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The Future of the Basic Course

***Judy C. Pearson
Paul E. Nelson****

A boon to the counters of student credit hours, a challenging job for the basic course director, a course of profit for many an author, an ultra conservative force to reformers, a baseless pursuit of skills to the researcher, and a hopeless morass to the theoretician, the basic course continues its bump and grind through the history of the discipline seducing thousands of students with its apparent practicality but disappointing many reformist professors as a hopeless anachronism.

Some of us have been associated with the basic public speaking course all of our professional lives. The two authors have both been basic course directors, written eight fundamentals texts, and taught the beginning course for many years. Long association brings a certain affection for the course and a reluctance to see it change, but in this essay we will face squarely some of the changes to which the basic speech communication course should respond.

Researchers and theorists have spent considerable time considering the history of the basic speech communication course (see, for example, Gray, 1989; Jeffrey, 1964; and Oliver, 1962). Readers who are interested in the past are encouraged to peruse the article by McQuillen and Ivy (1982) who trace the history of the basic course from the 1950's through the 1980's. They conclude that the course has been adaptive to both societal needs and the demands of the educa-

* The authors wish to express their appreciation to Jon Hess for his assistance in preparing this article.

tional institution. They summarize that the course moved from the primacy of the written word to the oral mode in the 1940's, began to emphasize public speaking in the early and mid-1960s, and embraced a career focus in the 1970's. More attention appeared to be given to communication theory and interpersonal communication. The course, which was originally taught primarily by senior faculty members, is now principally offered by more junior people largely because of the tremendous growth of the course, often at a rate which exceeded the growth of the particular educational institution.

Gray (1989) provided another helpful article on the history of the basic course. Her analysis begins by describing a 1954 symposium with the three speech communication professionals: Lewis, Minnick, and Van Dusen. She notes that the three had different goals for the basic course, but that all agreed that the course was probably the only one that students would take and that it therefore needed to focus on the students' essential communicative needs. Gray traces the basic course from the 1950's through the end of the 1980's and notes that the course has changed very little.

Researchers routinely provide articles on the current state of affairs in the basic course. At least 18 articles trace the development of the course through modern times (see, for example, Dedmon, 1965; Dedmon & Frandsen, 1964; Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970; Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985; Hargis, 1956; Hayworth, 1936, 1940, 1941 and 1942; Houghton, 1918; Kay, 1917; Pearson, Nelson, & Sorenson, 1981; Seiler, Foster, & Pearson, 1985; Seiler & McGukin, 1989; Sorenson & Pearson, 1981; Trueblood, 1915; and Winans, 1917). These articles, too, show that the more we change, the more we remain the same.

Although the basic course is relatively stable at most institutions, some alterations have been suggested and implemented. For example, a number of delivery systems

have been used in the basic course. Some would argue that the basic course has been primarily delivered using a small autonomous section, but other teachers have tried the large lecture (see, for example, Erickson & Erickson, 1979; Gleason, 1986, Hazelton, 1986; Larson, 1986; Pearson, 1986, 1990; Semlak, 1986; and Weaver, 1986) and the personalized system of instruction (PSI; see, for example, Fuss-Reineck & Seiler, 1982; Gray, 1984; Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Thomas, 1987; Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Yerby, 1986; Scott & Young, 1976; Seiler, 1982 and 1983; Seiler & Fuss-Reineck, 1988; Taylor, 1988; and Yerby, Gray, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987). The PSI appears to be superior to either the lecture-recitation or the autonomous classroom (Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Thomas, 1988; Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Yerby, 1986).

In addition, the teaching personnel has changed in the course. Historically, senior professors taught the basic course. Today, the course is more likely to be taught by junior faculty or graduate teaching associates. While many institutions have used graduate assistants, a more recent development is the use of undergraduates as teaching associates (Baisinger, Peterson, & Spillman, 1984; Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Yerby, 1987). The advantages of using either graduate or undergraduates in these roles include more efficient use of faculty resources, more cost effective instruction, and more personalized instruction for the students. The teaching associates reap both personal and career benefits. Graduate and undergraduate teaching associates may face some problems including less credibility, less knowledge of the subject matter, poor teaching skills, little experience, and an inappropriate attitude toward teaching. Nonetheless, with careful preparation, supervision, and planning, many institutions could benefit from this often untapped human resource.

