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COMMUNICATION EDUCATION AND ITS CRITICS

EVERETTE E. DENNIS



COMMUNICATION EDUCATION, the kind practiced at Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Public Communications, has more than its share of critics. Although higher education generally and professional schools specifically—such as business, law, and education—are the subjects of reform proposals, communication and journalism schools seem to attract even more scrutiny than their professional school counterparts. Wondering whether this impression was sound, I decided to look at more than twenty articles in professional, trade, and popular magazines over the last decade.¹ I compared these with published critiques of other kinds of professional schools during the same period. All professional schools were criticized by voices outside the university for being too theoretical and unresponsive to their major professional constituencies. Within higher education itself, the professional schools were also found wanting, regarded as out of tune with the academic culture and not quite intellectual enough.

My review revealed that critics of other professional schools were typically less shrill than those commenting on the communication and journalism schools, although some were quite harsh, such as those who blamed ruthless behavior on Wall Street on M.B.A. training or the existence of mercenary lawyers on legal education. Nevertheless, the other professional schools seemed to have more friends, more cheerleading enthusiasts who wrote warmly, even sentimentally, about the contributions of these educational efforts to individuals and their respective professions. Recall that legal education even got a movie, *The Paper Chase*.

Nearly twenty-five years ago I enrolled in the master's program at the newly renamed Newhouse School of Communications (the "Public" came later; even earlier it had been a school of journalism). I knew little of the academic and professional pressures facing that school and others like it. But I was struck and favorably impressed by the way the school presented itself to new students, especially in a little booklet about the faculty, *The Log*, which took its title from a statement by President James A. Garfield: "The ideal college is a log, with the student at one end and Mark Hopkins at the other. . . ."²

That compact publication carried striking pictures of the Newhouse faculty and an outline of their attainments. Prospective students got an impressive list of positions the faculty had held in major media, books they

1. From 1970 to 1988, scores of articles appeared in the popular and trade press about journalism schools, ranging from Ben Bagdikian's much-discussed "Woodstein U—Notes on the Mass Production and Questionable Education of Journalists," *Atlantic* (March 1977): 80, to more recent articles in the *Washington Monthly* (May 1986). The trade press (especially *Editor and Publisher* and *presstime* magazines) is also a frequent source of articles about journalism education (e.g., "Journalism Education: Storm Swirls, Changes on Campus," *presstime* [September 1983]). A full issue of the *Gannett Center Journal* was devoted to this topic in Spring 1988, *The Making of Journalists*. A useful intellectual critique of journalism and communication education is Stephen White's "Why Journalism Schools?" *Public Interest* (Winter 1986): 39–57.

2. Hopkins was a clergyman and physician who served as the president of Williams College from 1857 to 1887.

had written, and organizations for which they had consulted. *The Log* proclaimed that we were in the presence of masters of our field: Dean Wesley Clark and Professors Roland Wolseley, George Bird, Philip Ward Burton, Edmund Arnold, André Fontaine, Robert Root, William Ehling, and Catherine Covert, among others. *The Log* signified quality—and with it, I suppose, respectability. It bespoke a confidence that communication was an important field whose lessons (at Syracuse, anyway) were transmitted by people who had credentials.

Then and now, it seemed to me that the Newhouse faculty had taken charge of its educational assignment in a manner that grappled successfully with the competing cultures of the university and the communication industry. There is no evidence that they suffered from what scholars call “status deprivation”: not quite measuring up to the requirements of university life and being treated punitively because of it.

If *The Log* were taken at face value, the Newhouse School would have appeared to be on commanding heights of communication education. It had the best physical plant in the United States and a seemingly generous budget. I had the impression that faculty members held their heads high and commanded respect in other quarters of the university as well as outside the academy. As a student in an experimental program called Mental Health Communications, which was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, I made frequent contact with several other university departments where I was received enthusiastically. This, I would later learn, was not always the situation elsewhere in the United States for communication, journalism, and media studies students.³

Later as a faculty member at several universities, as a dean of a school of journalism, and as a president of the national Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, I learned that my early experience at Syracuse was more often the exception than the rule. Journalism schools were sometimes pariahs on their campuses, and students seeking admission to advanced graduate courses elsewhere on campus were occasionally rebuffed or repelled. At Syracuse, the school of communications had status, perhaps because of its resources, given by the press lord S. I. Newhouse. Indeed, the first year I spent at Syracuse, our building was dedicated by no less a luminary than President Lyndon B. Johnson. Few schools before or since have had a presidential dedication and the instant visibility it brought.

