Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Communication Studies

ISSN: 1051-0974 (Print) 1745-1035 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcst20

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Catherine Helen Palczewski

**To cite this article:** Catherine Helen Palczewski (2003) What is "good criticism"? A conversation in progress, Communication Studies, 54:3, 385-391, DOI: 10.1080/10510970309363296

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970309363296

*Communication Studies,* 54(3) (Fall 2003), 385–391

# WHAT IS "GOOD CRITICISM"? A CONVERSATION IN PROGRESS

CATHERINE HELEN PALCZEWSKI

Where does the drama get its materials? From the "unending conversation" that is going on at the point in history when we are born. Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him [or her]; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself [or herself] against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. It is from this "unending conversation" . . . that the materials of your drama arise.

(Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* 110–11)

Some forty-two years after Kenneth Burke described history, from a dramatistic perspective, as an unending conversation, Sonja Foss offered "conversation" as a metaphor for rhetorical criticism's process of knowledge development ("Criteria" 288). In rhetorical scholarship, "knowledge and progress cannot be measured in terms of linear accumulation, which assumes that a single vocabulary or metaphor is used by all critics so that pieces of knowledge are built on previous ones. . . . Given that data cannot be verified objectively, our aim becomes to continue the conversation about the data rather than to discover the truth about them" (Foss, "Criteria" 288). The topic of what constitutes good rhetorical scholarship is one for which an unending conversation is, indeed, in progress, a conversation into which Editor Mike Allen has asked this volume's contributors to dip their oars.

Therein lies the challenge. As I enter this ongoing conversation I face the twin risks that I will say too much, repeating what others have already said, and that I will say too little, failing to remember what others have said. Aware of this, I still want to provide a (recognizably incomplete) summary of what I have heard in the conversation (while constantly reminding myself that I am not "qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before" especially since much of it transpired before "the point in history when [I was] born" either as a body or as a scholar.)

Beginning with the Spring 1957 special issue of what was then called *Western Speech* (edited by Ernest Wrage), rhetorical scholars sought to define and clarify what constituted "good" rhetorical scholarship. In 1957, the main problem was the uniformity of critical method and the concomitant search for more diverse approaches. The renamed *Western Journal of Speech Communication* revisited rhetorical criticism in its Fall 1980 special issue, devoted to the "State of the Art" (edited by Michael Leff). By this point in time, a diversity of approaches to criticism existed: neo-Aristotelian, movement criticism, critical models, genre analysis, and dramaturgical (later called dramatistic).

Writing elsewhere, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell celebrated the diversity available to scholars on the eve of the 1980s, arguing it was "not a sign of chaotic instability but evidence of the health and maturity of our discipline" ("The Nature" 9). However, Leff

*Associate Professor and Debate Coach, University of Northern Iowa*

still worried that, with the proliferation of theoretical approaches, "critics lack perspectives that enable them to make adequate connections between theoretical constructs and the concrete data of rhetorical experience. The rise of pluralism has broken us loose from old constraints and encouraged fresh activity in the field, but the multiplication of theories does not resolve the tension between theory and practice" ("Interpretation" 342). Needless to say, this tension was not resolved in 1980.

In 1989, *Communication Education* offered an issue focused on teaching rhetorical criticism (edited by Martin Medhurst). In 1990, the *Western Journal of Speech Communication* once again published a special issue on rhetorical criticism (edited by John Angus Campbell). Here, the essays explored how two divergent schools of thought defined good scholarship. Michael Leff represented the position that "one engages in rhetorical theory for the sake of analyzing specific texts," and Michael McGee represented the position that "one analyzes specific texts for the sake of theory" (John Angus Campbell 250). John Angus Campbell further outlined the differences between the two:

> For Leff the proper object of analysis is the speech text situated in a specific historical context. For McGee the text is but the temporary and proximate site of a scene of rhetorical action that in principle ranges over space and time and is bounded only by the ideology of the people. In place of the speech "text" the object of analysis for McGee is the "ideograph" – a grammatical unit which may temporarily come to rest in particular texts but has no fixed habitation. (250)

In many ways, these two positions make clear the tensions between theory and practice that often lead reviewers to offer conflicting publication recommendations.

