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Improving the Basic Communication Course: Assessing the Core Components

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The introductory communication course remains a vital component in education at the collegiate level. Many higher education institutions are following a trend in which the basic communication course is a general education requirement of all students regardless of their academic focus (Cutspec, McPherson, & Spiro, 1999; Hunt, Novak, Semlak, & Meyer, 2005). In fact, according to a series of investigations conducted from 1968 to 2006, some form of the basic course (public speaking or hybrid version) is required for all students by a majority of institutions of higher education (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). However, with challenges in the economy, jobs at risk, record unemployment, and overall economic belt tightening, universities search for more effective ways to better draw students in and meet their needs. Though students remain the primary focus, the economic concerns trickle down to departments whose faculty begin scrambling to retain courses that have garnered their program's success or kept them financially afloat and at the forefront of university general education requirements.

One way to ensure the vitality of the basic communication course is to exhibit its usefulness and success within the general education core which strives to offer

every student attending the institution a well-rounded education intended to help them thrive in a rapidly changing world. A primary example that colleges, universities and communication departments are establishing this relevancy is by focusing on multiculturalism and diversity issues. In the 2006 basic communication course survey, approximately 71% of participating institutions reported valuing a strong focus on diversity issues (Morreale, et al., 2006). To retain general education status, the challenge then lies in the ability to provide evidence to administrators and accrediting agencies that course goals and objectives, such as a multicultural focus, are being met.

Though other means may provide evidence of student learning, assessment is a highly-valued method. According to the Principles of Accreditation within the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS; 2010) the focus on student learning outcomes is central to the accreditation review process. In other words, while multiple assessment methods such as curricular objectives and co-curricular goals' evaluation are necessary and valuable, a primary focus has been placed on student learning outcomes. It is this data that is primarily used to evaluate and enhance courses and overall degree programs. With this in mind, the purpose of the current study is to utilize a case study approach as a way to examine an effective means of assessing student learning of objectives and goals set forth in the basic communication course in an effort to ensure that it not only retains its general education status but also enriches the course.

DEFINING THE BASIC COURSE

This research study focuses on a basic communication course at a large southwestern university. The course is currently a general education requirement for all students and must be completed in order to obtain an undergraduate degree. Entitled *Fundamentals of Human Communication*, the basic communication course is a hybrid course that provides instruction in the intercultural, interpersonal, small group, and public speaking contexts. It is designed in a lecture-lab format such that students attend lectures to receive course content while attending lab sessions for experiential learning and skill building. The course is taught by a combination of full-time faculty, adjunct instructors, and graduate teaching assistants.

Five specific general education outcomes focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains of learning have been established for the course. After completing this introductory course, students should be able to (1) List, describe, and explain the five principles of human communication and identify how they are integrated into the intercultural, interpersonal, small group/team, and presentational speaking contexts, (2) Analyze and appropriately manage interpersonal conflict by using the five principles of human communication, (3) Identify and describe appropriate adaptive messages in intercultural communication situations and demonstrate appropriate affective responses to intercultural communication interactions, (4) Develop, organize, and deliver an *informative* presentation, and (5) Deliver a *persuasive* presentation integrating the five principles into the presentation.

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THE BASIC COURSE AT RISK

After being bantered about for several years, in 2007 the state legislature (representing the university in the case study) mandated that as of 2008, the hours required to earn a bachelor's degree would be reduced from 128 to 120 hours. With this degree reduction, four-year institutions began scrambling to discover ways to manage this directive and be fair to all departments and degree programs. In response, a primary focus of the provost at the institution in the current case study was to encourage the General Education Council to reduce the university's core curriculum from a 46 to a 43-hour core. If this was going to happen, at least one or two courses would face elimination. In addition, with university efforts to become a Hispanic-serving institution with at least 25 percent of full-time students being Hispanic (University News Service, 2010), the provost suggested that courses with a multi-cultural focus would be favored. The primary focus of the General Education Council's near-weekly meetings in 2006 was where to make the cuts—if they were to be made. The basic communication course was one of several discussed during these meetings, prompting the chair and the basic course director to begin examining the educational objectives, goals and outcomes in efforts to retain its university-wide relevance and general education status.

Assessment in the basic communication course—*Fundamentals of Human Communication*—was nothing new. Pencil and paper tests examining student learning of the course's primary principles had been examined for over 20 years. However, when the provost called upon the General Education Council to discuss possible

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courses to be cut, it became clear that course objectives and the assessment instruments and procedures would need to be redefined. The initial focus was placed on developing a multi-cultural focus in the basic course. Topics of cultural diversity were infused within each textbook chapter and class lectures and laboratory discussions. If the focus was substantial and evident then assessing student awareness and understanding of different cultures should reveal this. The course would also have to provide evidence of cognitive and behavioral learning sufficient for the provost, General Education Council and the SACS accreditation review board.

