along those lines.

Devotees of communication analysis have answered that call with a vengeance. It has changed from the least to perhaps the most analyzed event. The authors of these varied studies have found much in the practice of the event to applaud, but even a casual review of the writings reveals a strong sense of discomfort. The unease seems centered on the relationship of student to method to text. Do students truly understand the theories they have chosen to use? Do they grasp the strategies of the speakers? The critics of communication analysis have focused on the problems of theory and practice. The difficulties that distress many educators can be understood and alleviated if students, coaches, and judges make the text of the artifact, not the methodology, the focus of the critical process. To explain my position, I shall first review the recent literature on communication analysis and reveal the emphasis on method; second, put that preoccupation into perspective by looking at the use of textual criticism in rhetoric and public address; and, finally, offer some tentative suggestions that could help improve the practice of communication analysis.

Communication analysis occupies a unique place in the forensic world. No other event is so clearly based on an academic activity and has such strong ties to "the rest of the department." As a result, students and coaches have always felt uneasy about the final product. If the speeches are supposed to resemble published criticism, they fail that test. If not, then what purpose does the event serve? This confusion has led many to ignore communication analysis despite its proclaimed educational value. Some have sought to provide clarification by publishing guidelines for potential participants. These essays fall into three categories. The first type of article dispenses practical directions for doing the event. The
second kind of study reveals the judging standards used in the event according to survey research. The third category encompasses argumentative essays, polemics that attack or defend the nature and purpose of communication analysis. All of these studies demonstrate the preoccupation that forensic participants and educators have with methodological concerns and the corresponding lack of interest in textual analysis of rhetorical artifacts.

Most of the essays in the *National Forensic Journal*’s special issue on communication analysis fall into the first category. In fact, William Benoit, the guest editor, notes in his introduction that the issue "is devoted to pedagogical essays, articles on coaching competitive rhetorical criticism."4 To Benoit's credit, the clear majority of the articles fulfill that purpose and are of great value to the coach and competitor. It is important to note, however, that the "rules of the game" have long included an obsession with methodology.

In the lead article, Kathleen German has as her topic the choice of a methodology. She notes that most students who try the event face a crisis when "they realize they need a 'methodology.'"5 The essay defines "methodology" and provides some guidelines to aid in the selection of an appropriate one. While German clearly assumes the necessity of analyzing the text to determine the best method, she does not provide any means for doing so.

Kevin Dean makes the same assumptions in his essay. Dean outlines the process of writing a communication analysis. He argues that the research phase has four steps: "selecting an appropriate rhetorical artifact for study, understanding basic rhetorical theory, gathering background information about the rhetoric and the situation in which it occurred, and selecting a methodological tool to aid in the evaluation."6 Only in the last area does Dean discuss the need to analyze the text of the speech. He states that a student should select a method based upon the "most powerful or the most unique strategy(ies) employed by the speaker."7 Again, the process by which those strategies are found is ignored. Presumably, the student will study "basic rhetorical theory" such as "Aristotle's ethos, pathos, and logos; Bitzer's exigence, constraints, and rhetorical situation; Burke's identification; and Fisher's Motives" and use these principles to analyze the text.8 Dean reveals an even more profound bias toward methodological concerns when he discusses the elements of a written speech. He outlines a large number of tasks for the speaker, but only in the "application" of the method "to the artifact" is the text involved.9 Dean argues that a student should incorporate "illustrative examples from the artifact" at "every possible juncture."10
speech is logically prior to the text, and pieces of the text are used only to prove the explanatory power of the theory.

Two other essays in the special issue also seek to instruct. Benoit and Dean attempt to broaden the range of possible artifacts by arguing that literary works can be examined in communication analysis. Given the previous study by Dean, one presumes that the structure and direction of the student's speech would remain the same even with the use of a literary text.

