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Rod Troester

Pennsylvania State University - Main Campus

Drew McGukin

California University of Pennsylvania

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The Status of the Introductory and Advanced Interpersonal Communication Courses at U.S. Colleges and Universities: A National Survey

*Rod Troester
Drew McGukin*

Interpersonal communication as an important area within the Communication discipline is only little more than 20 years old (Berryman & Weaver, 1978; Miller & Knapp, 1985). Not only have the past 20 years witnessed the emergence of this area, they have seen its development into one of the major foci of the discipline. In the early seventies, there were mixed feelings about courses in interpersonal communication. While some predicted that "interpersonal communication might become as common to college freshmen and sophomores of the seventies as public speaking had been to undergraduate students of the fifties and sixties" (Stewart, 1972), others pondered the status of interpersonal communication courses as merely a passing fad (Illardo, 1972). Berryman and Weaver (1978) concluded from their survey of interpersonal communication courses at over 600 U.S. colleges and universities that interpersonal communication had gained a strong foothold in the communication curriculum and was more than a fad that would soon be gone.

Bochner, Cissna, and Garko (1991) provide a key reason for the sustained interest in interpersonal communication. They claim that "interpersonal communication is an intoxicat-

ing subject that never satiates one's curiosity about the perplexing dilemmas of social life" (p. 16). The past 20 years have witnessed tremendous growth in interpersonal communication theory and research, and that growth has produced tremendous diversity in this area. In the mid-eighties, Ayres (1984) surveyed the interpersonal communication literature produced within the communication discipline to identify the different lines of thinking within the area. He identified four dominant and distinct approaches: dialogue, cohesion, message process, and rhetorical. More recently, Bochner et al. (1991) claim that the area is characterized by numerous perspectives and that "each of these perspectives offers a somewhat different vocabulary, oriented toward a different set of research problems, and addressed by different methodological and analytical procedures" (p. 17). They use three "arbitrarily chosen" metaphors to organize the study of human interaction and interpersonal communication: control, coordination, and contextualized interaction (Bochner et al. p. 21).

The diversity in interpersonal communication theory and research has the potential for influencing instruction in interpersonal communication. In the seventies, Pearce (1977) identified three dominant approaches to teaching interpersonal communication: objective scientific, humanistic celebration, and humane scientific. Berryman and Weaver (1978) began their survey of the interpersonal course with the belief that there would be little consistency in the interpersonal course as it was taught at different colleges and universities. They concluded, however, that there was a surprising and unexpected consistency. Since their survey (which was never published), no current, systematic descriptive examination of the interpersonal communication course could be located in the communication literature.

The present survey provides a check-up of the interpersonal course in the communication curriculum at U.S. colleges and universities. The purpose of this study is to describe the structure of the interpersonal communication course, its role

in the communication curriculum, the instructional methods and materials used to teach the course and course content. In addition, the results of the current study are compared to the earlier study by Berryman and Weaver (1978) to determine if significant changes in the course.

METHODS

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was modeled after the questionnaires used by Berryman and Weaver (1978) and by Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990) in their recent survey of the basic communication course. The questionnaire contained sections on demographics, the introductory or lower level, and the advanced or upper level undergraduate courses. The 48-item questionnaire included both open and closed ended questions designed to examine course characteristics, curricular concerns, instructional methods, and course content and materials.

Sample

Seven-hundred-seventeen questionnaires were mailed to speech communication and communication departments listed in the *1991-92 Speech Communication Association Directory*. Departments that identified themselves in terms of theatre, speech pathology, mass communication, or other ways that distinguished themselves from communication were excluded from the sample. Two-hundred thirty-six questionnaires were returned providing a response rate of 33%. Although the response rate is lower than desired, it is comparable to the rate Hay (1992) reported in a survey of national trends in assessment (29%) and Gibson et al. (1990) reported in the

latest national survey of the basic course (28%). The length and complexity of the questionnaire may account for the lower than desired response rate.