However, a student's first romantic impressions of a school or field can be misleading. Although I thought Syracuse somehow accommodated the professional and the scholar under the roof of an elegant I. M. Pei building, I would also learn that my school, like other such schools, lived with tensions that are part of journalism and communication education's schizophrenic state as it tries to serve two sometimes contradictory masters.

Within almost any university community one can hear occasional charges that communication has no corpus of scholarship, no body of significant research. There are rumblings about “vocationalism” and charges that the communication school is really a trade school unworthy of the academy's embrace. Some faculty members in other fields say the journalism and communication school curriculum is anti-intellectual and defensive about the sometimes questionable practices of the media. And there is the frequent query about whether study in communication deprives

3. See the critique of journalism schools' reputations in *Planning for Curricular Change in Journalism Education*, 2d ed. (Eugene: School of Journalism, University of Oregon, 1987), 1–2; and Everette Dennis, “Whatever Happened to Marse Robert's Dream?” *Gannett Center Journal* (Spring 1988): 2–22.

students of needed instruction in the liberal arts and sciences. Moreover, outside colleagues (some of whom are not very collegial) make it clear that to them the communication school is not central to the purposes of the university, arguing that many prestigious universities get along very well without them. If the communication school lacks centrality, it may not contribute much to the overall purposes of education.

If the curriculum of the communication school offends some critics, so do the credentials of its faculty. Most university departments have clearly prescribed requirements for their faculty: all must have terminal degrees in the field, and there is something like a national norm about what professors should accomplish between initial appointment and eventual promotion and tenure. For the communication school, with its interests ranging from advertising education to newsroom preparation and communication research, the requirements are diffuse and diverse. They are harder to convey to university committees which are sometimes unsympathetic to the complexities of a communication school faculty, which must have requisite professional and academic experience to be credible. As a result, when communication faculty dossiers do not match exactly those of people in other fields, a suspicious, sneering, and outright rejection can be the result. Even worse is grudging acceptance, which carries with it stigma and low status.

If things on campus were not bad enough, the communication school is beset also with critics from industry who make the opposite case of campus detractors. "You are simply too theoretical," they say. "You don't care about newspaper production or the operational problems of a television station." When a communication faculty sings refrains of "What a Friend We Have in Theory," the professionals are not impressed.⁴ Thus, while campus critics sometimes say communication schools are out of touch with the academy, professionals say they are not quite in touch with the "real world." For disgruntled professionals there are two major complaints: they do not like what is taught in the communication schools, and they do not much like or trust those who teach it.

Even though many of these commentators do not have a clue about how they would fix the enterprise, they somehow believe that they know all when it comes to educating people for professional careers. Unlike other fields which have happily delegated legal or business education to scholars and teachers instead of practitioners, the communication industry still harbors the belief that emulating the norm of professional practice is highly desirable. In such a worldview, there is little time for critical analysis or instruction about professional ideals. Such a view relegates the communication school to the position of industry handmaiden rather than independent analyst or leader.⁵ Journalism and communication schools are thus light-years from the relative maturity of schools that train future legal or business talent, for example.

Another refrain of critics is that some media fields or subfields are not well represented in journalism and mass communication schools. Since schools of communication are umbrella agencies for the study of and training in the various media industries, they naturally have multiple constituencies. I have rarely met any newspaper editors, public relations practitioners, or advertising executives who felt that their field was well represented in

4. Everette E. Dennis, "It Wouldn't Work in Theory: Overcoming Resistance to Research about the Mass Media" (1986 Clissold Lecture, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario); reprinted in *Comment*, a Canadian media magazine.

5. George Gerbner, "Defining the Field of Communication," *ACA Bulletin* (Association of Communication Administrators) (April 1984): 1, passim.

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existing schools. Not unusual is the complaint from professionals in the electronic media that they are grossly underrepresented in schools that have considerable loyalty to the print media.

