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Directing the Basic Communication Course: Eighteen Years Later

Richard L. Weaver II
Howard W. Cotrell

In 1976, just two years after assuming the position of basic-course director at Bowling Green State University, Weaver wrote an article entitled, "Directing The Basic Communication Course," for *Communication Education*. Recently, we had the opportunity of examining that article with the perspective of an eighteen-year veteran director.

The motivation for that article was simple. Having assumed the position of director, Weaver looked through the literature of our discipline to find directions, suggestions, and ideas that would help in the new job. He found little written about directing basic courses and began the article acknowledging the problem: "Despite its history as a required course, despite the large numbers of students who are affected by it, and despite the people in the profession who have been associated with it, there is surprisingly little information available in the literature on *directing* the basic communication course" (p. 203).

Eighteen years later, the situation has changed. And eighteen years later, too, the problems a veteran director faces are different as well. As a new director, the important concerns were "the development of course purposes, procedures for organizing the course, and administrative policies" (p. 203).¹

¹Naturally, these concerns do not diminish in importance for the veteran director; they are simply problems that have been clearly, precisely, and, often, conclusively resolved — at least for the most part. They need reconsideration and re-evaluation throughout one's tenure as a basic course director, of course.

In this article, we will focus on problems that face veteran directors. We are not excluding new directors from our focus; however, these are problems directors often see evolving over a period of time. After a brief opening section on basic course literature, we will focus on tradition, motivating students for the long term, and maintaining our own motivation for the course.

BASIC-COURSE LITERATURE

Today, directors of basic courses interested in pursuing information *can* find more of it, however, they are unlikely to find much of an empirical nature.² With the exception of the Gibson studies, they are unlikely to find much in the way of systematic research.³ Also, they are unlikely to find theoretical perspectives to guide research and investigation. They are unlikely to find much in the leading journals of the field. All of this is unfortunate.

Here, we want to extend the discussion begun in 1976. There we explained three major problems facing basic-course directors. In 1989, we looked at five additional problem areas.

²The basic communication course has received more attention in the speech communication literature since 1976. For example, there is a journal available now called *Basic Communication Course Annual* (American Press, 1989, 1990, and 1991) edited by Lawrence W. Hugenberg. Each issue contains articles by prominent and, often, experienced researchers and writers in the area. For information on the background and evolution of the basic course, for example, the reader is referred to the first article in the first issue by Pamela L. Gray, "The Basic Course in Speech Communication: An Historical Perspective" (1989).

³Since 1976 there have been three more (for a total of five) studies of the basic course in speech communication (Gibson et al., 1968; Gibson et al., 1974; Gibson 35. al., 1980; Gibson 35. al., 1985; Gibson et. al., 1990). We know more now about what has happened in the basic course than ever before. For a judgment of how much we know, the reader is referred to the article by William J. Seiler and Drew McGukin, "What We Know about the Basic Course: What Has the Research Told Us?" (1989). Their investigation of basic course literature reveals "that instructors and directors do not have sufficient empirical support on which to design the course" (p. 35).

Now, we want to examine three that veteran directors are likely to experience.

DEALING WITH THE TRADITION

Veteran course directors develop a tradition — the information, beliefs, and customs of a people. In basic courses, our concern is with information, and those beliefs, and customs passed on in the form of stories about a course and an instructor by students. When teaching a rigorous, required, large, basic, communication course over a period of years, the development of a tradition is inevitable.

To discover the tradition on the first day of a new semester, we ask students on a half sheet of paper to anonymously answer the question: "Whether it's fact or fiction, write down something (maybe several things) *you* have heard about this course or about the basic course director. If nothing, write the word 'nothing' on your half sheet."

More interesting than the comments made about what they have heard about the course or its director, are the judgments students are inclined to make based on what they've heard. After students have written what they have heard, we ask them directly, "Okay, what do *you* think about what you've written?" One said, "It's *very* difficult to get an A, even if 150% is put into the class. This is really stupid; this class is required and should be okay to pass." Another said, "I hear the course is full of busy work. I hate it. All my other classes are very time consuming and more important to me than this one." Such half-sheet responses will give directors unexpurgated information on student priorities!

From the comments we have received from students, it appears that they act as though the tradition about a course or its instructor is valid. Seldom, we find, do they pursue it to discover its truth or validity. It is easier not to. If students hear the same story from more than one person, it becomes truth--tradition--and they believe it.

Students' judgments are important. They can lead to attitudes such as, "Why try?," "No matter how hard I try, nothing is likely to happen," "I hate this course so much, and I haven't even taken it yet," or "I'm scared to death." These judgments lead to a strong, negative, beginning attitude. Wilbert McKeachie, in his book *Teaching Tips* (1986), says the most important variable affecting student satisfaction with course and instructor is their expectations. Students who anticipate the course or teacher to be good or bad will likely find it to be that way.