The basic course, central to the concerns of most departments and our discipline, has been of interest also to journal

editors and those in charge of other professional outlets. However, few papers and articles have speculated about the future of the course (an exception includes Mehrley & Backes, 1972). Writers may be hesitant to predict the future because of the uncertainty that the future holds. On the other hand, little change has been reported in the basic course even though dramatic changes have occurred in other avenues of the field. Theorists may feel that predicting changes may be an academic exercise since the course is resistant to change.

Why should anybody care about the future of "The Basic Course" as it is so often called? One reason is that our identity, for better or worse, seems inextricably tied to it. Many people including colleagues from other disciplines think that the basic course *is* our field. Does anyone think of the field of psychology being Psychology 101? Does anyone believe freshman composition is the entire field of English? Yet many students and professors think the basic course is what speech communication is all about. Our identity is uncomfortably bound to that of the basic course.

A second reason for caring about the basic course is that it is the "bread and butter" course for many departments. Translating the metaphor means that the department's existence is justified by a big service course that teaches a relatively large number of students cheaply, especially when teaching assistants or part-time faculty are available instead of regular faculty. Thousands of today's professors were yesterday's TAs who used the course to finance their graduate education. The future of the basic course may speak to the financial future of the discipline.

A third reason for caring about the future of the basic course is that widespread changes in the basic course mark changes in the discipline, especially changes evoked by the discoveries of research or the embrace of a new theoretical perspective. Because so many people inside and outside the discipline tell the basic course what it should be, it has become rather resistant to change and in many ways

anachronistic. Like so many university courses, it is designed to meet a need of yesterday, not today, and certainly not tomorrow.

The purpose of this article is to resist the impulse to remain in the past or the present and offer some recommendations for the future of the basic speech communication course. We would like to prescribe what the basic course of the future should be. We base our prescriptions on four notions: the course must be based on accurate information, it should be inclusive in nature, it must be responsive to our contemporary world and to our student's current and future communicative needs, and it must provide a unique contribution to our students' education.

ACCURACY

Don M. Boileau (1985), while he was serving in the national office of the Speech Communication Association, observed, "If 'the eyes are the mirror to the soul,' then the *basic course* is the 'mirror' to the *discipline*. For many students the basic course is the only instruction in speech communication" (740). Since the course is the only exposure most people have to our discipline, it is imperative that the information we provide reflect the most accurate knowledge discovered at the present time.

The textbooks for the basic course purport to summarize pedagogically the current thinking and research in the field. But Allen and Preiss (1990) examined thirty-four basic course textbooks only to find that Aristotle's *The Rhetoric* was the only text in print that was faithful to a meta-analysis of research results. In other words, most modern texts make claims that are not supported by what is known.

Basic course texts need to accurately reflect current knowledge. So indiscriminating are many adopters that

some of the best selling texts are practically devoid of footnotes (students, they allege, do not like them). Allen and Preiss (1990) found that of 71 conclusions about message issues, 55% "were inconsistent with the relevant meat-analysis," i.e., wrong about what the literature says about the subject. Authors, reviewers and adopters, for the sake of our students, need to insist that the textbooks of tomorrow reflect the research that is supposed to inform them.

Publishers sometimes make decisions which inhibit accuracy in textbooks. Marketing experts and reviewers will often choose the "tried and true" over the innovative and accurate. For example, Monroe's motivated sequence has never been shown to be a more effective organizational pattern than other methods of arranging a public speech. Nonetheless, few successful books are without a section on the motivated sequence. Similarly, public speaking textbooks rely on organizational patterns, in general, that rely on written, rather than oral, modes of delivery. Outlining, appropriate for essays, but not necessarily for oral messages, is included in every text.

Accuracy should be evident in our courses and our texts. However, we cannot be the caretakers of accurate information if we are not informed. Teachers of tomorrow need to be idea generators, persistent readers of the professional literature, and researchers into the prickly questions that remain unanswered. We should be ashamed that Aristotle is more consistent with what is known than we are ourselves. And we need to overcome the comfortable myth that we can be teachers without a healthy sense of inquiry that keeps our pedagogy on top of our knowledge base.

Our knowledge must extend beyond the subject matter of our discipline. One contribution of the field has been the generation of knowledge about teaching. We have ample research on effective teaching methods, and yet the basic course remains essentially the same today as it has in years

past. We must provide delivery systems which are consistent with our current knowledge.