The respondents, however, approximate a representative cross section of U.S. colleges and universities. Responding schools ranged from those with enrollments below 5,000 (53.3%, n=123) to those between 5,000 and 15,000 (29.1%, n=67) to those over 15,000 (17.3%, n=40). This size breakdown is similar to that found in Hay's (1992) survey. Sixty percent were public institutions, and 39.9% were private and religious institutions. Gibson et al. (1990) found a similar breakdown of school type in their national survey of the basic course with 65% public and 32% private or church related. The percentage of public versus private within the communication field appears slightly higher on the public side when compared to U.S. Department of Education numbers which suggest 52% of U.S. colleges and universities are public (cited in Hay, 1992, p. 250).

The respondents also approximate the distribution of communication and speech communication departments across the four geographical regions. Of the 717 departments identified in the directory, 34% were in the Central region, 28% were in the Southern region, and Western and Eastern both had 19%. The regional distribution of the survey respondents was 37% from the Central region, 24% from the Western region, 20% from the Southern region, and 19% from the Eastern region.

RESULTS

The Introductory Interpersonal Communication Course General Characteristics

The majority of schools (67.8%) offer only one interpersonal course, 22.3% offer 2 different courses, and 10% offer 3 or more different interpersonal communication courses. Most schools (46.3%) offer only one section of the introductory interpersonal course, 35.4% offer 2-5 sections, 11.5% offer 6-10 sections, and 6.8% offer 11 or more. The introductory course is most commonly worth 3 credits at most schools (85%). Enrollments in the basic interpersonal course during the last five years were found to have increased at 57.5% of the responding schools, remained stable at 37.3%, and declined at only 5.2%. Like the basic communication course which was found to have steady or increasing enrollments at 92% of reporting institutions (Gibson, et al., p. 238), the interpersonal communication course appears strong and healthy.

At most colleges and universities (63.7%), the introductory interpersonal communication course and the "basic" course (defined as a general education communication course required of most/all students) are totally distinct, while at 25.9% of the responding institutions, interpersonal is an option within the basic course offerings, and at 10.4% the basic course is the introductory interpersonal communication course. This last finding conflicts with the finding of Gibson et al. (1990) that only 4% of basic courses follow an interpersonal orientation. The introductory course is required of communication majors by 50% of the responding schools, offered as an elective to communication majors at 37%, serves as a general elective to all majors at 64%, and is required of non-communication majors at 25%. A total of 15 different majors or pro-

grams were mentioned by respondents as requiring the introductory interpersonal communication course, ranging from accounting to engineering. The most frequent non-communication majors required to take the course (in rank order) include: education, nursing, business, criminal justice, sociology and social work.

Students in the introductory interpersonal communication course are most likely to be taught by full time faculty at 86% of the responding institutions, while 7.3% will have part-time instructors and 6.7% will have graduate student instructors. These findings are similar to those of Gibson et al. who report the basic course is most likely taught by full-time regular faculty members (p. 253). Although the majority of responding institutions (67.4%) report that instructors experience a great deal of autonomy in their courses, many institutions (45.6%) also report that there is a high level of consistency between and among sections. The finding that most institutions offer fewer than five sections of the introductory interpersonal communication course would appear to explain the levels of consistency and autonomy in teaching the course.

Most sections of the introductory course (85.4%) follow a small independent class format, 10% a mass lecture/discussion format, and only 4.7% are strictly mass lecture. Consistent with the results on class format, small class size appears to be the norm with 51.5% of the respondents indicating section size between 23-30 students, 35.7% indicated class sizes of fewer than 23 students per section, and only 13% enrolling 30 or more students per section. Unlike the basic communication course where class sizes of 30 plus were reported by 70% of schools (Gibson et al., p. 237), sections of the interpersonal course remain relatively small. Respondents indicated the introductory course is usually taught from a combined humanistic/social science approach (62.5%) with 19.3% following a social science approach, and 18.2% a humanistic approach.

