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An Idea For Restructuring the Basic Communication Course: A "Time as Needed" Approach¹

Donald D. Yoder

The basic course in communication is defined as the introductory first course that college students take in communication. It is most often a skills based course and frequently fulfills a university or college general education requirement. The hybrid communication course typically covers a variety of skills in a sampling of communication contexts, e.g., public speaking, group communication, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, and interviewing.

CHALLENGES

Recent challenges to the basic course in communication suggest that innovations are needed to change the course as it is currently delivered. Many schools and departments are requesting that the basic course be adapted to its majors. They contend that the course does not meet the specific needs of its majors or that the course is difficult to schedule given the increasing curricular demands within the major. In addition, revisions of General Education structures and foci may leave skill development isolated from other requirements.

¹ This article is a revision of a paper presented during the National Communication Association Convention, Chicago, 1997.

A second challenge to the basic course is the definition of the term "basic" which implies students learn "basic skills." In this context, the term "basic" has several interpretations. Some people define basic skills as remedial for unprepared entering students. Others conceptualize basic skills as those skills required to succeed in other college classes. Still others define basic skills as those assumed to be necessary for any college graduate to succeed in professional/career contexts.

A third challenge arises as many colleges and universities put increasing pressure to develop innovative course delivery methods which can save operating costs and increase efficiency. The traditional educational model based on a specified number of hours of classroom "seat time" is inefficient and costly. Basic courses face the dilemma between the need to increase the number of students per class for cost savings and the contradictory need to provide personal help and individual performance feedback and multiple opportunities for skill development.

RESTRUCTURING THE HYBRID COURSE

This article proposes a restructuring of the hybrid basic communication course. The suggested structure defines Basic Skills as "minimum skills required by a college graduate." It also assumes that these basic skills will be further developed in upper level courses, especially those in the student's major. Communication skills are contextually and transactionally determined, i.e., skill acquisition and performance require the interaction of others. In addition, communication competence involves the ability to choose an appropriate communicative act from a number of communication options. Thus, the development of communication skills also re-

quires a firm conceptual foundation as to their purpose and function in human interaction such that students can make informed decisions concerning their appropriateness in a given context. Therefore, the course assumes that skills cannot be learned by rote, nor can they be performed in isolation.

These assumptions mitigate the use of computer simulations or other non-human interactive technology as the sole means of teaching and evaluating communication skills. Delivery of the course must necessarily require "seat time" in an interactive classroom setting.

The necessity for communication skills in all professions and careers is well documented. These skills must be at a higher level of proficiency and sophistication than can be taught in high school classes. Typically, communication is taught in high school at the Sophomore level, often by non-communication professional, and almost universally as a public speaking class. The sophistication of the instruction, the scope of skills covered, the level of skills proficiency, and the maturity of the student are far below what are required by any career or profession, and often far below what is required in the college classroom. A university-educated person must have a sophisticated understanding of communication processes and the development of adult level communication skills that can apply to a variety of contexts.

This position assumes that students must see a connection between the classroom instruction and their potential future professions/careers. It also assumes that students have the maturity and experience to apply the skills to both their academic professional training and their work-related contexts. Instructors must also be able to apply the course material and skills to the non-classroom environment and to require a high level of competency. Many instructors and textbooks attempt to do this with promises that students will see the applica-

tion in their senior level course presentations or in their careers or in their marriages. Students often have difficulty appreciating the need for learning communication skills which are useful sometime in the distant future from their point of view. Indeed, when they do need the skills several semesters later, they have often forgotten what they were taught in the basic course.

Most students enroll in the basic communication course during their first year in college. Their immediate past experience is their high school relationships and their family environment. Many students spend their entire first year taking general education courses and do not take courses in their major until their sophomore or junior years. Such a structure mitigates the application of the course material to professional/career situations or to the problems encountered as students mature.

A difficulty in teaching students communication skills applicable to their careers and majors, therefore, is that many first year students do not have the experience or maturity to appreciate or apply the material to relevant contexts. For example, it is difficult to teach employment interviewing when students have no meaningful material to put on a resume and have no conception of the career that may await them. Similarly, public speaking skills and group communication skills become more meaningful when they can apply them directly to the assignments in their major courses.

A RESPONSIVE BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE

Therefore, this paper advocates a "time when needed" paradigm in which students take different units of the hybrid communication course when it has the

most meaning to their education and their personal/professional development. Each unit of the course would be taken in succeeding semesters or years. For example, they might enroll in the public speaking course in their sophomore year to prepare them for class presentations in major courses. Similarly, they might take the group communication unit in their junior year as they engage in group and team projects in other courses. The student may take the interpersonal and interviewing unit when they are seniors so they can prepare for the employment interviews they will face upon graduation. Each college, school, or department might recommend a different sequence based on the needs of their specific students and programs. The students' chances of developing communication competence are enhanced when they can continue to practice the skills taught in the basic course in immediate applications to courses in their major.

To meet the assumptions of the "time when needed" approach, the course could be redesigned to offer the skills in three 1-credit hour units. Three units (courses) could be designed, each covering one-third of the course material.

