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Summary of Issues Discussed During the Seminar on the Introductory Course in Speech Communication, November 1990

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The introductory course in communication has received considerable attention by scholars and practitioners in the past several years. Conventions, workshops and scholarly journals reflect the concerns of course directors, teachers and administrators in defining, operating and evaluating this course. Fourteen faculty convened at the SCA Annual Convention in San Francisco in November, 1990 to identify and discuss the major issues relevant to directing and teaching the introductory course in communication. Five major issues were identified during the seminar. Discussion of the issues ranged from theoretical perspectives to specific action steps. This report is a summary of some of the major conclusions reached by the participants of the seminar.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

A recent and growing concern of communication professionals is the measurement and teaching of communication competence. "Back to Basics" movements in curriculum development, assessment programs, and college/university skills

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requirements reflect an increasing need for communication educators to identify the dimensions of communication competence and ways of teaching and measuring students' communication skills. Nowhere is this of greater importance than in the introductory communication course.

The first level of analysis of the measurement and assessment of communication competence is the delineation of specific skills and knowledge to be covered. A problem with ascertaining specific skills is the separation of the introductory course into public speaking, group, interpersonal, and the hybrid or blend contexts. Some courses specifically focus on one context, while others cover a combination of situations. It is often assumed that the skills required by one type of communication are not germane to other types, i.e., skills do not transfer from one communication arena to another.

Test out and advanced placement tests suggest that there is a specific body of knowledge and a set of terminology that defines communication competence (and perhaps even our discipline). They also suggest that performance competence can be measured by success or failure in one specific context. This seems antithetical to the literature on communication competence which suggests that competence requires adaptation to different contexts and behavioral flexibility in meeting the exigencies of each situation.

A second level of analysis of this issue concerns the separation of "basic" skills from "advanced" skills. If the introductory course is "basic" in its approach and content coverage, then the skills learned in the course should also be "basic." This implies that upper level courses provide instruction in advanced skills. Such an assumption requires not only identifying specific competency skills, but specific levels of those skills, that should be mastered.

One approach to determining a set of core communication skills is to first delineate and then reach consensus on which skills are prerequisite for competent communication. The problems of determining communication skills have been

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addressed by several researchers, academic and professional committees, and quasi-governmental task forces. Lists of skills abound in the literature. The difficulty is to determine which ones are basic, which ones apply to which contexts, which ones are measurable, and which ones are teachable in a ten to fifteen week course.

A second way to approach the dilemma of basic versus advanced skills and which skills belong to which context is to consider a difference between communication skills and communication strategies. If communication skills are those behaviors that transcend communication contexts, strategies become the specific application of those skills adapted to the context. For example, all communication requires some degree of organization, though the specific strategies of organization depend upon whether the communication occurs in traditional public speaking, interview, group or interpersonal contexts. Similarly, listening skills are integral to any successful communication interaction, though the specific type of listening strategies may depend on the purposes of the people engaged in the communication.

With this approach, the identification of skills becomes focused on behaviors which transcend contexts. The introductory course then covers those skills and basic strategies. Advanced courses develop additional strategies, refine the basic strategies, and provide additional practice of the basic skills.

It seems unclear that our discipline has one introductory course. Each department defines and operationalizes their introductory course in a manner consistent with their tradition, faculty, students and political environment. Staffing this course is often as much a matter of teacher availability as it is a pedagogical decision of putting the best instructors in the course.

As a service course to other departments and colleges, the introductory course often adapts its content and assignments to fit the specific needs of its clientele. In addition, the current

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interest in Speaking Across the Curriculum (SAC) programs suggest that the introductory course has to adapt to the needs of other courses as well. In essence, the course not only needs to teach what communication professionals think is important but also what other disciplines think is important.

Advanced placement tests, test-out programs, and assessment programs suggest that several organizations assume they can/should set the standards and domain of course content. University and college administrators, not to mention some state legislatures, sometimes dictate course content, choose the texts of the courses and/or require specific types of skills assessment. Departmental budgets require part-time, adjunct, graduate assistants and undergraduate assistants to teach the course. All of these people, groups and agencies want a say in what the introductory course should be and how the course defines and assesses communication competence.

The problems inherent in the political and economic milieu of the basic course is a reality. As long as the course is primarily a service course, it must necessarily adapt to the needs of those it serves. The important issue here is not whether the course adapts, but how. An increasingly important function of administrators and teachers is to actively promote the course through effective public relations strategies. Retaining control of the content, format and staffing requires effective information dissemination and persuasive public relations campaigns. One of the *most* vital issues is to increase others' awareness and understanding of our discipline, the realities of our economic needs, and the importance of communication courses in modern college education.