Special issues were not the only place in which the quality of rhetorical scholarship was discussed. Wayne Brockriede made a case in 1974 for viewing "useful" rhetorical criticism as argument (165). Like Burke and Foss, his form of argument was not meant to be the final word, but to "invite confrontation that may begin or continue a process of enhancing an understanding of a rhetorical experience or of rhetoric" (174). Philip Wander's 1983 analysis of the ideological turn in criticism made a compelling case that critical activity must involve political action, and generated extensive conversation in its own right. Sonja Foss in 1983 outlined "criteria for adequacy in rhetorical criticism" (criteria she later reaffirmed in her 1989 contribution to the *Communication Education* focus issue). When assessing the quality of scholarship, she believed that a "critic must be able to justify what he or she says, provide warranted assertability, offer reasons, or argue in support of his or her claims" (289), present the range of choices available to the rhetor and the critic (291–292), offer a coherent presentation of his or her theoretical framework (292), and incorporate other perspectives (293).

In 1989, James Klumpp and Thomas Hollihan advocated rhetorical criticism be viewed as moral action, pointing out that even as "[c]ritics have adopted new theories of rhetoric . . . they are captive to a perspective on the critical act that leaves them naive to the very force of rhetoric which they purport to study" (84). Thus, they conclude, "there is a task for the rhetorical critic that goes beyond interest in 'mere' rhetoric. The critic that emerges – the interpreter, the teacher, the social actor – is a moral participant, cognizant of the power and responsibility that accompanies full critical participation in his/her society" (94).

After replaying these highlights of the conversation, I want to make three points. First, if I employed "newness" as the sole criteria for what constituted good rhetorical scholarship, I would fail to meet my own standards. Most everything I am about to say in this essay has probably been said before. Second, this short essay is but a mere

interruption in what is already a lengthy conversation. For example, I will not (even try to) resolve the Leff-McGee dispute or assess the already large body of literature on ideological criticism. Third, I want to note a direction the conversation has not explicitly taken. Although much has been written about what *has been* published and whether it is good scholarship, little has been written *explicitly* (save for Foss' essay) about what *should be* published, about the standards used by peer reviewers when assessing essays submitted to journals. Granted, the special issues and essays described above *do* implicitly point us to standards for reviewing scholarship. However, by calling for an explicit focus on what transpires as I read a submission, I think Prof. Allen may have turned the conversation in a slightly different direction.

In many ways, the explicit charge issued to us by Prof. Allen contributes to the increasing transparency of the review process in scholarly journals, a transparency made most vivid by Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown, and Leslie A. Baxter's wonderfully provocative essay, "Disciplining the Feminine." Thus, instead of writing generally about what is "good" scholarship, I want to take up Prof. Allen's charge directly and discuss *my* preferences. As authors submit their essays to the undifferentiated "anonymous peer reviewers," they actually are submitting an essay to specific people, of which I might be one. As one of the mass of reviewers, I have preferences for some types of scholarship, preferences molded by my own research, as well as my teachers (people from whom I took classes as well as people whose writing I try to emulate) and my colleagues.

Thus, my preferences reflect many of the lessons I learned from these people, including G. Thomas Goodnight's continuing admonition that I be kind to my readers and let them know where I am going, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's and Charles Kauffman's exquisitely painful editing that tried (often in vain) to push me to write to the level of the most eloquent rhetorical texts, and Gloria Anzaldúa's admonition to beware of the "esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing" (165). All of these people, as well as the scholars discussed earlier, have influenced what I think of as good rhetorical scholarship, and they often pull me in opposite directions. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's attention to historical context in her detailed textual analysis of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Solitude of Self" thrills me as much as Kathryn Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight's expansive and theoretically provocative analysis of the wide ranging moments of controversy in the arguments about fur. And, added to the mix of influences is the powerful critique of extant criticism contained in William Nothstine, Carole Blair and Gary Copeland's *Critical Questions*, a book that has encouraged me to rethink what I do as a critic of rhetoric and as a critic of rhetorical scholarship.

I recognize my preferences have changed across time, but one thing has remained constant: language matters. I am a child and sister (scholarly that is) of unrepentant Burkoids, and agree that human beings are symbol-using animals. I also am a child of feminism, and understand that language can be as much a tool for liberation as it is of oppression. Language is a mechanism of power, and can be deployed in a variety of ways. But, ultimately, I am a child of rhetoric, taking joy in the ambiguity, beauty, uncertainty, power, and intrigue of language. I aspire to be a player with symbols (Condit, "Post-Burke").