The tradition, especially when it is negative or false, needs to be challenged in some way. We have three methods for dealing with student stories. First, we address them directly. Often we do this during the first class period. For example, on grading, we tell students what the distribution of grades was from the previous semester so that they *know* they can get an "A," and that "A's" and "B's" *are* given.

Second, we provide written responses to the most common concerns. In the workbook for the course, we include specific explanations of grading and evaluating procedures — since these issues loom large in students' thinking. Also, we pose about a dozen of the most common of students' concerns (from the half sheets they submit) as questions, and we address their concerns directly and forthrightly toward the front of the workbook. For example, "Is the grading process fair?," "Can I pass the examinations?," and "Is it just a course full of busywork?," are among the most-often asked questions. These issues, cast in a negative frame, appear frequently on students' final course-evaluation forms until we began addressing them in the workbook.

To deal further with the "busywork" label, we took another important step. For every assignment in the course, we explain to students *why* we are doing it. For example, we tell them *why* an information-acquisition interview or a learning group is important. We tell them *why* research for communication efforts is important, *why* outlines are essen-

tial, and *why* we expect *both* command of the theory *and* superiority in performances to receive a high grade in the course. One *or* the other is insufficient.

Our third way of dealing with tradition has to do with availability. We make office hours visible and obvious. We make ourselves available before and after class. We create an open environment for dealing with problems and questions *when* they arise. In this way, we are able to refute negative rumors before they develop and become damaging. In this way, too, students feel as if they have a resource at all times for their help and assistance.

The above methods assist undergraduates in the course. But in large, multi-section courses, directors need to deal with those teaching the course as well. We use three methods for dealing with tradition with teachers as well. First, we make certain that instructors read the information students get in the workbook. Second, we produce a teacher's manual for the instructors who teach the course. In this, we outline all rules, procedures, and methods for handling problems. Also, where necessary, we underscore and explain further the requirements undergraduates read in the workbook.

Finally, we have weekly staff meetings for instructors. In addition to training sessions, these staff meetings allow ongoing contact to deal with problems as they arise. In his article on "Training or Teaching?," Trank (1989) states that "The key element in establishing an effective [training program] is the development of an appropriate atmosphere...." (p. 180). Reviewing student concerns that have been raised previously, before they occur again aids in maintaining an appropriate, supportive, positive atmosphere.

The goal of the basic course director is information management and control. If we can manage and control information, and clearly articulate the intentions and motives of the director and instructors, we make certain the tradition is mostly accurate, or, at the very least, not excessively damaging.

MOTIVATING STUDENTS FOR THE LONG TERM

One weakness of the rapid turnover of basic-course directors (Trank, 1989, p. 169), is that, often, new directors do not have the time to consider larger issues. Focusing on the immediate situation is a matter of survival and daily justification of one's credibility and position. How to motivate students for the long term is, we think, a larger issue.

We began using imaging visualization several years ago. It was because of the work of Joe Ayres and Theodore S. Hopf (1985) that we introduced a complete lecture on "Imaging" as a way to help control fear, nervousness, and anxiety. By writing to the authors, we received the script they used in their work, and we now introduce our students to that script.

In a second study (1987), Ayres and Hopf suggested that visualization can be as effective as systematic desensitization and rational emotive therapy for helping students reduce communication apprehension in the classroom. In a follow-up study (1990), the same authors showed that after both four months and eight months, those students exposed to visualization reported "significantly lower [communication apprehension] levels . . . than those who were not exposed to visualization" (p. 75). It is systematic studies like these that allow us to assume that some of what we do *can* have long-term effects.

Another technique we have incorporated in the basic course has to do with intervention strategies. Because communication is habitual, and because "past experience rather than specified strategy is frequently imposed" on situations (Beatty, 1989, p. 480), we offer students practical, easy-to-learn and apply, brief strategies for dealing with communication-related experiences. It is training in systematic method

that enables students to accurately analyze situations so that they can learn from these experiences (Beatty, p. 480).

We introduce intervention strategies in the first lecture. There, we offer students a ten-step strategy for submitting a completed paper—much like a scenario offered later for developing a speech. (See Figure 1.) We leave students with a five-step strategy for improving perception — showing them first how improved perception results in improved communication. This figure shows how an intervention strategy is presented.

In the second lecture on interpersonal communication, we use several strategies. We offer a five-step sequence for developing a positive (or more positive) self-concept. We discuss a six-step strategy for helping them improve listening. A three-step intervention strategy is offered for improving the clarity of expression. We provide a five-step strategy for successfully coping with anger, and we end the lecture with a three-step strategy for improving self-disclosure.

We have brief strategies that can be used for each of the major topics considered. There is one, for example, on interviewing and one on assertiveness. We offer students one to improve their nonverbal communication as well as one to use as they assess the nonverbal communication of others. We discuss strategies for group membership, group leadership, and time management. We use strategies to help them prepare their speech outlines and to rehearse for their speeches as well.