Shields and Preston undertake the task of explaining fantasy theme analysis. They provide the student with five assumptions, twelve technical terms, and three evaluative concepts. They also give several illustrations of how the method could be used. While these "mini-critiques" rely on the text of the artifacts, they also ignore the conventions of a student speech. With the wealth of technical terms and the implication that fantasy themes are nearly universal in application, I believe that a speech using this theory would still have the preoccupation with method that characterizes most current communication analysis.

Those concerned with teaching the event heavily emphasize the methodological portion of the speech for a reason. They understand that that part of the speech, along with delivery, dominates the judging criteria used in the event. In 1983, Shawn McGee noted that little research had been done on the judging criteria in communication analysis. Since that time, two studies have answered McGee's challenge by investigating this question.

Dean and Benoit use content analysis to examine "over three hundred rhetorical criticism ballots from four tournaments held in different regions of the country." They develop two major divisions of comments, one concerning speech skills in general and the other dealing specifically with communication analysis. Five of the eight categories in the latter division inherently include methodological concerns. The others could easily do so. While the speech skills section measures criteria such as delivery, one category deserves special attention. Many judges, Dean and Benoit report, want further documentation. That does not mean, however, that they want more evidence from the text to support the speaker's assertions. Instead, "most" of these "comments relate to the effects of the speech, the original source for the critical method, and the historical/background information about the artifact(s) studied." Textual documentation is not emphasized.

Larson, using survey research of judges and coaches, departs from Dean and Benoit in at least one crucial area. She not only investigates what is, but inquires about what should be; she measures perceptions held by the forensics community about the ideal
Evaluative criteria for communication analysis. Her results differ from Dean and Benoit on one critical point: Larson finds significantly more emphasis on the use of "proper support (illustration) material" from the text than did Dean and Benoit. Again, though, the theory seems logically prior to the text. The method comes first.

The results of these studies provide a ready explanation for the suggestions offered in the instructional set of articles. Judges want an introduction of the method, an explanation of the method, an application of the method, and methodological conclusions. Naturally, pragmatists concerned with coaching the event do not want students to lose consistently, so we encourage a focus on methodology. In the process, the goal of teaching criticism can be lost, and the critics of communication analysis tend to focus on that concern.

At the Second Summer Argumentation Conference in 1981, Brenda Logue took as her task the evaluation of argument in prepared public address. The section on communication analysis is revealing. Her examination of the six 1981 AFA-NIET finalists suggests to her that the speaker "performing a communication analysis basically advances a classificatory claim." The speaker states "that a given communicative act can be categorized or examined by a particular analytical method." Relying on Brockreide's schema of possible types of claims, Logue argues that such a claim is not very significant: "The critic knows what he [sic] is going to find and merely puts examples into 'appropriate cubbyholes.'" She contrasts a classificatory claim with a claim of explanation:

In other words, the critic would be providing more significant arguments if the critic explained rather than categorized communication. None of the six communication analysis finalists explained the communicative acts from their own perspective, but rather classified via an established classificatory perspective.

Logue's position is clear, and time has not changed the validity of her criticism. The state of argument in rhetorical criticism is not good.

Murphy agrees with this position in a later Argumentation Conference paper and traces the problem to the demand that students make a contribution to rhetorical theory. He argues that that requirement causes the contestant to focus on the theory to the detriment of textual analysis. He advocates the elimination of that demand and a turn to social, or what Campbell calls "ephem-
eral" criticism. Rosenthal makes essentially the same point in the special issue of the *National Forensic Journal.* He also claims that the burden to make a contribution to theory is too much to expect from a student in a ten-minute speech. His description of what "pragmatic" criticism would entail, however, still places a strong emphasis on established theory. Finally, a continuing debate in *The Forensic* has focused on the validity of the event as an educational activity, and much of the concern has centered on the use of theory by students. The affirmative argues that the contestants are trying to do a good job, and despite the fact that they do not produce academic criticism, their efforts are sound educational experiences. The negative maintains that the event produces superficial analysis and "cookie-cutter" criticism.

