2006

Case Study of a Basic Course: Using Assessment to Legitimize Innovation

Marlene M. Preston
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Rachel Holloway
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Case Study of a Basic Course: Using Assessment to Legitimize Innovation

Marlene M. Preston
Rachel Holloway

As public higher education enters an era of increasing demand, shrinking resources, increased competition, and restructuring (Hebel, Schmidt, & Selingo, 2002; Schmidt, 2002), many colleges and universities will turn to measures of productivity and quality to decide what new efforts will be funded and what efforts will be discontinued. Because change will be necessary for public universities to thrive (Yudof, 2002), basic courses may be increasingly called upon to prove their efficacy and/or shift their focus to meet new demands.

The following case study describes the five-year process through which a two-semester first-year communication sequence was accepted into the general education curriculum of a major research institution as equivalent to the freshman composition sequence taught by the Department of English. The Communication Skills courses (COMM 1015-16) at Virginia Tech were developed in response to numerous institutional demands. The sequence, which integrates oral and written communication, satisfied many stakeholders within the university, but did not fit easily within traditional structures on campus. This case study reveals a glimpse of the course design and the assessment plan needed to secure acceptance of Communication Skills I and II

("CommSkills") in the general education curriculum. Both the course structure itself and the means to secure support and approval may provide new ideas and strategies for those facing similar challenges in higher education.

DOCUMENTING EFFICACY IN THE FACE OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Promoting change is difficult in any organization, but universities present special challenges. Layers of hierarchy, multiple and sometimes conflicting goals, participatory governance, and a curricular structure deeply embedded in institutional and disciplinary culture discourage significant challenges to traditional ways of meeting learning goals. Not only are the "ways of doing things" often defined by tradition, but frequently the approaches to education are also closely tied to perceptions of academic identity. "Who can best teach what" helps to define and reinforce the boundaries of academic disciplines. While interdisciplinarity in research is actively encouraged by funding agencies and other external stakeholders, resources devoted to the teaching mission at institutions of higher education usually are allocated according to the institution's structural units, be they colleges, schools, or departments. Thus, if a new way of teaching a core skill, such as oral communication in a basic course, shifts enrollment from one unit to another and thereby justifies reallocation of scarce resources, resistance is likely to be significant. The threat to academic boundaries is heightened in a shrinking resource environment.

Of course, the arguments against curricular innovation, if they are to be perceived as legitimate in faculty governance procedures, must focus on the institution's educational goals and objectives. Thus, while the reason for resistance may be strongly motivated by resource allocation, the objections to change will be cast in pedagogical terms. Innovators must assume the burden of proof on those grounds.

Academic assessment provides the data to demonstrate that "we are actually doing what we intend to do in the classroom and in our educational programs" (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, 88). Academic assessment as institutionalized practice developed initially to meet demands for accountability from external stakeholders, but it now also promotes continuous improvement and accountability internally (Backlund & Arneson, 2000) and is used to evaluate the contribution of programs and courses to the teaching and learning mission of colleges and universities (Allen, 2002). Programs that are documented as meeting the needs of students, the institution, and external stakeholders will stand the greatest chance of survival.

IDENTIFYING NEEDS OF STUDENTS, THE INSTITUTION, AND STAKEHOLDERS

From global to institutional perspectives, the need for student mastery of oral and written communication skills is clear. In an age of institutional accountability, stakeholders-—including parents, alumni, and employers—are emphasizing the need for undergraduate instruction in and mastery of oral and written communi-

cation (Cronin, Grice, & Palmerton, 2000; Fallows & Steven, 2000). From a curricular perspective, faculty members and accrediting organizations in a range of disciplines recognize that students need sophisticated skills in oral and written communication to succeed in their courses, not to mention their professions (Rubin & Morreale, 2000). Approaches to meeting students' needs for instruction in oral and written communication reflect and structures, governance procedures, and other organizational factors that create barriers to and opportunities for change.

In recent years, Virginia Tech's Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, the University Writing Program, the Academy of Teaching Excellence, and the Faculty Development Initiative in Educational Technologies have challenged faculty across disciplines to engage students with learner-centered strategies (active learning, cooperative learning, learning communities). As a result, students are increasingly called upon to participate in teams and deliver presentations—in many cases without any foundational educational experience to prepare them for the challenge. In workshops designed to support writing across the curriculum and active learning, faculty expressed concerns about students' preparedness to accept more participatory roles in the classroom; the lack of class time and/or or expertise to teach group processes or presentation skills; and the possibility of ineffective student presentations that might embarrass a student presenter and/or waste class time. Such concerns were often accompanied by more general comments about students' inability to articulate their ideas effectively.