INCLUSIVENESS

Today's basic course, more than ever before, includes students from a variety of cultures and subcultures. The basic course must be for all people; it can no longer be exclusively for white, middle-class males. For example, the majority of college students seeking B. A. degrees today are women (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1989). Within the next decade, the majority of graduate students seeking the doctoral degree will similarly be female ("Education Department," 1990). At the same time, most collegiate administrative positions and most professoriate posts are held by men. As a result, the academy embraces male values, attitudes, and perspectives even though the majority of those served are female. The basic course, like the university at large, must respond to this change in clientele.

Groups other than women are similarly entering the basic course in greater numbers. The university is now receiving applications from an increased number of persons who are non-Caucasians. Orlando Taylor (1990), Dean of the School of Communications at Howard University, recently observed that the field of speech communication is not as attractive to people of diverse backgrounds as are other disciplines including engineering and business. He urges administrators and faculty to include cross-cultural and subcultural concerns within the communication curriculum.

The United States has also experienced an increase in international students (see, for example, Churchman, 1986; Hesler, 1986; McKenzie & Ross, 1989; Rojas-Gomez &

Pearson, in press; Schlessman, 1985). Finally, because the basic course is required on many campuses, psychological characteristics and communication apprehension must be considered in course design and delivery system (see, for example, Beatty, Forst, & Stewart, 1986; Booth-Butterfield, 1986; Bowers & 36C:099, 1986). Each of these groups require a rethinking of the goals and activities of the basic course. We must be increasingly inclusive, rather than exclusive, with regard to our audience.

Miller (1987) recently compared the Dale Carnegie course with the basic course as it is operationalized at most universities. She noted that Dale Carnegie's course was originated in New York City in 1912 for the YMCA, and had as its purpose practical instruction "to men whose jobs depended on facility in communication." She added that the course "came to symbolize the American pursuit of material success." Miller summarizes the criticism of the Dale Carnegie course by academicians:

Academics, however, have regarded Carnegie's method as little more than "animal-training tactics," and complain (1) that students are not given realistic assessment of their speaking skills; (2) that his "hard-sell" approach to marketing his course has often been fraudulent; and (3) that his motives are unethical because they involves selling a course that is designed to make money and increase the students' earning potentials, mostly by giving them a predatory advantage over their audience. Finally, the biggest difference is that Carnegie offers training, while the university offers an education based on research and theory. (abstract)

Miller is probably accurate in her depiction of the differences between the Dale Carnegie course and common criticisms that are offered. However, she may be overstating the extent to which collegiate basic courses are dependent on research and theory.

Recently, Brummet (1986) wrote an essay in which he depicted four potential approaches to public speaking education which ranged from the absolutist to the relativist. Absolutism assumes that one holds the truth and his or her job as a public speaker is to enunciate that truth. Witnessing, in this way, results in the potential benefit of faithfulness. The absolutist believes that others who disagree simply need more information.

The second stance, awareness, occurs when the speaker recognizes that others may hold all of the information available, but they still disagree. This person is metaphorically called "the soldier" by Brummet since he or she seeks to do battle. As a public speaker, his or her job is to use the weapons of messages in order to potentially achieve the ecstasy of victory or the sting of defeat.

Tolerance is the next stage. "The diplomat," as Brummet refers to this character, is the one who recognizes that people do disagree. He or she may retain an absolutist position, but realizes that others do not share those beliefs. This public speaker seeks cooperation from the audience. The role of public speaking is accommodation. Diplomacy is the guiding attitude. The possible gain is cooperation while the possible risk is confrontation.

The final state is relativism. Brummet notes:

The relativist sees public speaking as a crucible for merging self with self. Public speaking seeks to change, not just the opinions people have, but the people who are made up out of the opinions, values, beliefs, and commitments which rhetoric manages. Therefore the role of public speaking for the relativist is courtship, in which the dyad of speaker and audience together coyly consider whether to become part of each other by becoming part of each other's substance of opinions, values, beliefs, and commitments. The focus of attention is on the relationship between speaker and audience as equal

partners in oratorical exploration. The guiding attitude for the suitor is love (273).

"The suitor" seeks the benefit of consummation or becoming one with another while risking rejection and vulnerability. The role of public speaking in one of courtship to use Brummet's metaphor.

Brummet would probably place the Dale Carnegie course on the absolutist or awareness end of his continuum, but we must consider whether our basic courses are free of such underlying notions. The basic course, given current enrollments of individuals from differing cultures and subcultures, must be based on the relativistic perspective. Indeed, Brummet suggests that relativism may be learned through "cultural education linked to communication education" (274). Our basic courses, in order to be inclusive, cannot simply recognize nor tolerate differences: they must embrace them.