Finally, the problems of communication analysis can also be traced to the criteria for evaluation. Currently, students measure the success of their artifact in one of two ways. They maintain that it "fit" the method they explained at the outset of the speech. Clearly, this criterion has led to the charges of inferior argumentation leveled by Logue and others. Second, they claim that the speech had measurable effects. It succeeded according to the *New York Times* and the Gallup poll. Dean makes a strong argument in defense of this position: "While other standards are advocated by various writers, the criterion of effects is most appropriate for evaluating a persuasive artifact." While rhetoric is clearly designed to have a practical impact on real problems, the use of the effects criterion as the major, or even sole, criterion for evaluation creates significant difficulties. Judgments of effects rely on historical information extrinsic to the speech and thus lead students away from the text. The effects standard does not give the critic latitude to praise good speeches in impossible situations. Finally, this criterion does not allow the critic to evaluate the means that achieved the end. Questions of truth and ethics are irrelevant. The two criteria for evaluation used by most communication analysis competitors do not encourage the development of good critical or argumentation skills.

The current practice of communication analysis, then, does not match the high expectations held for the event. Pedagogical articles and research on judging standards place methodology and theory, not text, as central to the critical process. Such a preoccupation leads to classificatory claims and "cookie-cutter" criticism. In addition, given the peculiar nature of competitive forensics, a number of other harms result. Forensics claims to teach argument skills; yet, as noted above, the classificatory nature of the event limits its ability to do so. Forensics claims to encourage wide par-
participation; but the focus on theory in communication analysis leads to low involvement by students and coaches. The welcome mat seems out only to those who are interested in "methodology." In reality, all students who want to analyze and understand contemporary culture and politics should have a place. Moreover, their apathy is often encouraged by judges who do not want to cope with the event. Through no fault of their own, they find themselves listening to youthful declamations on the current state of rhetorical theory, rather than to clear analyses of persuasive discourse. If trained communication scholars cannot understand these speeches, then perhaps the speeches, not the judges, need improvement.32

In 1980, a prominent rhetorical critic spoke of similar concerns. He noted problems "expressed in terms of confusion about the relationship between theory and practice, complaints about methods that lose contact with the object of study, and warnings about the mechanical imposition of a priori categories on rhetorical artifacts.33 Michael C. Leff, as the guest editor of a special issue of the Western Journal of Speech Communication, was reviewing complaints made about the practice of rhetorical criticism. Three of the articles in that issue strongly argue for more textual analysis as a cure for difficulties that bear a striking resemblance to the ones encountered in forensics.34 A review of the essays can yield some important insights into the current controversies about communication analysis.

G. P. Mohrmann examines "the critical hobby-horse" of "traditional" scholarship.35 While noting that this critical perspective remains alive and kicking, Mohrmann turns his essay into a call for more detailed attention to rhetorical texts. He begins by noting the criticisms leveled against Neo-Aristotelean criticism. Quoting Douglas Ehninger, Mohrmann states that such criticism often resulted in a "mechanical summing up of how well a speech fit an a priori mold."36 Unfortunately, the solutions to this problem have not been found in the proliferation of new methods: "New molds for old is no answer."37 Mohrmann argues that these "contemporary adaptations and departures" have brought critics no closer to what should be the central focus of their activity, and that a return to tradition, to a system of topics, could be salutary: "Used with intelligence and imagination, the available topics may help us truly to understand and to appreciate the text and texture of messages."38

Edwin Black addresses the same problems with different vocabulary. He speaks of "emic" and "etic" criticism. Etic criticism "approaches a rhetorical transaction from outside of that transac-
tion and interprets the transaction in terms of a pre-existing theory.  Emic criticism allows the text to speak for itself:

The emic critic, on the other hand, holding that rhetorical transactions themselves constitute the chief source of knowledge in the field and the sole defensible ground for its theoretical formulations, proceeds to the task of criticism with a willing suspension of the will itself, seeking to coax from the critical object its own essential form of disclosure.