Instructional Practices

An emphasis on theory and conceptual learning outweighs a concern for performance/skills development at 46.6% of responding schools. The most common ratio of instructional time devoted to theory versus performance/skills indicated by respondents was 70/30 (26.4%) followed by 50/50 (22.3%), 60/40 (20.2%), 40/60 (17.6%) and 30/70 (13.5%). By contrast, a 40/60 theory/performance ratio was reported by 52% of basic course respondents (Gibson et al., p. 242). An emphasis on theory and concepts over performance in the interpersonal communication course is also reflected in the finding that at 49.2% of responding institutions, students grades are based on a 70/30 ratio of mastery of content versus skill development. Respondents indicated that on average, exams accounted for 44% of a student's grade, while papers would account for 24%, class participation 13%, performances 12%, journals 6%, and other activities 2% of a student's grade. When compared with the basic communication course, students in the interpersonal course are evaluated more on their theory-conceptual learning while 61% of grades of basic course students is based on performance, speeches, discussion, etc. (Gibson et al., p. 244).

Respondents were presented with a list of 15 commonly used instructional methods and materials and asked to indicate the 7 that were most frequently used in teaching the introductory course. Table 1 presents the top 7 methods, their frequency and percentage of use. The most common types of performance opportunities offered to students included role playing, group discussions, exercises, games and labs, informal and mock-job interviews and dyad discussions, reports and presentations, and participation in simulations.

Table 1
Instructional methods and Materials
Introductory Interpersonal Course

	Frequency Percentage	
discussion	175	92%
lecture	167	88%
role play	130	68%
handouts	120	63%
films/video	112	59%
term papers	100	53%
simulations	92	48%

Course Texts and Contents

Respondents were asked to indicate the textbook used in the introductory interpersonal communication course. A total of 56 titles were listed by respondents. Table 2 presents the top-ten choices listed by respondents.

Respondents were also asked if they used a reader or supplemental text in the introductory course. While the majority did not (66.8%), of those who did 17% used an instructor compiled collection of readings, and 16% used a published reader. The only published reader to be mentioned by more than two respondents was John Stewart's *Bridges Not Walls*, which was listed by 17 respondents.

Respondents were provided with a listing of 38 topic areas compiled from the tables of contents of recent interpersonal communication texts and common to interpersonal communication courses. They were asked to indicate 10 of these topics which would receive a significant amount of instructional time in the introductory course. Table 3 lists the top ten topics and their frequency.

Table 2
Top Texts in the Introductory Course
author/title/publisher

Frequency	author/title/publisher
40	Ronald Adler and Neil Towne, <i>Looking Out Looking In</i> , 6th ed., Fort Worth, Tx: Holt Rinehard and Winston, 1990.
22	Joseph DeVito, <i>The Interpersonal Communication Book</i> , 5th ed., NY: Harper and Row, 1989.
17	Ronald Alder, Lawrence Rosenfeld, and Neil Towne, <i>Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication</i> , 4th ed., NY: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1989.
15	John Stewart, <i>Bridges Not Walls: A Book About Interpersonal Communication</i> , 5th ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 1990.
13	Sarah Trenholm and Arthur Jensen. <i>Interpersonal Communication</i> . Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1988.
8	Joseph DeVito, <i>Messages: Building Interpersonal Communication Skills</i> : New York: Harper and Row, 1990.
8	Mark Knapp, <i>Interpersonal Communication in Human Relationships</i> . Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1983.
8	Rudolph Verderber and Kathleen Verderber. <i>Inter-Act: Using Interpersonal Communication Skills</i> , 5th Ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1989.
7	John Stewart and Gary D'Angelo, <i>Together: Communication Interpersonally</i> , 3rd ed., new York: Random House, 1988.
6	Thomas Mader and Diane Mader, <i>Understanding One Another</i> . Dubuque, IA: W. C., Brown, 1990.

Note: A total of 56 titles were provided by respondents.
 Top 5 titles account for almost 50% of the market.

