A Commentary: The Basic Communication Course, General Education and Assessment

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This commentary provides ammunition to arm our communication colleagues on campuses where the issue of including the basic communication course is being debated. This is an important issue on all campuses because of pressures from accrediting agencies to include specific goals related to oral communication competence. The issue is also important because there tends to be resistance from the body politick on campus to including specific courses in oral communication. This commentary suggests important communication skills recognized in a body of literature that can be taught in basic communication courses. An ancillary to the identification of specific goals in these five skill areas is the importance of reinforcing specific communication competencies in other courses throughout the individual student's undergraduate education. Therefore, we also suggest the importance of a Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) program.

"IN THE BEGINNING" — A RATIONALE

Basic communication course program general education program. The ability for students to learn competent commu-

nication skills to help them in diverse situations should be one of the central goals of every general education program. The difficulty arises from our inability to identify and agree upon specific communication skills for undergraduate students in the body of communication research and scholarship. This is clearly evidenced in basic course programs across the country when some programs emphasize public speaking, others emphasize the hybrid or blend communication course, some focus on interpersonal communication, others teach communication theory, some basic course programs integrate both writing and speaking skills, while still others use their basic communication course program to teach rhetorical theory with little communication skill training.

Our inability to define these essential communication competencies leads to integration problems for communication programs seeking inclusion of a basic course in a general education program. The necessity of identifying and then teaching appropriate communication competencies to students is the central role for faculty interested in beginning communication education. Shamefully, faculty frequently rely on their own views of what communication skills should be taught undergraduates, with little regard to existing results in the literature. Although faculty views need to be incorporated into any basic course program, results of research exist, or can be completed, to guide the selection of specific skills needed by undergraduate students before graduation.

Logical questions from any general education committee on any campus is, "What skills should undergraduate students learn in an oral communication general education requirement?" *and* "How were these skills identified?" How these questions are answered has implications for basic courses, a student's general education program, and for assessment of communication competence to meet accrediting agency demands.

This commentary includes a perspective on the issue of what should be taught in beginning oral communication skill

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courses. First, we establish a foundation by discussing the requirements of our accrediting agencies. Second, we explain the skills that are identified through research published in communication journals and beyond. Finally, we discuss the benefits of such a program to enhancing students' abilities to communicate throughout their undergraduate studies and the logical benefit to the assessment of communication skill development.

ACCREDITING AGENCIES ON ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

All college and university accrediting agencies in the United States emphasize oral communication skills as central to a bonifide general education. The importance of teaching basic communication skills *beyond or in addition to* public speaking is reiterated in all national college and university accrediting agencies (Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, New England Association of Colleges and Schools, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). The skills highlighted in their reports and guidelines include interpersonal (relational) communication skills, group decision making and leadership skills, listening skills, and presentational (public speaking skills). Each accrediting agency articulates a clear position regarding the importance of communication in a student's undergraduate education.

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (1994) suggested, "If a general education program is based on cognitive experiences, it will typically describe its programs in terms of the college-level experiences that engender such competencies as: capabilities in reading, writing, speaking, listening" (p. 21). The emphasis in speaking and listening by North Central provides clear guidance regarding the types of

communication skills undergraduate students need. Simply stated, students need to learn to speak competently and listen effectively in a variety of communication situations.

The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (1994) guidelines stated, "General education introduces students to the content and methodology of the major areas of knowledge — the humanities, the fine arts, the natural sciences — and helps them to develop the mental skills that will make them more effective learners. ... Programs of study ... must contain a recognizable body of instruction in program-related areas of 1) communication, 2) computation, and 3) human relationships" (p. 57). The Northwest Association's focus on communication skills and skills in human relations provide additional import to the inclusion of communication skills training in general education.

The other three accrediting agencies reiterate the emphasis on communication skill training in a student's undergraduate education. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (1992) indicated that, "Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English" (p. 12). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1992) concluded, "Within this core [of general education courses], or in addition to it, the institution must provide components designed to ensure competence in reading, writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills" (p. 24). Finally, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1994) pointed out, "Programs and courses which develop general intellectual skills such as the ability to form independent judgment, to weigh values, to understand fundamental theory, and to interact effectively in a culturally diverse world" (p. 4). This emphasis on communication skills is central to all college and university accrediting agencies in the United States. Our focus on how students may be trained in communication in pursuit of education is germane and timely.