Black, in remarks that describe the event of communication analysis, states "that there is not a single case in the literature of our field in which a rhetorical theory has been abandoned as a result of having failed an application." An etic critic examines the artifact with a predetermined viewpoint, finds what s/he wants to find, and is triumphant: "The system is infallible. But it is also sterile." Black argues that neither the critic nor the theory can profit from such an approach and urges a turn to textual analysis.

Michael Leff, in his diagnosis of the ills of contemporary rhetorical criticism, echoes the words of Black and Mohrmann. While not able to accept quite as sharp a distinction between emic and etic criticism as Black proposes, Leff endorses a focus on the text as a key to progress in the field. Initially, like Mohrmann, he turns to the past, to the 1957 special issue on rhetorical criticism, and notes that those authors saw the same problems. Preoccupation with the method of Neo-Aristotelean criticism led many away from texts and toward historical reconstruction. Edwin Black's landmark analysis of Neo-Aristoteleanism as a monistic method, however, did not result in a completely successful change. New methods appeared with startling regularity "without any of these methods solving the problem that lies at their collective origin—the Neo-Aristotelean tendency to impose mechanistic categories on texts." An emic perspective, while not a panacea, at least "forces the critic to engage the text before distorting it."

Since that special issue, "textual analysis has become increasingly fashionable among rhetorical scholars." While "fashion" is certainly no reason to urge acceptance of an approach, the increasing attention paid to texts by such insightful critics as Edwin Black, Michael Leff, Stephen Lucas, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell indicates the potential utility of this perspective. As Lucas argues, the "center of a critic's concern" should be the text itself. Leff quite reasonably observes that a rhetorical critic must "account for what the speech does, . . . to appreciate the way it articulates and structures what is said as the discourse unfolds."
The problems that the critics of communication analysis see, then, have been wrestled with before. Forensics educators should note the increasing focus on the text in rhetorical criticism and apply that lesson to students in the event of communication analysis. Too often and for too long, forensics competitors have ignored the "center of a critic's concern" in favor of creating genres or making broad theoretical statements. Campbell argues that the "first stage in the critical process" is an understanding of the text. Students need to have the ability to accomplish that task before they can profitably move on to theory.

Clearly, a focus on text does not mean a complete abandonment of methodology. James Aune, for instance, conducts an excellent textual analysis of Lincoln's Second Inaugural by using concepts drawn from American cultural studies. The importance attached to the development of the methodology in the student speech, however, should be reduced. Students should even feel comfortable simply outlining the difficulties faced by a particular speaker and the strategies used by that rhetor to attack those obstacles. For instance, in her book, *The Rhetorical Act*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell provides a series of questions termed the "Elements of Descriptive Analysis" that are a clear, useful way into the text. In addition, the book outlines "The Rhetorical Problem," one option for organizing the historical/contextual information about the speech. Of course, Campbell's system is not the only one a critic can use; whatever the choice, the focus of the communication analysis should be an explication of the text of the speech.

Textual analysis does not preclude theoretical statements; in fact, it may be the only fruitful way to build theory. Yet eliminating the requirement that these students contribute to rhetorical theory in their ten-minute speeches offers a number of advantages. That change would help to reduce the role of method in the speech and focus more of the student's attention on the artifact. Moreover, novice critics simply do not have the time nor the ability to create theory in these short speeches. Finally, a change to "ephemeral," or "social," or "pragmatic" criticism can fulfill an important purpose for the field of communication. In 1970, Karl Wallace commented: "It seems to be generally agreed among rhetoricians that one of their signal failures in the last seventy years is the failure to produce in any significant numbers of practicing critics of public discourse." Campbell repeated this lament in 1974 and pointed out: "Given our professional commitment to freedom of speech and discussion, the discipline of speech communication needs to honor and encourage the trained critics who enter the public arena to critique contemporary persuasive acts."
communication analysis has the potential to train thousands of students to participate in the public realm in this way, and that is a far more attainable and worthwhile purpose than anything so far achieved in rounds.