Table 3
Top 10 Topics in Introductory Course

	Frequency
self-concept	138
nonverbal	138
self-disclosure	135
perception	130
listening	128
conflict	122
language	110
relational development	100
emotions	72
person perception	70

Respondents were also asked to respond to the following question: "In your judgment, what are 5 of the best theories or conceptual approaches students should be familiar with if they are to understand interpersonal communication?" Table 4 presents the responses and the frequency of response for the 10 most frequently listed theories or approaches provided by respondents. Interestingly, when provided with a list of topics and asked to identify those which receive a significant amount of instructional time, respondents ranked Social Exchange Theory 16th, yet it ranked first in terms of the best theories/approaches.

These results suggest the introductory interpersonal communication course is a common offering at responding institutions, and is either as a requirement or elective at 87% of responding schools. The interpersonal course is distinct from the basic course and taught primarily by full time faculty who experience a great deal of consistency and

Table 4
Top 12 Theories/Approaches in the Introductory Course

	Frequency
social exchange theory	34
social penetration theory	30
uncertainty reduction theory	24
rules theory	24
perception/person perception/constructivism	20
attribution theory	16
self-disclosure	14
pragmatics of interpersonal	14
transactional analysis	11
symbolic interaction	10
needs/motivation	10
nonverbal communication	10

autonomy in their teaching. Theory and mastery of content appears to be more important than performance/skill development in terms of instructional time and the determination of student grades. The top five (5) texts account for roughly 45% of the market for introductory interpersonal communication courses.

The Advanced Interpersonal Communication Course Characteristics

In addition, questions regarding the introductory course, the third section of the questionnaire focused on advanced undergraduate coursework in interpersonal. A total of 58 respondents (24.5% of the total) offered advanced coursework

in interpersonal communication. Not surprising, introductory courses are generally taught at the freshman or sophomore levels while the advanced courses are taught at the upper division level. The advanced course is required for communication majors by only 23.6% of the schools which offer it, is offered as a communication elective at 60%, serves as an elective to all majors at 56.3%, and only 5.5% list it as a requirement for non-communication majors. At most institutions, the advanced course is considered to be more in-depth and theory oriented when compared to the introductory course which is survey oriented and more focused on skill development.

Instructional Methods and Materials

Respondents were provided with a list of 15 instructional methods and materials and asked to indicate the 7 that were most frequently employed in teaching the advanced course. Table 5 presents the frequency and percentage of use. When compared with the methods used in the introductory course, lectures, term papers, and research articles become more important while more experiential methods are less frequently used.

Table 5
Instructional Methods and Materials
Advanced Interpersonal Communication

	Frequency Percentage	
lectures	54	85%
discussion	50	79%
term papers	44	70%
research articles	41	65%
handouts	36	57%
film/video	25	40%
role play	22	35%

Course Texts and Contents

Respondents were asked to list the textbook(s) used in the advanced course. Table 6 presents the top choices listed by respondents. Eight text were listed by two or more respondents and 30 additional titles were provided.

As with the introductory course, most instructors in the advanced course (55%) do not to use a reader as a supplemental text. Of those who do, 34% compile the reader them-

Table 6
Top Texts for Advanced Interpersonal Communication

Frequency	author/title/publisher
9	Mark Knapp, <i>Interpersonal Communication in Human Relationships</i> . Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1984.
4	William Wilmot, <i>Dyadic Communication</i> 2nd Ed., Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1980.
3	Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin and Don Jackson. <i>Pragmatics of Interpersonal Communication</i> . New York: W.W. Norton. 1967.
3	Deborah Tannen, <i>You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation</i> . New York: Morrow, 1990.
3	Theodore Grove, <i>Dyadic Interactions</i> , Dubuque, IA: W. C. Brown, 1991.
2	Deborah Tannen, <i>That's Not What I Meant</i> , New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1986.
2	John Stewart, Ed., <i>Bridges Not Walls: A Book About Interpersonal Communication</i> , 5th ed., New York: McGraw Hill, 1990.
2	Michael Roloff and Gerald Miller Eds., <i>Interpersonal Processes: New Directions in Communication Research</i> , Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987.