THE BASIC COURSE
AS A GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENT

In a longitudinal study examining the status of the basic communication course across the nation, Morreale et al. (2006) found that over half of the institutions that participated in the study confirmed that the introductory communication course is a general education requirement for their students. Many institutions require this course as part of the general education curriculum because it provides students with essential communication skills which, in turn, will enable them to be successful contributors to society (Kramer & Hinton, 1996). According to guidelines at the institution in which the current study was conducted, general education courses should provide students with "fundamental skills and cultural background that are the marks of an educated person" (Undergraduate Catalog, 2010-2012, p. 45). With the comprehensive content offered, "students per-

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ceive the communication skills taught in basic interpersonal communication and public speaking courses to be useful and relevant for their future career" (Hunt, Ekachai, Garard, & Rust, 2001, p. 17). Thus, the authors in the current study examined specific aspects of the basic course which may enable it to remain a core component in the general education curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessing the Basic Communication Course

Assessment remains a vital component in the instructional context and is an integral process in determining student success within the realm of academia. Assessing communication courses ensures that student learning is occurring and student learning outcomes are being achieved. Additionally, assessment practices are vital to the survival of the basic communication course examined in the current study as a general education requirement. The purpose of assessing the basic course is to provide evidence that the instruction received will increase students' knowledge, improve students' behaviors, and change students' attitudes toward course content. Being able to statistically demonstrate that these changes are occurring will not only ensure that the basic course in the discipline survives (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2004), but also affords it the opportunity to demonstrate distinct contributions to academia (Backlund & Arneson, 2000).

In order to effectively assess the basic communication course, chairs and basic course directors should be aware of the guidelines established by the National

Communication Association (NCA; n.d.) and Backlund and Arneson (2000). These guidelines encourage assessment programs to include all three domains of student learning—cognitive, behavioral, and affective—in order to provide evidence of holistic learning in the basic course. Additionally, they discuss that effective assessment teams should "(1) create clear objectives; (2) focus on oral communication; (3) create an effective program; and (4) redesign the plan as needed" (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, p. 93). Thus, the current case study is guided by the criteria set forth by NCA as well as Backlund and Arneson (2000) and attempts to justify the need for the basic course as a general education requirement. The end goal is to provide effective statistical evidence of the course's success, specifically demonstrating improvement in scores on cognitive, behavioral, and affective measures of student learning.

Assessing Intercultural Communication and the Basic Course

As discussed previously, incorporating an intercultural dimension into the curriculum and assessment plan is vital to the retention of the basic course in the current case study. University administrators urge educators to include an intercultural dimension into the curriculum, as educational diversity becomes a primary focus of higher education (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). In the current study, the intercultural communication component plays a major role in the course's status as a general education requirement. Therefore, the basic course director has

implemented an assessment measure of intercultural communication.

In the course's textbook, *Communication Principles for a Lifetime*, Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2010) define intercultural communication as, "communication between people who have different cultural traditions" (p. 151). According to Funkhouser (1995), people engage in communication with those of various cultures on a daily basis, however few effectively utilize intercultural communication skills. Therefore, many institutions incorporate an intercultural component into the curriculum of the basic communication course. At least 71 percent of the colleges and universities in the country currently provide intercultural communication instruction as part of the basic communication course curriculum (Morreale et al., 2006).

In the current study, the basic course requires students to engage in lectures that provide course content about intercultural communication as well as participation in experiential learning and skill building activities. These activities are conducted in lab sessions geared toward improving students' reduction of intercultural communication apprehension. The experiential learning activities specifically address ethnocentrism and awareness, as well as skills to help students adapt their communication when confronting individuals from other cultures. The students also participate in interactive activities that include paraphrasing and adapting message content in order to practice and improve these skills.

While intercultural communication is an important aspect of the pedagogy in the basic course, instructors must also create effective assessment measures to en-

sure student learning outcomes and justify it in the general education core. The assessment process is also vital in identifying areas for improvement in the basic course, such as the decision to implement and refine the intercultural content. Furthermore, assessment serves as a means to improve and enhance students' intercultural communication skills after receiving instruction.

Research Question

Through the current case study the authors initially hope to discover whether student learning occurred in the basic communication course. Additionally, assessment instruments examining cognitive learning outcomes, conflict management skills, and intercultural communication apprehension are utilized to provide informative tools regarding improvements that can be made in the basic communication course to ensure greater student applicability. With these goals in mind the following research question was examined: *Did students improve on measures of cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of learning from the beginning to the end of a semester?*

METHODS

Participants

Participants in the study consisted of 686 students, representing 25% of the entire student population enrolled in the basic course for the semesters utilized in

the study. The demographic data of the participants was not specified. The students were enrolled in one large lecture section and smaller "breakout labs" within the basic communication course. The researchers utilized a convenience sampling technique to recruit participants for the study. The participants voluntarily completed the assessment instrument and were not given extra credit points or incentives for their contribution to the assessment process.