Finally, such changes in communication analysis would also require a reduction in the use of the effects criterion. Again, rhetoric should bring about practical changes in the world, and the effects criterion measures those changes. Yet it also, as indicated, presents a large number of problems and should not be used in isolation. Instead, students should primarily focus on what Campbell calls the "aesthetic criterion." The argument of the student speech should center "on how effects are produced... achieves its purpose, of how creatively a rhetor responds to the obstacles faced, of how inventively a rhetor fulfills the requirements of a form." While as a critic of communication the student should place these considerations first, s/he should also not be shy about asking pointed questions concerning ethics or truth. Ephemeral criticism should encourage debate and discussion, and little will do that faster than use of an ethical criterion.

At the risk of redundancy, this essay has again addressed the problem of communication analysis. The judging standards in the event do not lack uniformity, as may be the case in other events. Instead, the event suffers from a rigid obsession with methodology in the speech, from the requirement to add to rhetorical theory at the end of the speech, and from evaluative criteria that often have more to do with history than with analysis of the artifact. The standards of the event need to change to reflect an increasing concern with the texts we study. The relationship between an artifact and rhetorical theory is by no means a simple one. Yet, as Michael Leff argues, "We have erred so long in the direction of the abstract that it now seems reasonable to encourage efforts that begin with the particular." The educational purpose of the event should be to produce trained critics of public discourse. That goal can best be accomplished by demanding attention to the text and by requiring evaluations based on that analysis. In that way, communication analysis can best serve the students.
Endnotes

1 Kevin W. Dean and William L. Benoit, "A Categorical Content Analysis of Rhetorical Criticism Ballots," National Forensic Journal, II (1984), 99. I personally prefer to label the event "rhetorical criticism." I found as I wrote, however, that constantly distinguishing between "competitive rhetorical criticism" and "academic rhetorical criticism" became burdensome. Thus, I have used "communication analysis" to refer to the forensic activity and "rhetorical criticism" to label the academic endeavor.


3 Most tournament directors can testify that communication analysis is the smallest event. At the Miami (Ohio) Rose Bowl, for instance, the event had twenty participants in a tournament with over four hundred slots entered. On the same weekend, the event had about fifteen participants at the Colorado College tournament with a similar number of total slots.


7 Dean, 121.

8 Dean, 119-120.

9 Dean, 124.


13 Shields and Preston, 102-109.

14 Shawn L. McGee, "Judging Criteria for Rhetorical Criticism" a paper presented at the Central States Speech Association Convention, Lincoln, NE, April 7, 1983.

15 Dean and Benoit, 101.

16 Dean and Benoit, 104.

17 Dean and Benoit, 103.


19 Larson, 148.


21 Logue, 190.

22 Logue, 190.

23 Logue, 392. The quotation is from Brockreide.

24 Logue, 392. I have a peculiar insight into Logue's analysis since I was one of the finalists she discussed. She's right.


27 Rosenthal, 131-134.
28See Larson's review of that debate, 140-142.
29Dean, 117.
32Too often I find students making the excuse that they have a good speech, but the judge is too stupid to understand it. I too become frustrated at some ballots, but even speeches in this event should be understandable to the coaches and judges.
35Mohrmann, 266.
36Mohrmann, 272.
37Mohrmann, 272.
38Mohrmann, 272.
39Black, 331.
40Black, 332.
41Black, 333.
42Black, 333.
43Leff, 348-349.
44Leff, 345.
45Leff, 345-346.
47In addition, the Western Speech Communication Association has started Communication Reports, a new journal desiring "data-based" articles. Judging from the papers on Lincoln's Second Inaugural, the Journal seems likely to focus on textual analysis.
48Lucas, 7.
49Quoted in Lucas, 7.
52Campbell, The Rhetorical Act, 19-34, 147-152.
58Leff, 346.