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Envisioning a Capstone Course in Communication: The View from a Departmental Armchair

William J. Seiler

For many departments, the need to develop an assessment package has been the driving force in the consideration of adding a capstone course to their communication curricula. But there are other reasons to justify the creation of such a course. In general, the capstone course has been described by some as a course in which students are required to integrate diverse bodies of knowledge to solve a problem or formulate a policy of societal importance. The dictionary describes a capstone as the "final or crowning part." That may be a bit presumptuous, but it illustrates the notion of what most educators think of when they speak of a capstone course—a course that allows students to put closure on what they have learned. I conceptualize the capstone as a required course at the end of a series of courses within a given major that allows students to synthesize, research, and demonstrate what they have learned.

While the capstone serves as an important assessment outlet for faculty within a department, giving them clear indications of what students have been taught, what they have learned, how well they have learned it, what skills they have developed as a result of taking courses in the major, what gaps exist in either the curriculum or in individual course content, it also serves as a "check" for students. Students not only inventory what they know but they also receive a synthesizing experience, one which challenges them to discover overlaps, inconsistencies, and prevailing trends within a discipline. A capstone course exposes, like no other type of course, students' critical thinking abilities.

Yet, given all of the pluses related to offering a capstone course, there are many pragmatic decisions to make when faculty actually sit down and start discussing the potential for such a course. Before I begin my list of "important decisions," let me offer the caveat that there is little or no research that I am aware of that has been conducted on capstone

courses, their place in a curriculum, their function as assessment opportunities, etc. Thus, much of the information provided here is anecdotal or "armchair" thinking from an administrator's point of view, drawn from discussions with my own faculty about capstone courses in communication.

Decision One: Should the department offer a capstone course?

Answering this question with a "yes" seems easy and appropriate. But once faculty have responded "yes" and made the decision to create and offer a capstone course within a communication curriculum, this will automatically lead to numerous other questions and decisions to consider. A great deal of thought needs to be given to why, what, how, who, when, and where. The commitment of offering a capstone course will require much thought and a willingness of the departmental faculty to take on this added load and responsibility. Without faculty commitment and adequate resources, it is very difficult to sustain any course, let alone a course that has as its goal a synthesizing, integrating function, one that has no specific central content upon which to draw.

   I have no particular order to the decisions that faculty should make about what specifically should happen after the initial "yes" is given. I offer the following items in what I believe is a rational order from an administrative perspective (if ever there is a rational order from any administrator, including this one).

Decision Two: What purpose or purposes will the capstone course serve in a department and curriculum?

Will the capstone's primary purpose be to serve as a vehicle for assessing the major? Will it serve as an opportunity for students to integrate, synthesize, or place closure on what they have learned in their major? Will it be presented like a seminar, as an advanced, concentrated study on a topic not covered or highly emphasized in the rest of the curriculum? Will it serve some other purpose, or will it serve a combination of purposes? These are not easy questions to respond to, but answers to them are critical if the capstone is to be of maximum value to the department and its students.

Decision Three: What should be the characteristics of the communication capstone course?

In order to make this decision, a series of questions should be asked:

- Should the course expose students to an interdisciplinary approach, meaning that several or multiple content areas within a communication major are reviewed?

- If an interdisciplinary approach is used, will the course be team taught so that various faculty are responsible for reviewing their areas of expertise with capstone students?

- Should it be a course that integrates or synthesizes? If so, how much content within the communication major should students be expected to synthesize? Should certain content be used for integration and other content be omitted from coverage in the course?

- Should the course compare and contrast research or inquiry methods as well as content?

- Should the course emphasize real-world problem solving skills?

- Should it reemphasize certain basic communication competencies?

- Should it consider societal, economic, ethical, scientific, and/or professional connections to the discipline?

- Should the course have a blend of content orientation and skills orientation?

- Should it focus entirely on communication theories, methods, and concepts, or should it contain instruction in job preparation? Should there be any emphasis on preparation for entering graduate school or other professional programs?

- What will students do in the way of course requirements? Will you require such things as papers (individual, co-authored, or team-authored), research studies, standardized tests, readings, case studies, oral presentations, simulations?

- How will student learning in the course be assessed?

- How will the course fit into the curriculum, i.e., who will take it and when?

- How will offering a capstone affect the offering of other courses in the curriculum? Will it simply increase the number of required hours in the major or will the capstone replace an already-existing required course within the curriculum?

- Should there be upper-division standing or prerequisites for the course? If so, which courses should be prerequisites?

- How many credit hours will the course be?

- How will the effectiveness of the capstone course, within the greater communication major, be assessed?

- Who will teach it?

- Should all faculty members be responsible for this course, either in a team teaching arrangement or as a rotating assignment?

- How will faculty be selected to teach the capstone course? Are there some faculty members who are better suited for this type of course than others?

- Who will assess student learning in the course, especially if the course is team taught?

- How will faculty members who develop, teach, and evaluate the course be rewarded for their efforts? Should there be incentives to encourage faculty to teach the course?

- How will the course be supported financially and in the form of personal support from faculty, department chairs, and deans?

- Will the department have to give up or cut back on existing programs to provide resources for the capstone course?

Decision Four: How will the faculty respond to and support the course once it is offered?

It is very important for everyone in a department to be advocates of the capstone course and to feel ownership of it. The course belongs to the department, not to a single individual. In turn, a single faculty member should not feel "saddled" with the teaching of the course, as though no one else is responsible for it, year after year.

Decision Five (perhaps the most important): How will the capstone course be assessed?

Is the course serving the purpose that it was intended to serve? Is it a valuable addition to the curriculum in that it will aid students as well as serve the department in a meaningful and important way? What methods should be used to determine if the course has met its objectives? How will one decide if the course should continue within the curriculum and who will be involved in this decision?

There are few single or simple answers when departmental faculty are involved in the decision-making process outlined above, but each decision is critical to the overall success of the capstone experience. There are no doubt other decisions that will need to be made, depending upon individual departmental circumstances, but the five decisions explored here provide a guideline to help departments in the important planning, development, and implementation processes surrounding the communication capstone course.

References

Teaching and Learning Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln. (1997). Personal communication, September.