Our point is that if our goal is to change communication behaviors over the long term, then we must offer students tangible, brief, effective means for doing so. We have found intervention strategies to be a useful tool for this purpose, and the follow-up questions we ask students at the completion of the course indicate that over eighty percent of students make use of at least some of the strategies they are offered during the course.

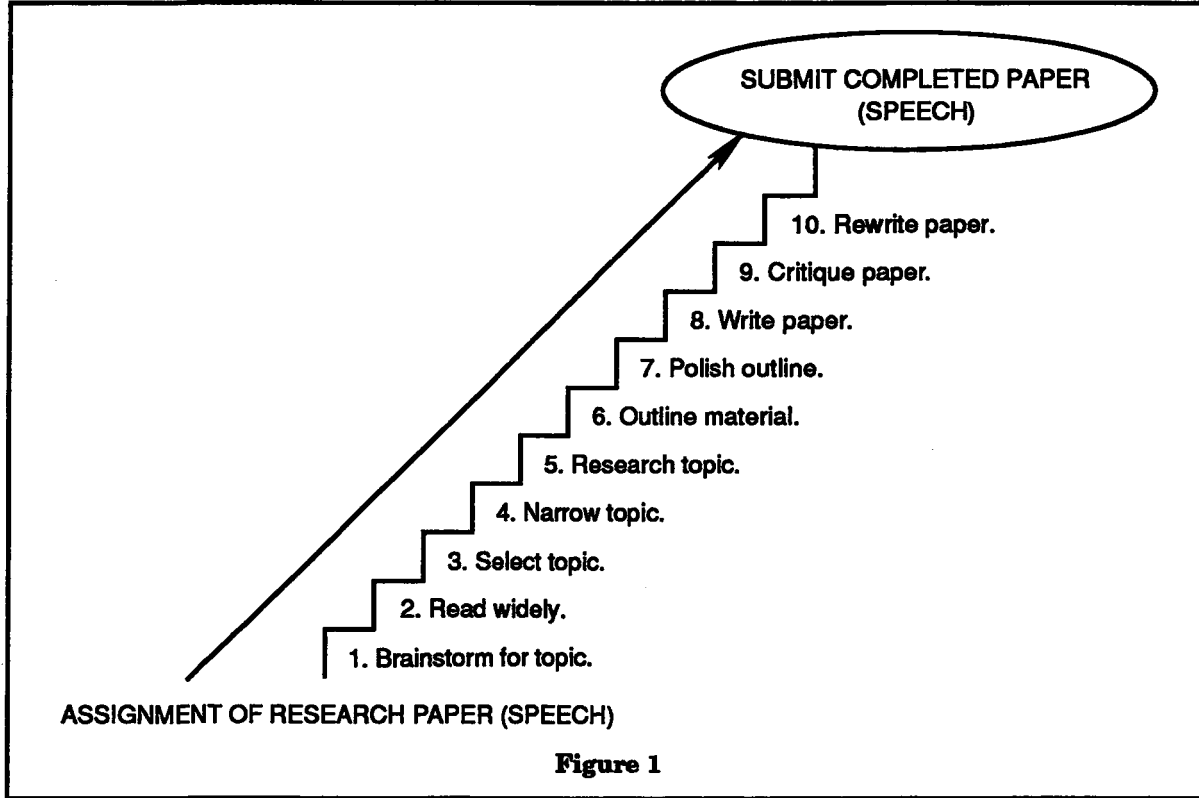


Figure 1

Self-Concept

1. Think better of yourself.
2. Think better of others.
3. See others as opportunities to build yourself.
4. Accept change in your self.
5. See the values of mistakes.

Listening

1. Be motivated.
2. Know what makes a poor listener.
3. Avoid distractions
4. Don't argue.
5. Listen selectively.
6. Make notes.

Clarity of Expression

1. Picture clearly what you want to express.
2. Clarify and elaborate on what you want to express.
3. Use feedback to help further guide your efforts.

Coping with Anger

1. Be aware of your emotions.
2. Admit your emotions.
3. Investigate your emotions.
4. Report your emotions.
5. Integrate your emotions.

Self-Disclosure

1. Establish an atmosphere of good will (friendly, cheerful, willing, and ready).
2. Reveal trust (confident, reliant, and responsible).
3. Take risk of minimal, low-level self-disclosure.

Figure 2

**MAINTAINING OUR OWN MOTIVATION
FOR THE COURSE**

There are three specific things we have done that help us maintain our motivation for directing the basic speech communication course. We experiment, we write about what we

do, and we have learned to cope with criticism. Criticism is inevitable, and it can be destructive.

