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Andrew D. Wolvin
University of Maryland, College Park

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The Basic Course and the Future of the Workplace

Andrew D. Wolvin

One of the goals of the basic communication course is to prepare students to function as effective communicators in their future careers. The importance of communication in the workplace is well documented. Studies (Curtis, Winsor & Stephens, 1989, *What Work Requires of Schools,* 1991; Maes, Weldy & Icenogle, 1997) consistently demonstrate that oral communication skills—listening and speaking—are at the top of the list of skills necessary to get and to succeed in careers. A look at the classified ads in a Sunday edition of major metropolitan newspapers reveals that "demonstrated oral communication skills" are desired of successful job applicants. Indeed, the National Education Goals Panel's Goals 2000 specifies that literate Americans prepared to compete in a global economy need the ability to "think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems . . ." *(The National Education Goals Report*, 1996, p. xvi).

But what is the world of work? It is clear that America has made the shift from an industrial society to an information society. Workers are not identified as "knowledge workers," people who are likely to produce and to deal in information than in tangible goods and services. Vogt (1995) described this work: "Knowledge workers inquire, observe, synthesize, and communicate perspectives which result in more effective actions" (p. 99). To be effective, Vogt argued, the knowledge worker must possess a "supe-

rior capacity to mentally and verbally process ideas and information . . ." (p. 99). Clearly, the knowledge industry requires oral communication skills of the highest order.

To prepare students to be an effective knowledge worker in today's organizations, it is necessary to re-tool the basic communication course to provide a broad foundation in the speaking and listening competencies that workers must have in order to do their work. The hybrid course with units in intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public communication offers the most realistic framework for meeting this goal (Wolvin & Wolvin, 1992).

People in organizations increasingly are "empowered" with self-management, an approach to management which requires that each individual has to assume responsibility for her or his own career, finding the necessary motivators and strategies to be productive and satisfied within the mission and goals of the organization (Manz & Sims, 1989). To be effective as self-management, an individual has to know oneself as a communicator:

- How to process information
- What is their communication style
- How to manage their communicator image
- Self assessment (see, for example, Fisher, 1996).

And they have to be good at self-talk, internal messages that they give themselves for positive reinforcement, motivation, and decision-making (Helmstetter, 1987). In my work as a management consultant, I find that managers and would-be managers discover the study of intrapersonal communication to be one of the most important areas that I lead them through.

One specific application of intrapersonal communication that shapes an entire organization is that of listening behavior. People in organizations have to be good listeners; the business of the organization depends upon it (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). And to be a good listener, people have to

understand how and why they function as a listener and what they can do to control for accurate message reception, focused attention, accurate decoding, and appropriate response.

At the interpersonal communication level, people in organizations participate in dialogues with others on a daily basis. Some people find that they lack good conversation skills, especially when it comes to small talk. And small talk is a necessary step for building rapport—a step critical in marketing and sales (Turecamo, 1994). Communicators also have to ask questions in order to get and to clarify information. And sending and receiving feedback is critical to job performance. In an extensive survey of managers and workers, Kepner-Tregoe, a consulting firm, discovered that less than 50% of the managers give immediate feedback about their workers' performance ("10 Essential Components," 1996).

One important application in interpersonal communication skills is in the interviewing process. Communication skills in the employment interview have been identified as the most important factor (more so than grade point average, work experience, activities, etc.) in getting into the workplace in the first place (Goodall & Goodall, 1982). The competitive job market requires that applicants communicate a positive, confident image throughout the entire selection process. But good interviewing skills do not stop there. Throughout one's career, an individual will have to demonstrate effective interviewing skills in order to move up the corporate ladder or to move on to other organizations or other careers (Shrieves, 1995). A person is likely to change jobs frequently in one's career lifetime, and each change will depend to a great extent on polished, professsional interviewing skills.

Another application of interpersonal competencies is in the small group process. It has been determined that people spend as much as the equivalent of two or three days a

week in meetings. Unfortunately, in many organizations that time is not very productive. Now that organizations have put into place participative management, however, there is a widespread use of workteams. "As organizations become more involved in the quality movement, they discover the benefits of having people at all levels work together in teams," observes one corporate consultant (Scholtes, 1988, pp. 1-17). To function, teams have to be able to communicate, using all the group facilitation and decision-making skills that they can marshall.

Significantly, today's knowledge organizations also depend on public communication strategies (Scheiber & Hager, 1994). Because people are producing and dealing with information, that information must be disseminated, and not just in written reports and computer files. Many organizations rely on oral briefings as a primary means of internal communication. Effective briefings require all of the public speaking skills and applications of computerized presentation graphics for visual reinforcement of the oral message. Indeed, presentation graphics should be integrated into the basic communication course so that students have training in how to create and use computerized slides effectively (Shaw, 1996).

Smart organizations will develop speakers bureaus as part of their external communication strategy. Employees at various levels of an organization will be selected, trained, and scheduled to present speeches to the organization's publics—local civic organizations, professional societies, academic audiences, and even political bodies.

Clearly, the workplace today requires skilled communicators who can function effectively at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public communication levels. In outcomes assessment of the basic course (Wolvin & Corley, 1984; Ford & Wolvin, 1993; Kramer & Hinton, 1996), students reported improvement in their perceived competencies to communication on the job. Hugenberg (1996) has

called for more attention to assessment and to the integration of technologies in the basic communication course. To ensure that our basic hybrid course response to the needs of today's workplace, we must heed Hugenberg's call and follow Pearson and Nelson's (1990) advice to attend to new communication patterns and relationships and to new technologies that our students will encounter in their world of work.

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William J. Seiler (Ph.D., Purdue University) is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. He is the author of several textbooks including one on classroom communication. He has a long line of research concerning the basic course, especially as it applies to the basic course using the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI).

Shawn Spano (Ph.D., Indiana University) is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at San Jose State University. In addition to teaching the basic course, he also teaches upper division and graduate courses in communication theory, interpersonal communication, and communication research methods. His research interests include interpretive approaches to communication, particularly in the area of social constructionism. He has published work in interpersonal communication competence, conflict resolution, student outcomes assessment, the history of rhetoric, contemporary public address, and communication pedagogy. He is currently working with the Public Dialogue Consortium and the City of Cupertino, CA on a project to improve the quality of public discourse in local communities.

David E. Williams (Ph.D., Ohio University) is an Assistant Professor and Director of Forensics at Texas Tech University. His research interests are in the areas of social movement research and forensics activities.

Andrew D. Wolvin (Ph.D., Purdue University) is Professor of Speech Communication and Director of the basic communication course at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has published research studies on the basic communication course and is co-author of three basic communication course texts.