Table 7
Top 10 Topics in Advanced Interpersonal

	Frequency
relational development	34
social exchange theory	31
conflict	29
intimate relationships	26
uncertainty reduction theory	25
social penetration theory	25
self-disclosure	23
rules theory	19
person perception	18
self-concept	18

selves, and 10.7% use a published reader, but no published reader was mentioned by more than one respondent.

Respondents were provided with a list of 38 topic areas related to interpersonal communication and asked to indicate 10 that would receive a significant amount of instructional time. Table 7 presents the results. These results, when compared with Table 3, tend to bear out the observation that the advanced course is more theory oriented when compared to the introductory course.

Finally, respondents were asked: "In your judgment, what are the 5 theories or conceptual approaches that students should be familiar with after having completed an advanced course in interpersonal communication?" Table 8 presents the responses provided and their frequency of mention. Clearly, theory occupies a central place in the advanced interpersonal communication course. This orientation is further clarified

Table 8
Top Theories/Approaches in the Advanced Course

	Frequency
social exchange theory	10
social penetration theory	9
rules theory	9
attribution theory	8
uncertainty reduction theory	8
relational development	7
coordinated management of meaning	5
symbolic interaction	4
Duck's relational typology	3
pragmatics of communication	
ala Watzlawick et al.	3
constructivism	3

when the key theories are compared with the topics reported in Table 7. A further comparison with the key theories in the introductory course (Table 4), however, indicates a close relationship between the key theories at both levels.

The advanced course in interpersonal communication is offered at approximately 25% of responding institutions, and is less likely to be required of majors than the introductory level course. It is a course which places less emphasis on performance or skill development in terms of instructional methods, materials, and course content when compared with the introductory course.

DISCUSSION

These results provide a description of the current status of the introductory and advanced interpersonal communication courses at U.S. colleges and universities. Since a previous unpublished survey of the interpersonal communication course exists (Berryman and Weaver, 1978), it is possible to compare the present state of the course with the earlier results in terms of course structure, instructional methods and materials, and course texts and content.

In general, if the interpersonal communication course was gaining a foothold at U.S. colleges and universities in 1978, the results of the present survey suggest that the course is well established and flourishing. The percentage of schools not offering coursework in interpersonal decreased from 39% in 1978 to only 16% in 1991. Currently, 83.5% of responding schools offer introductory and/or advanced coursework in interpersonal communication (57% introductory only, 24% introductory and advanced, 2.5% advanced only).

The interpersonal course was most frequently taught at the freshman level in 1978 (61.9%) and remains so in 1991 (54% at the freshman level, 46.6% at the sophomore level). It continues to be most frequently offered as a 3 credit course. The present study found that undergraduate interpersonal communication courses run the range from the freshman to senior level, and that at 32% of responding schools, two or more course are offered. The interpersonal course was, and is increasingly taught primarily by full time faculty (80% in 1978, 86.6% in 1991); the present study notes a decreased use of part-time and graduate student instructors in the course.

It is not possible to directly compare the audiences taking the interpersonal course (whether as a requirement or elective) given the results reported in the 1978 study. However, Berryman & Weaver found that 36.6% of "arts and sciences" students were required to take the course as well as several other majors (1978, p.5). The current survey found the intro-

ductory interpersonal course to be required of 50% of communication majors and required of other majors at 25% of the responding schools. The present study found the most frequent majors to require the interpersonal course are, consistent with the 1978 study, education followed by nursing and health related fields, business, sociology-social work, and criminal justice. The interpersonal communication course appears to be solid a part of the communication curriculum as well as an elective or required course by other disciplines.

The course format used in 1991 is similar to that found in 1978. Small independent section were the norm in 1978 (79%) and have increased in popularity in 1991 (85.4%). The course was and is increasingly taught in small sections of between 18 and 30 students (64.8% in 1978 and 79.8% in 1991). The large lecture format was unpopular in 1978 (only 2.5%), and is employed by only 4.7% of respondents in 1991.