In the same way, the basic course must include multiple perspectives in the way we come to glean new knowledge within the discipline. Contemporary communication theory informed classical rhetorical approaches to understanding human communication. In turn, more current critical methods have added to social scientific ways of knowing. The basic course must continue to integrate the epistemology of multiple ways of knowing.

RESPONSIVENESS

Many respected communication professionals have noted the importance of responding to student's communicative needs. We noted earlier that Gray (1989) described the 1954 meeting with Lewis, Minnick, and Van Dusen and that the three agreed that the course needed to focus on the

students' essential communicative needs. Wallace Bacon (1977), then President of the Speech Communication Association, agreed,

I believe that we are central to the aims of higher education, today even more than in the past. While I trust that instruction in subject matter will remain the domain of colleges and universities, it seems clear enough that we are no longer training scholars largely to talk to other scholars. Institutions are facing the task of teaching men and women to interact with others in the day-to-day word outside their walls (10).

Bendtschneider and Trank (1988) similarly urge the faculty and director of the basic course "to be primarily concerned with the extent to which the basic course is fulfilling the communication needs of their students" (4).

A variety of surveys have suggested that the content of the course may be discrepant from students' needs (see, for example, Becker & Ekdom, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 1982) Weitzel & Gaske, 1984). Lohr (1974) surveyed alumni and found that they most frequently engaged in social conversation, making decisions, and giving information to one person. The most important activities included giving information and making decisions with another person, and providing information to a group. Persuasion, making decisions with a group, and persuading one other person were identified as the most difficult tasks in which they engaged.

Sorenson and Pearson (1981), too, suggested that basic courses should help students meet eventual professional needs, but their survey of students and alumni showed that current courses were not necessarily responsive to those needs. Students determined the interview to be the most important communicative activity while the alumni named the small group discussion as most essential. In addition, while both students and alumni favored a hybrid course

which blended interpersonal and public communication skills, the trend within the last decade has been toward an increased emphasis on exclusively public speaking competence.

For their part, Johnson and Szczupakiewicz (1987) surveyed both alumni and faculty members about the ratings of the importance of public speaking skills. They found that the two groups significantly differed on the importance on 15 of 18 public speaking skills. The alumni saw informative speaking, listening, and handling questions and answers as most important; they viewed outlining, selecting a topic, and entertaining speaking as least important. The faculty identified informative speaking, persuasive speaking, and gathering supporting materials as most important, while they determined that evaluating speeches, small group discussion, and entertaining speaking were least important. Further more, faculty members reported that they felt that extemporaneous modes of delivery were most important, but alumni reported that they routinely used impromptu, memorized, and manuscript delivery styles, too.

Bednar and Oleny (1987) found that entry level employees were more likely to use the memorandum, the computer network, the informational report, and the letter. Their most serious communication problems included poor listening, lack of conciseness, and poor feedback. They also ranked interpersonal and oral communication skills as more important than written skills.

We must deal with essential communicative activities rather than outdated public speaking. Although we cannot predict what the twenty-first century will bring, some general trends certain to affect our profession include the increasing role of mediated communication and technological advances in this information age. Second, social transformations including changing demographics, alterations in the family, and a burgeoning older population will affect

our field. Third, increased geographical mobility within both the professions and labor force alters our interactive patterns.

Brian Winston (1990), Dean of the School of Communications at Pennsylvania State University, recently startled an audience as he predicted that by the year 2010, no serious newspaper would carry photographs. He explained that the advent of being able to alter photographs unnoticeably moved photos from being a vehicle of truth to a vehicle of distortion. Similarly, he suggested that we may now be in an age of technological determinism as current technology, rather than social and cultural factors, determine our use of mediated messages. He urged the audience to gain control of our technological possibilities. Classroom technology, shown to be useful by communication professors (see, for example, Hemphill & Standerfer, 1987), should be adopted for reasons other than its availability.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1990), Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, at the University of Pennsylvania, predicted changes in academic institutions because of technological advances. She posited that three classes of institutions would result. The first group, dependent on print media, such as letters, would soon fall behind. Institutions which added phones and computers to their communication systems would be more successful in establishing quality graduate programs and high caliber faculties. However, the very finest institutions would also have access to teleconferencing with other institutions and the capability of uploading and downloading information. Access to information and the speed with which one could share that information will distinguish the successful from the unsuccessful programs in higher education.