Given this, I believe rhetorical scholarship ought to expand our understanding of how we function as linguistic animals. And, if it can do so with joy, instead of drudging pedantics, all the better. Rhetorical scholarship explores language *both* by analyzing a text, but also with the language choices within the essay itself. Ultimately, both the

product and process ought to foster intellectual curiosity, embrace linguistic responsibility, and engage our brains. If we are critics of symbol use and examining symbol use, we should be as conscious and critical of our own usage as we are of that which we criticize. As Nothstine, Blair and Copeland remind us, we are writing to an audience – and we can choose (to some extent) the audience (or type of audience) to which we write (10–11). In creating an audience as we write to it, I encourage authors to make explicit the joy I hope they find in language, a joy the player in me believes is at the core of what we do.

In addition to a general attention to language, like Brockriede, I believe good scholarship ought to make an argument. It should take a position about a text, a fragment of discourse, a theory. And, being influenced by the essays of Wander and Klumpp & Hollihan, I also believe that all scholarship is political (more or less) and moral (more or less), and should recognize itself as such. Thus, in the vein of Foss, I look to see if the critics themselves are aware of their choices, if they are attentive to the political and moral, as well as scholarly, implications of their work. I try not to impose any predetermined purpose on the text, but instead look to see if the authors are aware of their purpose/s.[1] Finally, when discussing human communication, I request that authors are attentive to the rich diversity that exists within humanity, and limit their claims to that which they have studied, and recognize that which they have not.

But, these statements provide little guidance to an editor struggling when his three reviewers come back with a split of recommendations: one saying publish, one saying revise and resubmit, and one saying reject. How can I help an editor left asking: "How does one assess the purposes of rhetorical scholarship? What should be accomplished after having read a piece of rhetorical scholarship?"

Nothstine, Blair and Copeland, in *Critical Questions*, critique the move toward professionalization and scientization in rhetorical studies. Their argument is that the way we frame discussions of criticism, viewing it as a product of a scientific enterprise, is the very thing that provokes Allen's questions. If criticism is a product, "We may then ask, what has criticism provided us? What are its results, its findings? What theory has it built or modified – rather than merely borrowing for its purposes?" (41). So, instead of viewing rhetorical scholarship as driven by a method (modeled after scientific method) that produces a product, I think of it as developing heuristic vocabularies that enable the conversation to veer off into interesting directions.

Nothstine, Blair and Copeland believe that criticism is not guided by approaches that "qualify as 'methods' in any meaningful sense . . ." (40). Our approaches "are more properly conceptual heuristics or vocabularies; they may invite a critic to interesting ways of reading a text, but they do not have the procedural rigor or systematicity that typically characterizes a method. In fact, it is arguable that they are at their best, critically, when they are least rigorous 'methodologically' " (40). Thus, essays that develop a heuristic vocabulary, or deploy an existing one in an intriguing way, are the ones that most engage me as a reader. Given this, when reviewing criticism, I try to determine whether the vocabulary used is appropriate to the text. How does one determine this?

First, does vocabulary clarify more than it obscures, or does it at least create a productive ambiguity? Therefore, when authors introduce vocabulary, I ask they do so in a way that includes the new participants in the conversation, as they remember the voices of those who have come before. Charles Kauffman's essay on the naming of weapons is one that models this as he introduces us to a Burkean vocabulary that

exposes the power of naming. Scholarly essays are, indeed, part of an unending conversation, and should be conscious of their place in that conversation.

Second, is the vocabulary one that encourages sensitivities to the nuances in the rhetoric? Are authors attentive to differences as they identify similarities in language usage? Are authors attentive to power issues, in the text studied as well as in their own work? This may sound reminiscent of McKerrow's "critical rhetoric" which "examines the dimension of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world" as it "seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power" (91). Authors should be attentive to the way the texts they study participate in larger systems of power. But, even as the larger picture is painted, authors should resist over-generalizing in some quest for grand theoretical claims. Sometimes, a single text is interesting for reasons completely unique to it.