First, we experiment. We have found that the overall structure of our hybrid course (five weeks each of interpersonal, small-group, and public speaking) works well; thus, the structure and the major activities have remained. We work continuously to refine, hone, and polish exercises, activities, and lectures. We encourage our instructors to do the same. With their reports of results, the observations of an instructional facilitator—an objective observer who sits in on the class and makes suggestions for improvement and change—and our own interest in trying new things, we are able to incorporate minor changes on a continuing basis. This fosters freshness.

Second, what we try, we often write about. There are a number of potential outlets for instructional material.⁴

⁴If it is quantitative or qualitative in nature *Communication Education* should, of course, be considered first. If it is an exercise or activity that can be written about succinctly, then *The Speech Communication Teacher* is an excellent outlet. The next level of potential outlets, after *Communication Education*, would be the regional journals. Most, however, are unlikely to consider pedagogical material unless it is either quantitative or qualitative in nature, and a quick survey of these journals indicates the paucity of instructional material to be found in our journals. We have found state journals to be excellent outlets, however. And of the best way to discover which state journals need material and to whom to write, basic-course directors should keep their eye on *Spectra* for these announcements. A list of editors of selected journals, newsletters, and magazines is listed in the *Speech Communication Association Directory*. Another excellent outlet for material is the education journals. There are some, like the *Journal of Higher Education*, *American Educational Research Journal*, *Research in Higher Education*, or *Studies in Higher Education* that take primarily quantitative material. But there are numerous other outlets, too, that most people writing instructionally oriented material from a speech communication perspective, may not have discovered. For example, if the material would have applicability at the secondary level as well as the college level, then *Educational Horizons* and *The Clearing House* offer potential outlets. If the material might relate to other disciplines, almost all major disciplines have a journal comparable to *Communication Education*. If it is creative or unusual, then *Innovative Higher Education* or *College Teaching* (formerly *Improving*

Writing about the basic course serves several purposes. It forces us to think through each aspect of what we are doing thoroughly and completely. In doing so, often we make further refinements. Also, it encourages us to place our ideas into a larger perspective. In addition, it gives us the opportunity to share our ideas with a larger audience. Finally, writing allows us to keep fresh through creative expression.

The last way we have for maintaining our own interest in the basic course over the years has involved learning how to deal with criticism. Anyone who has directed a large course and who has asked for open-ended comments from students, knows that students' criticisms can be harsh, severe, even unwarranted and unfair. Of course, if there weren't positive comments, we could not maintain our sanity. Positive comments are assumed; it is the negative ones that have the destructive power.

There are several ways for dealing with negative criticism that we have developed over the years. These include, first, the need to relax and to place it in perspective. It can help, too, to acquire a confidant or someone who can help interpret the criticism or discuss it with you. Another way is to acquire feedback along the way rather than wait until the end of a course. That way, when negative things occur, they can be handled and disposed of at once. When we discover it, we like to deal with it directly. If appropriate also, we like to share criticism with students. It can help in dealing with negative criticism, too, if the evaluation forms are designed to get at exactly the information desired.

College and University Teaching) might be worth considering. If authors don't mind picking up a share of the publication costs, then *Education*, *College Student Journal*, and *Instructional Psychology* can serve their purposes. Other journals that could be outlets for our material include: *Change*, *Focus on Learning*, *Human Learning*, *Instructional Development*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and the *Phi Kappa Phi Journal* among others.

BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE ANNUAL

To assist in handling negative criticism we constructed a method for categorizing student evaluations in such a way that we can channel-off the negative reactions, label and disregard those considered uninformed or irrelevant, categorize those that seem to represent the majority, and deal appropriately with the constructive ones. We have defined each category and placed them on a continuum from negative to positive. The labels include aggressive /personal, annoyed, perplexed, irrelevant, uninformed, okay, constructive, and overly complimentary. With these categories, instructors have a rational way of dealing with potentially emotional experiences.

SUMMARY

In this article, we focused on problems that face veteran directors. They are problems that can be dealt with once the basic ones concerning the purposes of the course, procedures for organizing the course, and policies for course administration have been resolved.

We all create our own basis for happiness. For us, the basic course serves a valuable, on-going, worthwhile force in students' lives. Whether or not the course or its content becomes old to us, it is still new to students. It can be the most valuable experience for them simply because communication permeates every facet of their lives. Knowing this, we approach it as a survival skill.

By being prepared to face the kinds of questions and problems presented here—how to deal with the tradition, how to motivate students for the long term, and how to maintain our own motivation for the course—the director of the basic course is more likely to *continue* directing the course with enthusiasm and interest. The issues discussed here are important because they touch the very roots of student attitudes, student motivation and learning, and instructor concern and dedication. Indeed, in eighteen years, our interest in the basic

course has not changed. What *has* changed is that our commitment has become deeper and more firmly rooted — rooted in issues essential to quality education.

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