Jamieson (1990) warned that the communication field could become extinct if we do not respond to current technological changes. She noted the irony that the discipline

which has traditionally studied communication systems could become obsolete because it could not adapt to them.

The basic course needs to address new communication patterns and relationships. Five-minute informative and persuasive speeches might have served Lincoln well (and did so in his Gettysburg Address), but in an age of sound bites, computers, fiber optics, and twenty-five hours per week in front of the TV students have a greater need to know about mediated communication via modern technology, how to communicate with people across the world, and even how to communicate with spouses, children, and the elderly. Our mainstays are decidedly archaic and increasingly irrelevant to most of our students even if they do rather enjoy exercises that come from the pages of the Roman progymnasmata.

The basic communication course has not been responsive to students' needs nor to change at all. Mehrley and Backes (1972) argued for revolutionary and "highly accelerated" change in the basic course nearly two decades ago. They added that the content of the basic course was "more appropriate for achieving a Boy Scout's merit badge in public speaking than earning three hours of college credit" (209). However, as Trank (1985) noted, "The basic course always has had critics but it has shown a remarkable immunity to criticism and change" (87). He adds, "In spite of a lack of meaningful supportive data and in the face of legitimate criticism" the basic course will continue with "business as usual" (87).

If we are to maintain currency, we must venture into new areas or treat classic topics in new ways. For instance, many contemporary surveys of education and many articles on communication education point to the crying need for critical thinking (see, for example, Fritz & Weaver, 1986; Hay, 1987; Hochel, 1988; Mader & Mader, 1988; Morris, 1987; Schwartz, 1989). The basic course invites the study of critical thinking because it has always been in the course even if it was not labeled as such. Many professors of

speech communication cut their teeth on debate, the analysis of arguments, the standards of proof, and the uses of evidence. It would help if we would dwell less on syllogistic reasoning, and more on practical works of ordinary language philosophers and do what the critics of education believe is important: have students think before they speak about the basis and foundations of their statements. The need to know their own epistemology.

Another essential area is ethics (see, for example, Greenberg, 1986). Although many basic texts at least mention the word, few courses treat ethical considerations in any depth. Our contemporary society calls upon each of us to establish responsible ethical standards by which we create and respond to messages. The rapidly changing mass media, new and innovative political campaigns, technology which allows the alteration of news photos, and personalized newspapers require clear and coherent ethical systems.

UNIQUENESS

The discipline of communication has its own unique heritage. While we share areas of interest with other disciplines, we represent a sulphitic field. The basic course should celebrate our unique contribution. In addition, traditional communication activities including debate can be used to teach essential communicative skills (see, for example, Vallin, 1989).

Correspondingly, the basic course would do well to wean itself from its origins in departments of English and the written word by adopting a new metaphor based on orality. Haynes (1990) writes convincingly of our continuing dependence on speech as "well performed writing" with its prestructured messages, composed outlines, carefully crafted notes, and other practices that discourage spontane-

ity, immediate response to feedback, and other practices to which we give lip service. An examination of any well-received textbook will demonstrate that we rely heavily on written, rather than on oral, communicative practices. What current textbook does not have a chapter on organization? Haynes argues that today's "vid-oral" communication provides a modern day oral culture that should inform our teaching of public speaking.

In the future we need to be more proactive and less reactive. We have for generations taught what business administration, education, agriculture, and others demand of us. Shadowen (1987) argues that while we should accommodate career relevance in the basic course, we must retain our "traditional theories" and "general principles" of communication. We need to espouse our own perspective, based on sound theory, respectable research, and student needs. We do not have to abandon our well intentioned practicality to also be so academically respectable that our colleagues in Arts and Sciences (who rarely require the course) want their students to learn in the basic course.

The discipline of speech communication is no longer a derivative of more established disciplines, if it ever was. Indeed, the advent of the information age, new distribution systems, and high technology should make our discipline and its basic course increasingly indispensable inside and outside the so called academic world. All we have to do is practice the concept of adaptation that we have taught for so long.

Those of us who have spent our professional lives teaching, researching, pontificating, and writing about the basic course worry about the basic course of the future. Will all of our favorite exercises fall by the wayside? Will the new and unfamiliar overcome the comfortable practices of the present? With change comes the necessity to learn more about new ideas. With change comes risk, the risk of authors trying new approaches, teachers trying new

pedagogy, publishers printing the untried, and colleagues accepting new advances in the basic course. The changes we have recommended come out of deep commitment to the basic course, which – if it is to mirror a vital discipline – must change to reflect a changing student body in a changing world.

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