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Teaching Basic Courses: Problems and Solutions

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Basic course teachers operate in a frustrating environment. Their courses are often required. Numerous students are likely to be involved in the courses. Demands for excellence come from students who don't want to waste their time, from other disciplines who want a high degree of rigor if they are to continue having their students take the course, from colleagues who recognize that the basic course is a major recruiting arena for majors, and from administrators who know that basic courses are the bread and butter of the college's offerings. There is no doubt that much pressure for success and effectiveness rests on the shoulders of the basic course teacher.

In this paper, we will focus on five recurring problems that have plagued this basic course teacher of fifteen years. We will phrase these problems in terms of the continuum that seems to define them: 1) rigor versus leniency, 2) dependence versus independence, 3) theory versus skills, 4) being close versus being distant, and 5) objective evaluation versus subjective evaluation. All are likely to have a direct effect on the motivation of both instructor and students. Some of the ways we have attempted to solve the problems may provide insights for others teaching basic courses.

The problems discussed are not problems that can be solved during the initial construction of a course. Most recur periodically and need to be adjusted and reconsidered — *some* year in and year out! Some, too, can never be totally resolved — at least to the satisfaction of everyone. This lack

of total resolution creates some of the ongoing frustration with the problems.

Rigor Versus Leniency

Many students feel that basic courses should be designed to entice, not turn away, students; that they are generally uninteresting and unbeneficial; and that basic courses should help, not hinder, student progress. If we define "rigor" as "strictness" (Weaver and Cotrell 1988a) then the problem of basic-course teachers is their attempts to be rigorous but fair, challenging but not too challenging, and difficult but not impossible.

In contrast to the feelings of students cited above, there are students who feel that rigor makes them work harder, prevents procrastination, results in more efficient courses, creates a challenge to learn, forces them to do their assignments, and gives directions to classes (9-10). The contrast between the two points of view highlights the potential frustration. One student expressed the problem well when he said:

"I felt an excessive amount of work was required, and it made it a little difficult to absorb. Much of what was said sunk in, but I would like to have had a more laid-back atmosphere but not too laid back."

"Laid-back . . . but not too laid back" is indeed the frustration. You can please some of the students all of the time, and you can please all of the student some of the time; but you can't please all of the students all of the time! Perhaps this is a way to rationalize the frustration: We do the best we can considering the circumstances, knowing that everyone will not be happy with all of our decisions.

There are several things basic-course teachers can do to maintain rigor in their courses. They can keep their expectations high; detail specific criteria to be met on each assignment with the criteria set high; require, expect, and reward a high level of creativity; provide a high-quality role model; and offer some compensation for rigor such as

friendship or some special attention, relevant skill development, provision of rewards, reinforcement, and feedback, or supplying the opportunity for students to perform well in a rigorous and challenging course or department.

We have found that when standards are set high from the outset, when courses are clearly outlined at the beginning, and when expectations are specifically detailed at the start of each major assignment, students perform better. Also, when this is accomplished, it becomes easier for teachers to adapt, change, or pull back, as the needs of the class dictate. Teachers must be sensitive to student needs. But keeping in contact does not guarantee adaptation and change. Teachers must remember that good teaching requires both rigor and willingness to draw back from rigor.

Independence Versus Dependence

One important goal of the basic course is to foster independence in students. To bring them to a point where they can and do think for themselves, make proper decisions and act on them, and confront and resolve problems in an intelligent and mature manner, should be a priority. This desire is no less important for a basic-course teacher than for other teachers. In some cases, however, it may be a frustrated desire — frustrated because of the needs in basic, multisectioned courses such as: strict and specific assignment guidelines, the need for consistency between sections, and the nature of basic skill-oriented assignments.

Wilbert J. McKeachie, Director of the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, and author of *Teaching Tips* argues (1986),

“Many students have conflicting motives. One common conflict is between independence and dependence. This means that students are likely to resent the teacher who directs their activities too closely, but they also are likely to be anxious when given independence; so that teachers have the neat trick of finding ways of simultaneously satisfying both needs” (p. 224).

Students' need for more independence or for more dependence is likely to be a product of their personality, training, and expectations. Those needs vary dramatically between students. For example, dependent students show little intellectual curiosity, learn only what is required, see teachers and peers as sources of structure and support, look to their authority figures for guidelines, like to be told what to do, prefer teacher outlines, notes on slides or written on the blackboard, clear deadlines for assignment, and teacher-centered classroom methods (Kozma, et al. 86-88). These characteristics are amenable to the basic course.

Independent students like to think for themselves. They prefer to work on their own, and they learn the content *they* feel is important and are confident of their learning abilities. Independent students desire independent study, self-paced instruction, problems that give them an opportunity to think for themselves, projects which students design, and a student-centered rather than a teacher-centered classroom. With respect to structured basic courses, many of these traits run directly contrary to what often is or can be expected in large basic courses — especially in those with multiple sections taught with a large lecture and small performance sections.