Of course, a wide variance in students' communication skills should be expected at a large research institution with an undergraduate population of 20,000. While many students are well-prepared for college work, some are entering totally unfamiliar territory, having spent more time mastering computer games or sending instant messages than conversing with their friends. Some face the well-documented challenges of communication apprehension (McCroskey and Anderson, 1976). Whatever their level of preparedness, many students need help making connections with peers and faculty and deciphering the communication norms on campus.

On many campuses, such concerns are addressed through a required foundational communication course or a public speaking requirement. Unfortunately Virginia Tech has no general education requirement for oral communication. Simply adding a public speaking course to the general education requirements, as is often the case at large universities, would fail to meet the overall needs of students. The need to understand interpersonal and small group communication, as well as computer-mediated communication, far exceeds the focus on public address typical of most public speaking courses. Moreover, due to overwhelming enrollments in communication courses, no hybrid course was available for non-majors, and until the 2001-2002 academic year, even most Communication majors were not getting instruction in oral communication in their freshman or sophomore years.

The gaps in Virginia Tech's programming and the recognized needs led to the following goals: (1) integrate speaking, writing, and technology into a first-year course; (2) provide basic instruction in communication

theory through experiential learning; (3) encourage application of theory in situations relevant to first-year students; and (4) build a first-year student community to aid in student retention and academic success. While these challenges were significant, they presented an opportunity to develop a new approach to fundamental communication instruction.

RESPONSIVE COURSE DESIGN

To address these institutional and departmental needs, the Department of Communication authorized the creation of the CommSkills sequence. The course design began with this seemingly simple premise: The integration of oral and written communication in a course for freshmen allows them to adapt their communication skills to their new discourse community, to secure a foundation of solid theory-based skills, and to enhance those skills as they practice speaking and writing during their college careers in preparation for their professional careers. The resulting course sequence weaves together familiar components—freshman composition and a hybrid communication course—and it allows students to work in a community as they study varying approaches that writers and speakers use to address audiences of readers and listeners. The sequence was designed so that students who completed the 6-hour CommSkills I and II sequence would meet any requirements for freshman composition and public speaking.

A traditional hybrid approach serves as the background for the two semesters with intrapersonal, interpersonal and group communication as the focus for the

first semester; and public communication as the focus for the second semester. Assignments incorporate a variety of oral and written presentations, designed to encourage students' understanding of and comfort with their writing and speaking. Specifically, in Communication Skills during the first semester, students explore their sense of self, their relationship skills, their proficiency in groups, and their ability to engage an audience with a story. A series of formal and informal assignments encourages students to apply communication theory to real-life situations. Staying with the same classmates and instructor for the second semester, students in CommSkills II develop research skills along with their study of writing and public speaking. Several assignments early in the semester prepare students to complete a major group project tied to the development of an informative speech. Students then practice research skills as they conduct interviews, access library databases, and evaluate websites. The final major assignment is an individual persuasive presentation followed by the creation of a portfolio incorporating their work from both semesters. (See Appendix, "Communication Skills Course Components.")

The course design capitalizes on contemporary learning theory to maximize the effectiveness of the course for first-year students. The sequence uses a spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1962) and builds "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) among students. Informal speaking and writing assignments are designed to build critical thinking and processing skills (Bean, 2001) and to foster connection and reflections in an experiential learning environment (Kolb, 1984). This design allows students to make their own meaning, a necessary step

toward long-term learning (Bruner, 1990). The course acknowledges and builds on students' prior knowledge and expectations using formal writing and speaking assignments to encourage students to articulate their own goals and recognize the relevance of the coursework, to acknowledge and encourage multiple perspectives, and to reflect on their personal perspectives as they begin to widen their views of the world, including the complex demands of their academic environment. This development of students' ways of knowing (Magolda, 1992) contributes to the development of the whole person, a goal of many general education programs (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000).