The emphasis on oral communication skill development by each accrediting agency highlights an important problem facing basic course directors and communication educators of beginning communication programs. The problem or challenge is for communication faculty to develop programs in oral communication skills where students learn necessary skills and receive helpful assessment of these skills throughout their undergraduate educational careers.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH ON COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The research literature about communication education is substantial and consistent (Vangelista & Daly, 1989; Rubin, Graham & Mignerey, 1990). Studies have repeatedly found that "giving information and making decisions with another person" (interpersonal communication) and "providing information to groups of individuals" (group communication and public speaking) are the most important self-identified skills for students. The focus on communication be central to any general education. Seiler (1993) concluded, "In fact, surveys of alumni (DiSalvo, 1980; Pearson, Sorenson & Nelson, 1981) have consistently found that interpersonal communication, giving information and making decisions with another person, or providing information to groups of individuals to be more important than strictly public skills" (p. 51).

Interestingly, the notion that beginning communication courses, those founded on the principles of teaching applicable communication skills, should be broad in nature and not too context specific in scope is not new. Over thirty years ago, Dedmon (1965) wrote, "Our traditional approaches have blinded us to the real objective of the required first [basic] course: To teach a general education course in oral communication" (p. 125).

SPECIFIC SKILLS

As mentioned earlier, our inability as communication scholars and educators to identify specific communication competencies needed for undergraduate students is a problem. It has left the door open for interpretation by others in other disciplines to determine the contents and goals of basic communication instruction (Hildebrandt, et al., 1982). Communication educators are the experts in skill instruction and training. Our discipline needs to take hold of this important issue and make some determinations about the essential nature of the beginning communication course.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1994), in a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, summarized a set of seven communication competencies for communication skills development. These included situational appropriateness, appropriate involvement and responsiveness, adaptability and flexibility in communication with others, clarity in communicating with others, efficiency of communication, goal accomplishment, and politeness (pp. 132-133).

In a DELPHI study reported by Hugenberg, Robinson and Owens (1982), employers and communication educators were asked to identify vital communication skills for college graduates. The top ten skills include: giving clear directions, listening well, listening to what the other person is really saying and feeling, establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with others, articulating accurately your position, collecting information before drawing conclusions, selecting the proper way to communicate a message to others, dealing with communication anxiety, identifying a logical format for organizing and presenting information to others, and communicating information upward and downward competently in the organization.

These results have been corroborated by the College Placement Service whose 1993 report revealed that in addition to one's proficiency in a field of study, employers most highly value oral communication and interpersonal skills, followed by demonstrated teamwork and analytical skills (p. 3). Also, Curtis, Windsor and Stephens (1989) identified the top skills which young people need to become managers. Their survey of over one thousand personnel managers isolated these communication skills: work well with others one-on-one, gather accurate groups, listen effectively, and give effective feedback. The importance of good communication skills for job applicants is reported in studies prepared by business organizations, communication scholars, and the United States Government.

In another attempt to identify competencies needed by college graduates, Career Services at Bowling Green State University (1995) identified a six page list of learned and transferable skills. These skills include: planning and organizational skills, oral and written communication skills, decision making skills, leadership skills, management skills, supervisory skills, critical thinking skills, problemsolving skills, conflict resolution skills, teamwork and teambuilding skills, ethics and tolerance skills, personal and professional management skills, information management skills, design and planning skills, research and investigation skills, communication skills, human relations and interpersonal skills, management and administrative skills, valuing skills, and personal and career development skills. Each of these skills areas is further delineated with specific tasks and/or activities students currently do or should learn to do to be competitive in today's job market and for their ongoing career development. One can easily identify the skills from this list routinely taught in basic communication courses.

These studies and reports taken together suggest that the communication skills which undergraduate students need to learn may be grouped into five, sometimes obviously overlap-

ping, skill areas. These skill areas are developed later in this article into specific objectives related to student communication competencies. The skill areas are:

1. Listening Skills

2. Interpersonal Communication Skills

3. Group Communication Skills

4. Presentational Speaking (Public Speaking) Skills

5. Strategies for Being A Competent Communicator

These skill clusters, determined through analysis of available literature add impetus to the need for inclusion of oral communication skill training in general education.

STUDENT ORAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES: RECOMMENDATIONS

By further reviewing the literature and available instructional materials in communication, communication faculty can identify specific skills which ought to be included in any general education program. These skills are within the normal teaching purview of communication faculty; they are discrete and lend themselves to progress and outcome-based assessment; and they can be explained to non-communication instructors so as to enable faculty to monitor whether and how students in upper-level courses continue to use them, or not.

Below are a series of recommended student oral communication competencies, taken from the skills noted in the literature, to include in an oral communication requirement within a general education program. The competencies may be attained at one level in a basic communication course and later, through a Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) program, at a higher level as the student nears graduation.