Contrary statements of students illustrate the problem. In a tightly structured basic course, one said, "This was a well organized class." Another said, "Class is too structured, unable to be flexible for all students. In the teaching profession, the top teachers are able to adjust to the students' needs and desires." Precisely. Good teachers would have to agree with the second student's comments. Flexibility is essential. But flexibility when handling a large number of students is difficult.

How do basic-course teachers perform the neat trick of satisfying both dependency and independency needs? It is likely to be a perpetual problem because learning styles vary. No single approach will satisfy everyone. One approach is to do both: offer students structure, then within that structure, try to provide sufficient room for independent work. For example, to provide students more independence, we have a number of related optional assignments in addition to what

are required in the course that interest students. They may do a special report on a visiting speaker, analyze a written speech, or do a paper on a movement, rally, or event that involves a number of speech-communication activities. Sometimes their findings are reported back to the class as a whole; sometimes they take place between student and teacher.

Whenever possible, students are gathered in groups to determine the focus, parameters, or criteria for upcoming assignments. Even though they are not determining whether or not the assignment should exist, they are selecting important governing ideas — like how many sources must be consulted, the range of topics, or the criteria that should make up evaluations of forthcoming speeches. In this way, they are offering important input, and they feel like they are part of the planning of the course.

Another way to approach the problem of independence versus dependence is to focus on independent goals whenever possible — such as specific skills. We try to have individual counseling sessions with each student that deal with her or his own communication strengths and weaknesses. We try to give each student specific, individual areas to work on — or “growth goals.” These make them feel independent. Teachers then tie those specific skills, or “growth goals,” into overall class goals. Growth goals are related to greater success in interpersonal, small-group, or public communication activities. Individual (independent) choices can be made within the class (dependent) structure.

Theory Versus Skills

There are some major problems in basic courses with respect to the theory-performance split. First, if the course is conducted primarily by beginning teachers, how well grounded in theory are they? This is often a problem in basic courses. Second, are undergraduate students required to attend lectures where some theory can be shared? Does the textbook adequately make theory clear and available? Third, is performance accomplished for its own sake, or is it guided

by the theory in the course? Performance *not* guided by theory is *likely* to reinforce prior habits, some of which may be weak. Given a choice, teachers need a combination of theory and skills. In determining which activities should be retained, they should keep those directly tied into the theory and eliminate any others.

Once again, the theory-performance frustration is underscored by student open-ended evaluations. One said, "We didn't seem to really learn practical skills. It was more the theory." In this student's mind, the written material far outweighed the skills activities of the course. Another student in this same course reinforced this point of view by saying, "It is ridiculous that in a speech class the emphasis is on written work not the actually speaking portion. I do not feel I improved at all on my speaking abilities because there was little instruction given on it." Although understandable, to believe that there can be dramatic improvement in speaking skills in one semester is unlikely. Most students have been speaking for 18-22 years prior to the one-term basic speech course. Weak communication skills have been well entrenched.

Other students in the same basic course, however, took a contrary position. One said, "This course has helped me in my speaking abilities as well as in communicating with others in general." Another said, "The one thing I gained in this course was the speeches and the practice I had giving them in front of people."

The frustration for the basic course instructor comes from not knowing which emphasis, theory or skills, will benefit most students the most. How is one to know for certain which decision is the best one? The guideline suggested above is helpful; plan to share basic theories, then select activities that directly relate to those theories. Performances guided by theory are likely to have the most long-range effect and retention possibilities.

In our own desire to approach the theory versus performance issue, we consulted the latest survey of speech communication departments (Gibson, et al. 1985). In their article, "The Basic Speech Course at U.S. Colleges and Universities," the authors discovered the following:

trying not to appear so perfect. Students need to see their basic course teacher as a human being.

Distance is also important. It is difficult to be fair and objective with friends. Thus, when teachers befriend students, it becomes harder to evaluate and grade them. We encourage teachers *not* to have students address them by their first names. To be on a first-name basis suggests friendship or closeness. To be addressed as Ms., Mr., Mrs., or Dr. provides some distance — albeit artificial. Maintain standards, being on time, prepared, organized, and motivated — a clear and distinct professionalism — also helps in preserving distance. One feature of speech-communication courses that appears consistent across our profession is that, for the most part, they promote closeness — a warm, personal, supportive environment. We are not suggesting that this environment should be discouraged, we are simply suggesting that it promotes an air of extreme closeness. When students get a lower grade than desired in such an environment, they feel betrayed; trust has been broken. The goal is to promote the environment *and* keep the distance — a neat trick.