IMPLEMENTATION AND INITIAL EVALUATION

After a one-semester pilot, the sequence was ready for a two-semester offering in 1997. The College of Business asked for approximately half of the available seats, and the Department of Communication filled the rest with students who selected the course during orientation. At that point, the course was run as a "special study." Two years later, the courses were approved by the College of Arts and Sciences and earned official course number designations.

From the inception of the sequence, students had multiple opportunities to comment on the course and their growth in it through a skills inventory, progress reports, reflection essays, and in-class response papers. This formal and informal feedback assisted faculty in monitoring and assessing the course design. In addition, the course director used focus groups to explore student

attitudes about the course. Except for predictable suggestions involving "less reading, easier tests," students were very positive. The course was meeting their expectations, and they were enthusiastic. Additionally, anonymous, university-mandated evaluations were administered across all sections each semester. Students wrote comments about their success in the course and its usefulness in their academic careers. Students also rated their gains in the course on a three-point scale as compared to other courses taken in college. Many reported "more than average" gains in knowledge of principles, logical thinking, and appreciation of the subject matter and discipline.

All of this information indicated that the course was working well. Until this stage, however, all evaluation was internal; the information was used to fine-tune the course design as necessary. The courses had not been formally proposed for inclusion in general education, nor had the courses been scrutinized in a more public university forum.

ASSESSMENT FOR THE UNIVERSITY AUDIENCE

Unfortunately, any suggestion that the courses be included in the university's Core Curriculum met clear opposition, despite evidence of learning achieved in the course sequence. To make a stronger case, the Department of Communication turned to a tool that is sometimes dreaded by faculty—outcomes assessment. This strategy for documenting the efficacy of a communication course in general education is often necessary for institutional and program assessments (NCA, 2003), but

the Virginia Tech target was even more specific. No one seemed to doubt that students exhibited improved oral communication skills once they had completed the course sequence. Evidence was needed to prove that the course met the various goals of the Core Curriculum, specifically to demonstrate that students made substantial gains in writing skill. Collecting and sharing that evidence would challenge the final bastion of exclusive territory in general education at Virginia Tech—Area I "Writing and Discourse."

Virginia Tech's Core Curriculum is broad. Over 140 courses from 26 departments fulfill Area II "Ideas, Cultural Traditions, and Values." Fifty-four courses from 15 departments meet the "Society and Human Behavior" requirement. Courses from disciplines as diverse as entomology, civil engineering, and religion make up Area VII "Critical Issues in a Global Context." Only one area differs, Area I "Writing and Discourse"; except for those students with credit for advanced placement or dual enrollment, every incoming first-year student was required to take the freshman writing sequence offered by the English Department.

Although underlying resource issues influenced the intensity of the opposition, arguments against inclusion of CommSkills in the Core Curriculum focused primarily on course outcomes. Faculty from many departments, primarily in the College of Arts and Sciences, questioned the strength of the course sequence and the ability of instructors in the Department of Communication to adequately prepare students to write well and to analyze text proficiently. The lack of an emphasis on literary analysis was an often-expressed objection, although the ability to analyze literary text is not a stated

goal of Area I. Some colleagues disapproved of the "professional" and "applied" nature of the assignments and identified insufficient writing instruction and feedback as a problem. These concerns, among a range of other more specific objections, stopped forward movement of the course sequence through governance.

To refute these concerns, the department provided lengthy justification and description, detailed syllabi, sample assignments, student portfolio samples, and letters of support from the Colleges of Business, Human Resources, and some departments in the College of Engineering. Despite these efforts, the courses could not secure support from the subcommittee assigned to make a recommendation to the full university committee. The College of Business continued to enroll students for over two years while the governance system ground to a halt.

After a series of memoranda, formal and informal meetings, email, and phone calls, it became clear that overwhelming evidence would be needed to counter arguments at the university core curriculum committee.

To meet the challenge, an independent assessment strategy was developed, one that would allow direct comparison to the freshman composition sequence related to Area I goals. The timing of our decision matched the university's ongoing assessment process. Each area of the Core Curriculum is assessed on a rotating basis, and the assessment cycle reached Area I just as the CommSkills sequence was under its greatest scrutiny. Virginia Tech's Director of Academic Assessment developed a survey to measure the English department's freshman composition sequence against the Core Curriculum objectives for Area I, and it became the basis for comparison that would eventually legitimize

Communication Skills. Although instruments available through NCA and other universities may have had greater validity, performing an assessment to allow direct comparison of the Communication Skills courses to English courses was critical to the argument the department needed to make.