I.   Listening

    1.   Students can overcome barriers to effective listening.

    2.   Students can perform cognitive listening skills.

    3.   Students can perform expressive listening skills.

    4.   Students can perform transactional listening skills.

II.   Interpersonal Communication

    1.   Students can communicate specific levels of trust in their interpersonal communication.

    2.   Students understand the appropriate use power in their interpersonal communication.

    3.   Students can self-disclose appropriately.

    4.   Students understand the role of attraction in their interpersonal relationships.

    5.   Students know the skills and strategies for initiating effective interpersonal relationships with others.

    6.   Students know the skills and strategies for maintaining effective interpersonal relationships.

    7.   Students know the skills and strategies for terminating interpersonal relationships.

    8.   Students can exhibit the skills and strategies for conflict management.

III. Group Communication

    1.   Students can demonstrate appropriate leadership skills in a group.

    2.   Students can evidence appropriate member roles in a group.

3.   Students can demonstrate a variety of decision-making strategies.

4.   Students can participate in constructive conflict resolution.

5.   Students can express their ideas clearly to the group.

6.   Students listen to all group members.

IV.   Presentational Speaking (Public Speaking)

1.   Students can assess her or his listeners and use that assessment in preparing a speech.

2.   Students can appropriately organize a speech.

3.   Students can begin a speech appropriately.

4.   Students can effectively conclude a speech.

5.   Students can use transitions when delivering a speech.

6.   Students can appropriately use supporting materials during a speech.

7.   Students can prepare a competent informative speech.

8.   Students can prepare a competent persuasive speech.

9.   Students can deliver a speech competently.

10.   Students can use visual aids competently during a speech.

V.   Strategic Communication Skills

1.   Students can manage the communication context competently.

2.   Students can use the strategies of persuasive communication competently.

3. Students can use nonverbal communication appropriate to her or his message and the situation.

4. Students use appropriate strategies understand the verbal and nonverbal messages.

5. Students use appropriate strategies remember her or his message.

6. Students use appropriate verbal communication strategies to accomplish the goals of communication.

In developing arguments for the inclusion of an oral communication requirement in general education, it might be beneficial also to tie the associated skills taught in basic courses to other goals of a general education program. For example, students in basic communication courses also might learn writing skills through analysis and outlining, or they learn critical thinking through analyzing information for speeches or listening to assess another student's assignment, or students learn research and library skills by conducting searches for information to complete assignments.

ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: EXAMINING THE MYTHS

One myth needs to be dispelled: we *"naturally" communicate well through speaking and hearing.* This commonly-held, but false, belief takes root because we start talking almost before we start walking: hence, one may think that effective communication through talking is "easier than walking," certainly easier than writing. It is not.

Second, there is no physical artifact of the oral/aural communication process. Speaking and listening are effervescent; and, while harder to do well (in the absence of written

correspondence), one's impression is the contrary. Said differently, written communication seems more difficult to do well because the message is available for public examination and reflective study. One's written work is designated, engineered, created, edited, and documented. One's oral expressions, though, must be arrived at in the mind. If written communication is like chess, oral communication is like chess without board or pieces.

It is not difficult to find a corresponding flaw in the suggestion that to improve a person's oral/aural communication competence, one simply needs to be encouraged to "do it more," to engage in more communication-type activities. That flaw is that practice in the absence of instruction tends to produce not competence, but well-practiced incompetence. In other words, practicing the wrong skills is just that, practicing the wrong skills.

THE FOUNDATION OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: THE BASIC COURSE

To set the stage for the ongoing communication skill development in students, the General Education Program must establish solid foundations during the first year of college. Seiler (1993) wrote, "Because of the diversified nature and multi-plural society we are living in, the hybrid course has the flexibility and structure to adapt to change better than any of the other introductory speech communication courses" (p. 52). If we can agree that the interpersonal, group, listening, public speaking and strategic communication skills noted earlier are important, the hybrid or blend communication course introduces students to specific communication competencies in each skill cluster.

The basic communication course sets the all-important academic and skill foundation for students to develop their communication skills. In setting this foundation during the

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student's first year of academic life, assignments in other courses (other general education courses, courses in a student's major or minor, additional communication courses, etc.) can be used to further develop a student's communication competence. These additional communication assignments in follow-up courses are best utilized after specific communication skill training. This foundation must be established by the best qualified faculty with specific training in communication skill development and evaluation. In establishing these foundational skills in a basic communication course, faculty in more advanced (intermediate) courses in other departments can reinforce these competencies instead of having to try to teach them at the expense of teaching the content of their own courses.

COMMUNICATION ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The second part of an oral communication component in the general education is a communication across the curriculum program (Cronin & Glenn, 1991; Palmerton, 1991; Weiss, 1988). This element of the program relies heavily on the use of basic communication course as the foundation for communication skill development.