Third, does the essay spark my intellect? Does it introduce me to an interesting text or show me how to use a theory in an interesting way? Or, is it just (well, never just just) a piece of scintillating writing? Or, as Nothstine, Blair and Copeland describe the writing of those they critique, is it "engaging and provocative, sometimes delightfully maddening" (50)? For example, I have read much on Native American rhetoric and issues, and yet, every time I read an essay by Randall Lake (e.g. "Between" and "Enacting"), even if I have read it before, the synapses in my mind pop. His argument is so tight, the writing so elegant, that even as I say "why, of course, that is so obvious" I am also reminding myself "but I didn't figure it out on my own; he was the one who made it obvious." The theory or text need not be new, but their combination should trigger a moment of wonder.

Fourth, is the analysis driven by the text, (and here I mean text broadly defined to encompass everything from a speech to an ideograph to street protests)? Does the analysis treat the text as more than a means to some (obscure theoretical) end? Many times, the authors of the texts we analyze have poured their bodies on the page (or pavement). The document is a living one (sometimes literally as recent scholarship on body argument makes clear, see Hauser), not meant to be pinned down like a biology specimen. When being critical, or even harsh and polemical, do we remember the authors on the other side (if not inside) of the text that we study? Or, do we remember we ourselves are often "authors" of the very ideographs we examine? Here, I straddle the theory/text divide, finding articles that present heuristic vocabularies in relation to a text most accessible.

Fifth, is the essay written at a level that meets the high standards to which the author holds the text? As Celeste Condit noted in a presentation at NCA a few years back, in some ways rhetorical critics have it hardest since we are writing for people who spend their lives analyzing language, structure, style, etc.

Sixth, is the author sensitive to the political implications of the choices made in the inventional processes out of which the essay grew? As Nothstine, Blair and Copeland remind us, there are a series of choices made even before pen touches paper (or finger touches keyboard) (5–8). Ranging from "on what texts do I focus" to "to whom do I write," and "as whom do I write" to "from what point of privilege do I write," we need to attend to why we do what we do as critics. The problem with professionalization is that the personalization of these choices, and the politics they reflect, are obscured behind a veil of objectivity. We pick the text that is "significant." We use the theory that is "cutting edge." We become significant because we are published.

My argument here is *not* that all scholarship be personalized and that we write only about that which touches us directly. I am more than aware of the dangers of a

politics of personality (or personalization) (see Linda Kauffman). I am *not* asking for disclosures of personal experience. Instead, because I recognize the power of language, and the disciplining powers of academia, I am interested in from where a person writes. I *am* asking that the process of invention become explicit. I *am* asking that the author be present in the essay.

Ultimately, the issue is whether the scholarship tickles my brain. As my favorite anarchist once wrote, ". . . I must do something with my brain" (de Cleyre, 16). And, so, for me, criticism needs to work through a linguistic puzzle in such a way that the pieces fall into place, or are, with deliberate intent, scattered. Rhetorical scholarship needs to be inspired and inspiring.

As one final conversational inspiration, I want to close by tossing out a proposal. At the national debate tournaments, judges submit a "judging philosophy." Debaters can then tailor their arguments when debating in front of particular judges, and determine when they might need to do more work to win an argument given a judge's predilections. Similarly, it might be an interesting experiment for a journal to publish (say, on its webpage) the "review philosophies" of the members of its editorial board. Although people will never know specifically to whom their essays might be sent, they can determine which boards might give an essay a hearing or when they might need to bolster their discussion of a particular issue to counter the predilections of the editorial board members. For example, even when I disagree with a claim, if it is well-argued, I am more than willing to say "publish" if only for the sake of introducing into the discussion an argument likely to generate further conversation. Not only can submitters use these philosophies but so, too, might the editor of the journal. When trying to determine what to do with the inevitable "split decisions," it might be helpful to think about the perspective from which a reviewer reads an essay, or if there is a bias that no amount of good argument might overcome. With the publication of review philosophies, no longer would we be submitting to anonymous reviewers, but peers with their own perspectives on what we do as scholars.

Now, converse.

## NOTES

[1]Now, the cynic in me says the purpose of all scholarship is to get a job, or tenure, or promoted. But, then, there is another part of me that also knows the pure joy from figuring something out, whether it be how a text works or how to write that one glittering, elegant sentence that makes an entire piece of criticism hold together.

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