An independent and simultaneous assessment of the Communication Skills sequence was launched as if the sequence had already been included in the Core Curriculum. Because the departmental goals were broader than those stated in Area I of the Core, a survey was developed in three parts. In the opening section, students were asked to identify the high school experience that most prepared them for Communication Skills sequence. Students also were asked to assess their perceived writing, speaking, technology, and group participation skills upon entering college using a five-point Likert scale with 1 described as "extremely poor" and 5 as "superior."

The second section of the survey asked students to respond to the questions developed for Area 1 assessment. Each item began with the phrase, "As a result of taking Communication Skills" to ensure that students did not waiver from their assessment of *this* course sequence. Items were provided in the same order used by the Area I academic assessment survey, and students responded on a four-point Likert scale with 1 equal to "strongly disagree" and 4 equal to "strongly agree." Students did not have a non-response option. In a third section, items were added to assess aspects of the CommSkills sequence that exceeded the Area I objectives, including listening, group problem solving, ability

to participate in class discussion, use of technology, and ability to develop primary sources of evidence.

The survey was distributed in two ways to students who were currently enrolled and to students who had completed the sequence previously. Current students responded to a paper version of the survey in COMM 1016 late in the spring semester; 148 of 203 enrolled students completed the survey, producing a 73% response rate. In addition, 272 former students were asked via email to participate in the assessment online. Eighty-nine former students responded, producing a 33% response rate.

DATA AND IMPACT

Student satisfaction with the course was high. In general, both former and current students rated their skills upon entering college as average or slightly higher than average. Both former and current students rated their learning in COMM 1015-1016 very positively. Among former students, mean scores on the twenty Area 1 items ranged from 3.0 to 3.74. Students choosing "agree" or "strongly agree" on the twenty items ranged from 75% to 99%. Among current students, mean scores on the core items range from 2.91 to 3.88. Percentages of students choosing positive responses ranged from 76% to 98%. Ninety-nine percent of former students reported that they would recommend the course to friends; 97% of current students would recommend the course. Responses to open-ended questions were highly positive.

The data affirmed the strength of CommSkills and led to another attempt to include the sequence in the

Core Curriculum. With the assessment report attached and *with no change in any other aspect of the previously submitted proposal*, the proposal was resubmitted to the University Core Curriculum Committee in Fall 2001. The subcommittee charged with reviewing the sequence made a positive recommendation to the full committee, noting the persuasiveness of the data. The recommendation from the subcommittee noted specifically the persuasiveness of student testimony. The vote was positive, and Communication Skills was listed in the *Core Curriculum Handbook* for the 2001-2002 academic year.

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EXPERIENCE

At many universities, the battle to legitimize communication education has been fought and won. Some of us, however, are still in the trenches. Our experience at Virginia Tech verifies what we teach: Meeting decision-makers on their own terms with evidence consonant with their values and attitudes is essential to persuasion. In the presence of overwhelming quantitative and qualitative evidence, even the most entrenched areas of curriculum can be dislodged to make way for new approaches to education.

Assessment was the cornerstone of our eventual success in securing a place for communication education in the general education of Virginia Tech's students. First, the ongoing assessment over a period of years helped the course designer and instructors to engage in continuing and ongoing improvement in the course. The use of a team-based and standardized approach to the

course also allowed the department to ensure that data gathered reflected all sections of the course.

Second, the assessment provided the evidence to legitimize change. Prior to the presentation of data, ethos controlled the argument. When faculty in the English Department, perceived as the only campus authorities in writing instruction, rejected arguments made by faculty in the Department of Communication, those charged with making curricular decisions deferred to the structurally legitimized ethos of the English faculty. Assessment provided a means for logos to trump ethos, and for faculty in a range of disciplines to move beyond political and personal disputes and let the data drive the decision. Whenever a course challenges traditional academic territory, assessment will be essential to success.

Third, and perhaps most important for the success in this case, was the use of an assessment instrument legitimized within the institutional context. Freshman composition and CommSkills were measured with identical items. Had the Department of Communication used an instrument of our own development or one created by a communication organization, the data would have been far less powerful within this setting. Because the writing faculty in English were involved in the development of the assessment instrument, the most motivated critics of the course sequence set the standard by which the courses would be judged.