The issue of communication competence is of central concern to everyone involved with the introductory course. Communication educators and administrators must maintain control of the course. Control of the course is dependent upon clearly defining course content, reaching consensus on the skills and strategies important to competence, and communicating our identity and expertise to others.

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COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

Communication faculty have increased attention to the relationship of culture and communication. The current concern with cultural integrity, minority students, and cross-cultural communication emphasizes the need to discuss the impact of cultural awareness in the introductory course. The panel participants perceived cultural concerns differently, yet there seem to be some common issues addressed by the seminar.

Some scholars take the view that culture is expressed and created through communication. Others adopt the perspective that communication differs among cultural contexts. Which perspective is most beneficial to the structure, content, and instructional strategies of the introductory course? Do we examine communication in diverse cultures or do we examine culture through communication?

Most current fundamental textbooks attempt to discuss the cultural impact of communication. Through multicultural examples, through explications of research on communication practices in different cultures, and through “advice” on how to communicate with people from other cultures, the texts try to increase the cultural awareness of communication students. Unfortunately, many of these attempts seem superficial taxonomies of different meanings for different verbal symbols or nonverbal behaviors. The cultures are often overly generalized or stereotyped such that little practical information is given.

Treatment of cultural dimensions of communication may be more efficacious if approached from the perspective that culture defines a person’s communicative perspective. Rather than learning what a specific gesture means in several different cultures, or how different cultures use space and touch, the focus is on the way in which the people from different

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cultures interpret their world. Students are asked to consider the question "What is the other's perspective and how is that influenced by their traditions, values, language, etc?" Rather than treating cultural stereotypes as the determining factor in interpreting meaning, culture becomes just one of many factors influencing effective creation of competent communication.

The introductory communication course needs to improve in recognizing multicultural perspectives. Increasing students' awareness of cultural influences is essential. The introductory course needs to go beyond consciousness raising, however, to provide a useful perspective for interacting with people from different cultural perspectives. Cultural dissimilarity becomes an obvious signal that there may be confusion in creating shared meanings, however, everyone has somewhat different cultural backgrounds that make them unique. Beginning communication texts and classes need to emphasize that the same awareness of communication problems that occur in multicultural contexts should occur in every communication context.

With the increased awareness of multicultural diversity, texts and teachers have become increasingly sensitive to avoid statements which may be construed as biased against or for a specific culture. Yet at the same time, many texts and classes promote stereotypes in their discussions of audience analysis by telling students to generalize from basic demographic cues to the values and attitudes of the audience. Despite frequent disclaimers that the conclusions should be tentative, the practice of cultural stereotypes continues. Assignments and exercises seem to be developed without adaptation to the needs and perspectives of various cultural groups. Examples are normally of the "white" cultural perspective, with other cultures used primarily to show difficulties in communicating.

It is obviously impossible to discuss communication devoid of cultural implications. Communication faculty need to

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become increasingly vigilant in attempting to create balanced and realistic explorations of communication in a variety of cultures. Culture is pervasive to communication experiences and needs more attention than an isolated chapter, a few well chosen examples, or an “awareness exercise.”

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS

Much of our pedagogical literature, books, manuals and research seems to address the specifics of classroom assignments, presentational methods and evaluation procedures. Adaptation to students seems to be limited to matching methods to student personality variables, learning styles and demographic variables.

Faculty in the introductory course often hope that students are able to see the connection between the course and the “Real World” outside the space/time context of the classroom. In efforts to make the course content “meaningful in a broader context,” they may assume more “world knowledge” and maturity than the students possess.

Because the introductory course is defined as “basic” the assumption seems to be that it must be taken early in the students’ academic careers. Yet the maturity of the students, their development of cultural awareness, their understanding of the world, and their shared experiences sometimes mitigate the application of course material, exercises, and assignments that relate the course content to the “real world.” Discussions of death, job experiences, marital relationships, and other topics which are predominant in the research and literature of our field often seem inappropriate and less than meaningful to students just out of high school. First and second year students may not be capable of recognizing the importance of issues that are covered in the communication classroom. The content and application of the course material may be more

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relevant to advanced students who have experienced the kinds of situations that are discussed in many fundamental communication texts and courses.