Objective Evaluation Versus Subjective Evaluation

The problem of evaluation in a basic course is a difficult one and offers a source of serious and on-going frustration for every instructor. Here, it is our opinion, one is damned if one does it one way and damned if one does it another. The problem is compounded by the large numbers of students in our basic courses. There are also a number of subjective issues.

For some, including these teachers, objective versus subjective is *not* a major issue; that decision was made fifteen years ago and has been consistently supported and maintained. But students do not appreciate the decision. Some say the tests are too specific: “I don’t see why you need to ask specific questions verbatim from the book. I thought comprehension was the goal, not memorization.” When we

used broader questions, one response was, "Your tests are unfair. They ask for our opinions on concepts and issues. We do not have the knowledge to make such judgments." In testing, our move from broad questions to more specific ones has been slow, but, in general, students do poorly on broad, conceptual questions.

Because of the number of students in the course, we use no short-answer or essay questions. We do not have the time to grade them. Even the possibility of having graduate teaching assistants grade such questions is prohibitive since their first goal is to get a degree and already their workload is taxing. Also, having them grade short-answer or essay questions leads to potential inequity and inconsistency between sections. In grading such examinations, some people grade easily; some grade hard. Common, multiple-choice exam provides teaching assistants with an additional objective outside evaluation component that is added to students' other course experiences.

The second issue in objective versus subjective evaluating concerns competitive grading versus grading an objective scale. We use both. Competitive grading is an element in our peer-evaluating portion of the course (Weaver and Cotrell 1986; Weaver and Cotrell 1989). On the exams we grade against an objective scale: 90-100 = A; 80-89 = B; 70-79 = C; 60-69 = D; below 59 = F. At times we have been more generous. We have found that with an effective, well-designed test, and close to 1,000 students, the breakdown on the objective scale generally follows a normal, bell-shaped curve. Although we spend more than five pages in our workbook explaining the grading philosophy, process, and scale, students' questions and concerns persist. These results occur with respect to our use of peer evaluation, but much occurs, too, simply because our standards are high.

The next issue in the objective versus subjective evaluation problem is the weight given the examinations in the overall scheme of the course. They are the most objective portion. The subjective part includes the grades on the papers, activities, outlines, and speeches given by teaching assistants. If the exams are easy, students do not mind them

counting substantially; if tough, they either do not want them counted much or not counted at all. The frustration comes when students do very well in the subjective part and very poorly in the objective part. When it is the objective portion that causes them to get a "C" rather than a "B" or a "B" rather than an "A," their complaints are loud and persistent. One element here is that teachers of the performance sections, for the most part, tend to be easy graders. This means that students tend to do better in the subjective portion of the course. With objective exams, graded on an objective scale, grades tend to balance teacher's subjective assessments. Students, however, do not like the balance!

The real issue in objective versus subjective evaluation is trying to obtain objective consistency in grading between sections. We have fifty sections of twenty students each. Since we cannot get into the heads of teachers, there is no way to obtain total consistency. No matter what we have done, we have received some student complaints, but the complaints have been significantly reduced. We have approached the problem from two directions. First, we laid out the specific criteria for each major graded assignment carefully and precisely. These are provided in the student workbook required for the course, and they are followed by all basic-course teachers. Second, we constructed a uniform, consistent evaluation form for each assignment that all instructors and students use. These forms are also contained in the workbook. Laying out criteria and constructing evaluation forms takes time, but we have reduced the "inconsistency" comments dramatically by taking this time.

Summary

Although there are a number of issues that are a source of constant frustration for basic-course teachers, these teachers continue to find the course, the students, and the job challenging, interesting, and rewarding. The issues of rigor versus leniency, independence versus dependence, theory versus skills, being close versus being distant, and objective

versus subjective evaluation, do not disappear. These issues nag, haunt, and frustrate. Our goal is still to do the best we can with the most students we can.

What it really comes down to is how effectively can we walk the fine line of balance between each dichotomy. The problem is that to satisfy the largest number of students we need both. To strive for an ideal, as teachers, it is likely that a balance is appropriate on each of these issues. *How* to achieve the balance is the question. The best way we have discovered for establishing the balance is to set up the course initially with balance in mind. Then, as the course proceeds, from term to term, we alter and adjust (fine tune) our position and approach to each of these issues based on the open-ended course evaluations students provide and any other monitoring that is possible. For example, we have begun to place specific questions at the end of the final exam on issues of student concern in the course. On these questions we get frequencies from the computer, and based on student responses, we can continue to monitor and fine tune.

As long-time basic course teachers, we have lived with frustration. There is no way to please all the students all the time. To run a competent, worthwhile, rigorous required course, one must learn to live with — and, perhaps, compensate for — the frustration that will surely be present. That is why, despite our best intentions, our best interests, and our best presentation, when it comes to students' perceptions of basic course teachers, it's often a question of whether or not you have the proper solution to their current problem! Sometimes you do; sometimes you don't.

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