THUS, THE COMMUNICATION SCHOOL, its faculty, students, alumnae, and alumni often live in a confused atmosphere beset by mixed signals, largely because they have many points of reference. They try to do a good deal for several constituencies, some of which are, unfortunately, at cross purposes. Purists in the academy doubt the value of professional education and suspect it is draining the liberal arts. Some industry people want professional schools to serve the world of practice, training entry-level professionals for various roles in the industry. At the same time, the broad mandate of communication schools with interests ranging from advertising to electronic media and magazine instruction (and resources) is to satisfy individual subfields as well as other constituencies.

The condition faced by individual communication educators is often one of self-doubt. They try to satisfy both the scholarly demands of the university and the practical requirements of the communication industry. To justify a place on the campus of a research university, a communication school needs to contribute to the commonweal—it must attract and keep students as well as recruit and retain a quality faculty. In the communication school, the composition of faculty is itself a complex chemistry since the school must contain people with considerable academic training and requisite professional experience. The successful professional school needs respect from its chief constituents, namely the media industries and related auxiliaries. Journalism and communication professors must necessarily be more than professionals on loan; they must also be educators with a penchant and competence for teaching, research, and public service.⁶

Thus, communication professors today are faced with contradictory demands. They necessarily worry about connecting their students with a rapidly changing industry and world. At the same time, they must be productive enough to keep their jobs and earn tenure by engaging in research, scholarly work, and critical analysis. These professors are also expected to make connections with other colleagues on campus and with industry professionals. In the midst of these multiple demands, the feedback they hear is not always praise. It can even be denigrating and dispiriting.

The origins of these contradictions and stresses are fairly clear. Unlike other professional schools, journalism and communication faculties frequently recruit to their ranks practitioners who have no scholarly training. They often do this in curious fashion, giving the new faculty member from the profession a tenure-track appointment with vague references to productivity and promotion “down the road.” This has happened so often because communication schools have been blessed (or plagued) by large enrollments that require increasing numbers of faculty, especially faculty who can teach basic professional courses. Thus, people are actively recruited from the mass media, from news organizations, and from other professional settings like advertising agencies and public relations firms.

6. A useful discussion is Robert Blanchard's “Our Emerging Role in Liberal and Media Studies: How Do We Break the News to Media Professionals?” *Journalism Educator* (Autumn 1988): 28–31.

These new faculty members often face work-intensive classes and several sections of professional skills courses; there is little time for reflection or research.

But this typical scenario can be altered, as several innovative programs and administrators have demonstrated. Instead of letting a person ill suited for academic pursuits sink or swim, several universities have initiated programs of faculty development. Also, considerable aid and comfort has been provided by a joint communiqué of U.S. newspaper editors and journalism educators. Several years ago, the Committee on News Editorial Education, a joint venture of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, issued a statement calling for a two-track approach to faculty recruitment and hiring. Under this system, now accepted in some schools, faculty members who are hired from the traditional academic arenas are expected to obey the long-accepted rules of the academy, balancing the three-legged stool of productivity based on research, teaching, and service. Other faculty hired from the various media professions are given a different, but still rigorous, standard. Instead of writing the traditional scholarly articles and treatises, they can produce texts, essays, op-ed pieces, and other examples of professional productivity, as long as it has something to do with media studies. It cannot be mere professional work that would be done by entry-level people in the media; it must be distinguished and must contribute to knowledge and understanding.

As yet, this two-track system has not found universal acceptance in the United States. Some schools, such as Syracuse University, are carefully examining the idea as it might relate to *all* professional programs and not just to journalism, but it remains under discussion. It is a controversial issue on many campuses. Traditionally trained academics tend to believe, possibly with some justification, that it would institutionalize what they see as the shortcomings of professionals who are unable to conduct research or to publish in the more rigorous academic media. Others see it, again with some justification, as a means of retaining people who are genuinely needed to teach professional and career-related courses but who are unlikely to perform as conventional scholars or researchers. That is why recent efforts to recruit communication school faculty into a two-track system (scholars and professionals) are especially encouraging.