Of course, inclusion in the general education program does not automatically confer legitimacy; rather, it is a mixed blessing. Although the department has been required to make ongoing justification for additional resources, funding has increased, and the sequence has

grown to its current total enrollment of 550 students. Because the capacity does not meet the demand, enrollment is restricted to select majors, including communication, finance, marketing, management, biology, human development, and hospitality-tourism. To assure consistency across all instructors and sections, a course director developed a course guide, plans routine meetings with the CommSkills faculty, and continues ongoing assessment of the courses, including students' perception of growth across the sequence and downstream assessment of seniors who took the course as freshmen (Holloway, 2002).

The department will continue to gather data, not only when required, but also as an ongoing strategy to promote the value of communication instruction for students in a basic course. Seeing assessment as an opportunity rather than a threat is a useful approach when a department is required to demonstrate the efficacy of its programming.

REFERENCES

Allen, T.H. (2002). Charting a communication pathway: Using assessment to guide curriculum development in a re-vitalized general education plan. *Communication Education*, 51, 26-39.

Backlund, P., & Arneson, P. (2000). Educational assessment grows up: Looking toward the future. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 29, 88-102.

Bean, J. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1962). *On knowing: Essays for the left hand.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cronin, M.W., Grice, G.L., & Palmerton, P.R. (2000). Oral communication across the curriculum: The state of the art after twenty-five years of experience. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 29, 66-87.

Dannels, D.P. (2002). Time to speak up: A theoretical framework of situated pedagogy and practice for communication across the curriculum. *Communication Education,* 50(2*),* 144-158.

Fallows, S. & Steven, C. (Eds.). (2000). *Integrating key skills in higher education.* London: Kogan Page.

Hebel, S., Schmidt, P., & Selingo, J. (2002). States face year of famine after a decade of plenty. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 11, 20.

Holloway, R. (2002, Spring). Creating community in the classroom. *Virginia Tech Magazine.* Available at http://www.vtmagazine.vt.edu/spring03/feature5.html

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning.* Harlow: Prentice-Hall.

Magolda, M.B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

McCroskey, J.C., & Anderson, J. (1976). The relationship between communication apprehension and academic achievement among college students. *Human Communication Research*, 3, 73-81.

Morreale, S.P., Osborn, M.M., & Pearson, J.C. (2000). Why communication is important: A rationale for the centrality of the study of communication. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 29, 1-25.

The National Communication Association, NCA Taskforce on the General Education Curriculum. (2003). *Communication in the general education curriculum: A critical necessity for the 21st century.* S.A. Materese (Ed.). Washington, D.C.:National Communication Association.

Rubin, R.B., & Morreale, S.P. (2000). What college students should know and be able to do. *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, 29, 53-65.

Schmidt, P. (2002). State spending on higher education grows by smallest rate in 5 years. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 18, 20.

Yudof, M. G. (2002). Is the public research university dead? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 11, 24.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX

"COMMUNICATION SKILLS" COURSE COMPONENTS

Instructional threads common to both semesters (along with use of hybrid comm. text and writing handbook):

1. Informal writing and speaking to learn
2. Formal writing and speaking to demonstrate mastery
3. Meeting audience needs with clear, appropriate, correct oral and written communication
4. Working within a community on authentic assignments, relevant to freshmen

	Oral Communication	Written Communication	Electronic Comm/ Info Literacy
Semester I	Intrapersonal	Intro letter; Goals memo	Visual introduction
	Interpersonal	Conflict analysis, letter	Email, netiquette
		Progress report	
	Group Discussion	Self-evaluation	Nickname files; surveys Gathering campus information
	Intro --Public Comm	Analysis of Speaker	
"Exam"	Impromptu speeches	Portfolio; Reflection essay	

Appendix (continued)

	Oral Communication	Written Communication	Electronic Comm/ Info Literacy
Semester II		Bridge essay based on Provost's "Common Book"	Parenthetical citation Integrating quotes into text
	Narrative Speech	Presentation plan Self-evaluation	
	Informative Group Presentation	Presentation plan Self-evaluation	Interviews; Library and electronic research; PowerPoint; APA style
	Persuasion Speech	Researched Report	Databases Integrating research into text
"Exam"	Impromptu speeches	Two-semester portfolio Reflection essay	