The most frequent philosophy or approach to the course in 1978 was a humanistic/social scientific combination (50%), such a combined approach has grown in popularity to 62.5% of the present respondents indicating a combined humanistic/social scientific approach. Interestingly, the present study found a decrease in the humanistic approach (from 25.5% in 1978 to 18.2% in 1991) and an increase in the social scientific approach (10.1% in 1978 to 19.3%).

In examining the relative importance of theory to performance and skill development, Berryman and Weaver found a 50/50 ratio of theory to performance to be the most frequent while the present study found a 70/30 ratio to be most frequent. There appears to be a shift away from performance and skills development toward theory and mastery of content. In addition, student grades are increasingly being based on mastery of content versus performance and skill development. In 1978 a 60/40 ratio was most frequent. In 1991, a 70/30 ratio was twice as frequent as the 60/40 ratio (49.2% in 1991 vs. 22.8% in 1978). This is perhaps explained by the difficulty of measuring and evaluating student interpersonal performance

and skill development. As in 1978, the written exam continues to be the most widely used grading method accounting for 44% of the average student's grade in the 1991 interpersonal communication course.

Table 9 compares the top instructional material and methods used in 1978 with those used in 1991. The comparison is not exact because different lists were used in the 1978 and 1991 studies.

In terms of course contents and materials, some features have changed while some have remained consistent. Table 10 compares topics covered in the interpersonal course in 1978 with those indicated in 1991.

Table 9
Rank Order Comparison
of Instructional Methods and Materials

1978	1991
handouts	discussions
exams	lectures
exercises	role play
syllabi	handouts
supplemental readings	films/videos
dyadic encounters	term papers
simulations	simulations
worksheets	journals
journals	case studies
critique sheets	field studies

Note: The above comparison is qualified in that the methods and materials provided to respondents in the 1978 and 1991 were similar but not exactly the same.

Table 10
Rank Order Comparison of Top Ten Topics, 1978/1991

1978	1991
verbal	self-concept
nonverbal	nonverbal
feedback	self-disclosure
self concept	perception
comm barriers	listening
listening	conflict
perception	language
self-disclosure	relational development
empathy	emotions

Note: The above comparison should be qualified in that respondents were not presented with the same list of topics in 1991 as in 1978.

In examining textbooks reported in use in 1978 with those used in 1991, a great deal of consistency is found. The top text in 1978 was *Looking Out/Looking In* by Adler and Towne. It continues to be the number one text in 1991. DeVito's *The Interpersonal Communication Book* was ranked third in 1978 and second in 1991. *Bridges Not Walls* was ranked fourth in 1978 and remained in that position in 1991.

In terms of growth in the interpersonal communication course, in 1978 57.5% of respondents reported gains in enrollment with 37.5% suggesting enrollment was maintaining. In 1991, 57.5% of respondents reported increased enrollment over the last 5 years while 37.3% reported enrollments remaining the same. As in 1978, only 5% of responding schools reported declining enrollments. No comparison of advanced courses is possible given the 1978 survey did not distinguish introductory and advanced. Berryman and Weaver did note

that "some respondents offered interpersonal coursework at more than 1 level (p. 5). The present study found at least 24.5% of responding institutions offer both introductory and advanced interpersonal communication courses. Indeed, the interpersonal communication course is alive, well, and thriving and U.S. colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

The introductory and advanced courses in interpersonal communication are alive and well at U.S. colleges and universities. A student enrolling in an introductory level interpersonal course will most likely take the course as a freshman, be taught by a full time faculty member in a small independent class, experience a theory oriented course and be evaluated on the basis mastery of content, and read one of five popular texts. A student enrolled in the advanced course would most likely be taking the course as either a communication requirement or elective, receive an intensive examination of interpersonal communication theories, and be exposed to more lectures, research articles, and term papers. The growth in enrollments experienced by most responding institutions, the increasing number of institutions offering more than one course, and the decrease in the number of schools not offering interpersonal coursework confirms the observation of Bochner et al. (1991) that interpersonal communication truly is an intoxicating subject.

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