Instructors need to be aware of the emotional, vocational, and experiential maturity of the students when designing and conducting the introductory course. For example, is the “employment interview assignment” commonly encountered in hybrid communication course relevant to a first year student? Are role play exercises of marital conflicts or parent-child situations understandable to a single, childless student? Are discussions of death relevant to someone who may never have attended a funeral or had a relative die? While the skills seem essential to any communication encounter, the attempts to transfer those skills beyond the classroom setting often meet with disinterest or misunderstanding. Instructors and textbook authors need to adapt assignments, discussions, and exercises to the maturity, experiential, and emotional readiness of the students.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

With the increasing sophistication and availability of communication technologies, the introductory course is increasingly concerned with adapting them for instruction. Word processing, computer simulations, electronic mail systems, desk top publishing, videotape recording, editing and playback, and computer assisted instruction are becoming used more frequently in the classroom. The ability to increase the communication channels currently used by students and instructors is worthy of the increased attention and budget allocations. It seems reasonable that communication professionals should “lead the charge” in integrating communication technologies in the classroom.

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Technology should not be used for technology sake. The costs of purchase, maintenance, and security are only some of the issues involved. Perhaps more importantly, teachers need to consider the impact of the technologies on the communication between students and teachers, both inside and outside the classroom. For example, if students have access to the teacher through a synchronous electronic mail or bulletin boards, will that make the communication less personal? Will it increase the availability of the teacher to otherwise apprehensive or reticent students? Will it change the focus of communication from the oral to written media? The impact of the new technologies must be considered. Additional research examining the impact of technology on classroom communication, relationships, and learning is crucial.

On the other hand, technology should not be avoided simply because it is new. Many of the technologies such as CAI, word processing, and videotape have been demonstrated to enhance the efficacy of the classroom experience and to increase the cost effectiveness of instruction. Convincing administrators to fund the technology, to give instructors time to train and adapt the technology to their specific classroom needs, and to persuade other faculty and students to use the technology are major obstacles to be overcome. The caveat is not to take the technologies for granted, but to constantly assess their effectiveness and adapt them to changing needs and skills of the students.

COURSE ADMINISTRATION

Few topics in the administration of the introductory course have gained more attention than staffing the classroom with qualified instructors. Since the introductory course is the most “visible” course to students and to other departments, it seems essential that it receive high priority in

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the assignment of effective faculty. Because of the number of sections, it is often necessary to staff the introductory course with part-time or adjunct teachers. In some cases, the applicant pool is exceedingly small such that administrators have little choice in selection of teachers. Establishing clear and relevant qualifications for hiring and assessing faculty performance seem critical for effective course administration. Unfortunately, these qualifications have yet to be fully explicated or consistently applied.

When a course is heavily staffed by part-time faculty whose credentials are not clearly established, other departments may consider the quality of instruction to be sub-par. A common perception is that "anyone can teach communication." The persistent use of part-time instructors, many of whom do not have advanced degrees, only serves to reinforce this perception. Improved public relations with other departments and administrators that demonstrate that careful selection procedures were followed and that these instructors are highly rated by the students may increase the prestige of the part-time faculty.

A second concern with staffing the course with part-time instructors concerns commitment to the course. Part-time instructors often feel alienated from the daily interactions with full time faculty. The temporary nature of their assignments mitigates personal identification with the course which decreases motivation to participate in its development, modification, innovation and evolution.

Course directors need to spend time and resources to integrate these instructors with all other faculty. Involvement in staff meetings, increased participative decision-making, and inclusion in faculty social events can increase commitment to the course. Increased public relations with other departments and administrators can offset many of the invalid negative perceptions that part-time faculty means lower quality instruction. Introductory course directors need to make every effort to select qualified instructors, fully integrate them into

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the course, and publicize the high quality of instruction they deliver to the students.

CONCLUSION

The five main issues identified in the SCA Seminar covered a broad range of topics from course content, to pedagogical methods, to administration issues. One of the most interesting observations made during the seminar was that there is great diversity in course content, pedagogical philosophies, and teaching methods. Yet underlying the diversity was a common agreement that the introductory communication course, as representative of our discipline, was healthy and important. Continued refinement of the course content, increased efficacy of teaching methods, clearer conceptualization and operationalization of communication competence, and more efficacious incorporation of multicultural perspectives will only enhance the quality of instruction. Clearly, the introductory communication course does not exist in a vacuum. Increased attention to effective public relations with administrators, other departments, and public agencies is essential for a successful program.

It is difficult to summarize eight hours of animated discussion of critical issues into a few pages. Many important ideas expressed in the seminar were not fully developed in this summary article. The critical issues need further discussion, additional research, and continued attention by communication faculty and administrators.

NOTES

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