The new "Carey Grants," administered by Dean James W. Carey of the University of Illinois College of Communications under a grant from the Gannett Foundation, reflect a particularly encouraging interest in journalism faculty development. These small grants are awarded to journalism and communication faculty who want to "do journalism," such as major books, articles, and exhibits wherein their journalistic skills are displayed. These projects, too, might well count when a person is advanced to the tenure table.

THESE CONSIDERATIONS ASIDE, I contend that any intelligent persons who move from the professional world to teaching careers in journalism can get promoted if they plan well and demonstrate their competence in acceptable ways. There are no secrets about how to do this.

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First, if they do not have a nurturing dean who cares to help them develop, they must do it themselves. This may mean reading extra materials or taking courses to master the nature of scholarly inquiry. Journalism and typical media work are usually not systematic. Scholarship is. But systematic methods of scholarship are not exactly brain surgery; they can be learned, even on one's own.

Second, the professionally oriented faculty member is well advised to seek out and make use of a mentor/partner—to work collaboratively with someone who has scholarly credentials but less experience in the realities of the communication industry. This pairing is symbiotic: each can serve as a mentor/partner for the other and each can bring something of considerable value to the undertaking. In cases where former media professionals have paired with research scholars, particularly successful teams have resulted.

Third, some schools bring together their research professors and their media professionals in specially designed workshops, organized as short-term and carefully designed minicourses focusing on specific aspects of the research process (e.g., sampling, statistical procedures, measurement). These workshops enable busy instructors to forgo regular semester-long courses with students that may cover much unneeded material. This, of course, implies an administration supportive of faculty development.

Fourth, media professionals who have become professors ought to keep writing. Too many people who become journalism school faculty stop being productive professionals. While dedicating themselves to teaching and service, they can also produce articles for journalism reviews, trade publications, and other useful outlets.

Fifth, above all, they need to learn the written and unwritten "rules" of the academy—to get a full and exact understanding of what they need to do to ensure tenure and promotion, should that be the goal. The professionals may not like the requirements, or they may wish they were not there, but the expectations of the academy are the realities in which they now live and serve. If they fully map out at the outset what will be required of them, there will be no nasty surprises at tenure time. Few people who think through, plan, and genuinely try to meet these requirements are denied tenure and promotion in the end.

By request, I have made the critical case here, but is all of this negative? No, not at all. My discussion reflects, instead, the multiple demands of an information society in the process of redefinition. There is no consensus today about what constitutes the best type of university education, as critics like Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, Charles Sykes, and William Bennett so vividly demonstrate in the controversies they have ignited. At the same time, people within the communication industry (itself undergoing fundamental changes) can hardly know their own needs from day to day, let alone personnel requirements five or ten years hence.

Actually, the pressures on communication schools are quite flattering, although they may not always seem to be. Certainly, positive interpretation of the extraordinary attention validates communication schools as important enterprises that are much valued and worthy of scrutiny and debate. When communication schools bought into their present broad mandate, they also accepted the continuing interest and assessment of internal and

7. For a wide-ranging view of the field: Nancy Sharp, ed., *Communications Research: The Challenge of the Information Age* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

8. This is a review of issues and problems related to the remarkable rise in recent years of undergraduate enrollment in professional schools and the corresponding drop in enrollment in arts and sciences degree programs. Some twenty faculty members from various disciplines offer suggestions about how to reduce barriers between disciplines (*Contesting the Boundaries of Liberal and Professional Education: The Syracuse Experiment*, ed. P. Marsh [Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1988]).

external critics. Even though this can be chafing to those of us who believe in the mission of the communication schools and want them to succeed, it is not such a bad thing after all.⁷

What should leaders of communication schools do about the cross fire of their critics? They can listen, learn, and make use of this unwanted attention for productive ends. This means being responsive citizens of the academy while also serving society's need for quality communicators. It is up to those in control of communication education, who have open doors to campus and industry colleagues, to decide what to do. There are a number of helpful guidelines. The recent "Syracuse Experiment" on reducing the boundaries between liberal and professional education is one example.⁸ After all, administrators and faculty are the experts hired to conduct communication education. They ought to carry out their mission coherently and with intellectual honesty. They may want to listen to professional critics, but in the end must make their own decisions and fashion educational policies that will best serve the society and be appropriate within the role of the university. ♦

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