In identifying competent communication as a specific set of skills, it is important to integrate communication skill training throughout the student's college experience — similar to the reinforcement of writing skills intertwined in a writing across the curriculum program. With a strong foundation of oral communication skill competencies *and* appropriate training of faculty across the university, the quality of our students' communication will increase in recognizable ways. By teaching a basic course incorporating fundamental communication competencies during a student's first year, they will be better able to practice appropriate skills and

receive informed feedback from trained faculty in approved intermediate and upper-level courses — regardless of major.

In discussing a communication across the curriculum program, Davilla, West and Yoder (1993) wrote, "The basic communication course in communication serves as a template for the development of a CAC [Communication Across the Curriculum] program. ... The CAC continues, expands, and embellishes the knowledge and skills learned in the basic communication course. This model works best when the basic course is a prerequisite for other CI [Communication Instruction] courses. Students learn the basic skills and knowledge from communication faculty and then continue to practice those skills in a variety of settings" (p. 86).

A communication faculty should stand ready to provide the necessary training for faculty across the campus who want to participate in a communication across the curriculum program. The skills in evaluating specific communication competencies are identifiable and can be taught. This training program establishes the importance of reinforcing the appropriate competence or correcting communication weaknesses where expected student competence levels are not achieved.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES: A TEST-OUT ALTERNATIVE

With an identifiable set of communication competencies and body of knowledge, students can demonstrate an acceptable mastery of the communication competency knowledge base by passing a proficiency test. They can also demonstrate a mastery of the oral communication skills noted above through a series of communication assignments. If students demonstrate sufficient understanding of the course content and possess acceptable levels of the oral communication competencies, they should proceed to upper-level coursework to continue the development of their communication skills.

ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

A two-phase communication requirement as part of general education permits a logical assessment plan to be developed. Assessment of communication skills is currently of major importance on campuses across the country and in the research published (Hay, 1992; Angelo & Cross, 1993; Banta, *et al.,* 1993; Jones, 1993; Christ, 1994). Student competencies can be assessed at the beginning and end of the basic communication course. The initial assessment established the students' starting points, the end-of-course assessment highlights changes in students' competencies.

Based on the fact that communication competencies are reinforced throughout the student's undergraduate program through the CAC program, their communication competencies can be assessed again near graduation. Communication competence data for comparative assessment can be created easily. These data are important in demonstrating to accrediting agencies how the goals of the oral communication competence program are met by students.

The execution of student competence assessment is accomplished in two areas: at the student's completion of the basic communication course *and* as the student nears graduation. Assessment data collected at these points accomplishes two things. First, the assessment of students' communication competencies at the end of the basic course provides faculty with data to evaluate course goals, objectives, and instruction. These data can be accumulated in several different ways or in combination. Students can be administered pre- and post-tests using one of several valid and reliable measures (i.e., one or several versions of *The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension,* the *Willingness to Communicate Scale,* etc.)

A second way to accumulate assessment data in the basic course is to develop an assessment of student communication

competency performance by a jury of communication faculty. Tapes tracing student performances from the beginning to the end of the basic course can be used to demonstrate their improvement (hopefully) in specific competencies identified in course goals and objectives. Both sets of data provide baseline performance information for comparison with data collected as students near graduation.

As students progress through their other coursework, their communication performances in other courses as part of the CAC program are taped and kept, portfolio style, for assessment near graduation. The assignments are reviewed by a jury of communication faculty for ongoing communication competence development. These tapes provide evidence of student mastery of specific communication competencies. Finally, students can also take the same paper-and-pencil instruments administered during their enrollment in the basic course for comparison purposes. The comparison data offers additional documentation of communication competence development through the CAC program.

DISCUSSION

Hopefully this commentary reinforces the importance of instruction in the basic communication course in a student's education. We also believe that the competency areas and accompanying objectives, although soundly grounded in literature, might cause some discomfort and, perhaps, disagreement with basic course directors and instructors. However, there are compelling needs to identify a body of knowledge and a set of competencies that basic communication course programs can deliver and can be reinforced in a CAC program. This commentary serves as a starting point for the discussion of this issue within our discipline — whether it be at the department level or within the discipline as a whole.

Finally, this commentary provides basic course directors, fighting battles on their campus regarding the importance of oral communication skill training, with useful data and a starting point to develop a coherent argument or defense, whichever is necessary. Communication programs remain under careful scrutiny from within and outside the academy. Those of us interested in the basic course must be prepared to meet the scrutiny of accrediting agencies, legislators, boards of trustees, and faculty from across our campuses head on.

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