Course 1 — Public Speaking. This unit (course) would include the necessary skills for developing and performing a speech to inform and a speech to persuade including listening, organization, supporting materials, reasoning and critical thinking, visual aids, and delivery. Assignments: two 5-7 minute speeches, one exam.

Course 2 — Group Decision Making. This Unit (course) incorporates the necessary skills for leading and participating in group decision making including listening, group processes, group roles, leadership,

power, conflict management, and decision making processes. Assignments: one group project (8 groups of five students) requiring a written paper and a class presentation; one exam.

Course 3 — Interviewing and Interpersonal Communication. This unit (course) includes the necessary skills for managing interpersonal relationships and employment interviewing including person perception, self image, listening, impression management, developing interview questions and guides, EEOC guidelines, resume writing, and interviewing strategies. Assignments: professional resume, 5-7 minute employment interview, one exam.

Each course would be taught in a schedule equaling one-third of the term, e.g., for a fifteen week semester, each course would be given in a five week schedule. This arrangement should make it possible to schedule the basic course with little impact on the scheduling demands of other departments, schools, or majors. In addition, the students would have ten weeks in which they would not attend the course.

These courses would be taken in a sequence that best fit the needs of the student, e.g., sophomores would take Course 1; Juniors would take Course 2; Seniors would take Course 3. Students could opt to take more than one course per term, giving maximum scheduling flexibility. The revision of the course as a series of one-credit courses, delivers essentially the same course to the same number of students with each course having the same number of contact hours. It makes maximum use of class time by allowing different numbers of student enrollment in each unit.

Table 1
Course Structure

Current Structure to deliver course to 720 students per semester:

One 15-week 3-credit course

2250 minutes of "seat time" per course per term

30 sections of 24 students each

30 classrooms

30 instructors @\$2000 = \$60,000

Proposed Structure:

Three 5-week 1-credit courses (three rotations per term)

MWF 10 sections Public Speaking

MWF 8 sections Interpersonal

TTH 6 sections Group

750 minutes "seat time" per course per 5 week term

72 sections of 1 credit hour courses per term

30 sections of Course 1— (24 per section) — 10 sections each five-week term

18 sections of Course 2 — (40 per section) — 6 sections each five-week term

24 sections of Course 3 — (30 per section) — 8 sections each five-week term

24 classrooms per 5-week term (repeated each 5 weeks)

24 instructors per 5-week term @666.67 = \$16000.00

(note: each instructor teaches 3 1-hr courses per semester @ \$2000 per 15 week term; \$48000.00 per term)

Savings per semester:

6 classrooms

6 instructors

\$12000 salaries

Thus, the total number of sections required is reduced by approximately 20% per year providing savings in personnel costs and overhead. For a program offering 60 sections/year at an average cost of \$2000 per instructor in salary and benefits and operating expenses, this amounts to a \$24000 savings per year. It also permits maximum scheduling flexibility for the students

Requirements

Specific requirements must be met for this structure to be effective. First, providing waiver exams for each 1-credit course would be costly and administratively cumbersome. Second, because of the short time period and limited number of class meetings, it would be inappropriate for students to add the course late or to over-subscribe the course. However, since each course is repeated within the same semester, students have a greater flexibility in adding courses at a later time. Third, there would be no time for late or make up assignments.

Disadvantages

The proposed structure would require new texts to be written based on a modular approach. There would be increased work in ordering and handling course materials and in creating syllabi and other course materials. The staffing and training of instructors and scheduling procedures would need to be modified to accommodate the more complex structure. The increased number of students per teacher per term might decrease student-teacher interaction and rapport. The modular course structure also increases the complexity of grade

handling since there will be three sets of grades submitted (one set every five weeks). Potentially, there may be some loss of content from the current course and a loss of continuity and integration of course material. The structure may also make it easier for academic units to require only some of the 1 credit courses, e.g., engineering might require only the public speaking course, thus resulting in an overall loss of student credit hours.

Advantages

Pedagogically, the modular “time when needed” structure increases focus on the skills required by one specific context at a time. Since each course is focused, there could be additional innovation in teaching strategies, e.g., adjoining rooms with multimedia technology could allow team teaching, shared resources, and interaction among sections. Most importantly, under the assumptions of “time when needed” structuring, students would be taking the course when they are more mature and when course content is more germane, i.e., employment interviewing would be studied during the junior or senior year.

Operational advantages include the savings in personnel and operating costs (See Table 1). The structure decreases the number of rooms required to deliver the course, while fewer sections decreases the need to schedule early and late classes. Students may find it easier to schedule the course with the other courses required in their major programs, i.e., it may be easier to find time for a 1-hour course for five weeks than a 3 hour course for 15 weeks. Being in class for only 5 weeks each term frees ten weeks per term for students. A student who becomes ill or misses assignments can more easily reregister for the course during another five

week session rather than taking an incomplete or repeating an entire 3-credit course for missing one unit. Assessment of course efficacy and student communication competency could be more focused on specific skills and outcomes.

The "time when needed" modular structure meets the assumptions of teaching communication skills at a level applicable to the major and to career development. It also capitalizes on the need to teach skills to students when they are ready to learn, i.e., when they can readily apply the skills in other contexts. The innovation in structure is more complex, yet it saves personnel and operating costs without sacrificing human interaction necessary for communication skills development.