Procedures

A pretest-posttest design was utilized in the assessment process; therefore, two data collections occurred each semester. Instructors administered the pretest at the beginning of the semester before content instruction. The posttest was administered to the same group of students at the end of the semester. The students were asked to complete the pretest and posttest without utilizing their textbook or notes. The participants were asked to identify their pretests and posttests by marking them with their student identification number at the top of the page. At the end of the semester, the assessment team matched students' pretests and posttests by using the students' identification numbers. In order to ensure a large enough sample, data was collected over the course of two semesters. The pretest / posttest design was used to determine if a difference between the scores existed (Keyton, 2006).

Instruments

To measure students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning outcomes, the assessment instrument was divided into three sections, each consisting of a different measure. Cognitive learning was assessed with the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment (See Appendix). The behavioral domain of learning was assessed with the Conflict Management Skills Assessment (Mottet, 2003), and the affective domain of learning was measured with the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension, also known as the PRICA (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997).

Cognitive learning outcome assessment. The first instrument was developed by the basic course director to measure the cognitive component of student learning. This instrument was selected because it directly measures cognitive learning outcomes outlined in the course objectives. The cognitive learning outcomes focus on five principles of communication taught in the course including: 1) be aware of your communication with yourself and others, 2) effectively use and interpret verbal messages, 3) effectively use and interpret nonverbal messages, 4) listen and respond thoughtfully to others, and 5) appropriately adapt messages to others. The assessment instrument utilized to measure this objective encompassed items reflecting the five principles of human communication and course content taught in the classroom. The measure consists of 15 multiple-choice items, each with four response choices. The questions were designed to assess knowledge of the cognitive learning objectives. Scores for each item were dichotomous (correct or incorrect) and KR-20 reliability analysis for the pretest revealed a .58 and a .64 for the post-

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test which are both considered satisfactory for short (10-15) item tests (Kehoe, 1995). Refer to the Appendix for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment.

Behavioral learning outcome assessment. The second assessment instrument was the Conflict Management Assessment (Mottet, 2003). A second objective of the course focuses on students' conflict management skills and the instrument selected to evaluate this was a self-perceived conflict management competence measure. This instrument was implemented in the assessment process to measure the behavioral dimension of learning for the basic course. The assessment instrument consists of seven communication behaviors that can be used to manage conflict in relationships. The scale ranges from 0 to 100, with 0 representing perceptions of complete incompetence and 100 representing extreme competence in managing interpersonal conflict. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceived competence in using each of the behavioral skills to manage conflict in relationships. Although previous reliability estimates for this scale have not been previously reported, the alpha reliabilities in the current study were analyzed for the Conflict Management Skills Assessment in both the pretest and posttest. The pretest alpha reliability was .72, while the posttest alpha reliability was reported at .79.

Affective learning outcome assessment. The third and final instrument utilized to assess the basic course was the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). This instrument was selected based on the focus of intercultural competence in the course objectives. Additionally, communication apprehension, and in this in-

stance, intercultural communication apprehension, has been identified as an assessment of affect toward communication by previous researchers and educators (Comandena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Thus, this instrument was selected because it effectively measures and demonstrates students' affect toward the course, as they willingly utilize the course material to alter their communication outside of the classroom with individuals of varying cultures.

The PRICA measures an individual's perceived apprehension when communicating with people from different cultural groups. The measure consists of 14 Likert items. Responses are indicated on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. Scores for the PRICA can range from 14-70. Negative items on the instrument were reverse-coded, such that a total score below 32 indicated the respondent had a high level of intercultural communication apprehension and a total score above 52 indicated a low level of intercultural communication apprehension. Scores between 32 and 52 indicate the respondent has a moderate level of intercultural communication apprehension. The PRICA has demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .94$) and face and construct validity in previous research (Neulip & McCroskey, 1997). In the current assessment the alpha reliability for the pretest PRICA was .92, while the alpha reliability for the posttest PRICA was .93.

The three instruments were strategically selected for their ability to meet NCA's established criteria for assessment practices (National Communication Association, n.d.). They were designed to measure the objectives defined by the General Education Council, the commu-

nication department, and the basic course director as well as indicators of student learning. As previously stated, the goal of the assessment process in education is to demonstrate that cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of student learning are taking place, thus providing justification for the basic communication course as a component of the general education curriculum.

RESULTS

Paired samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine if participants' scores on the three assessment measures differed from the beginning to the end of the semester. This analysis was conducted after a Pearson correlation determined that the three learning indicator scores were unrelated. The range of scores for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment pretest was 0-15 ($M = 8.36$, $SD = 2.68$) with the same score range on the post-test assessment ($M = 10.34$, $SD = 2.74$). The *t*-test result was significant: $t(685) = 20.27$, $p < .001$, indicating the mean cognitive score for students was significantly higher at the end of the semester. This suggests cognitive learning objectives are being met and student cognitive learning is occurring.

The range of scores achieved on the Conflict Management Skills pretest was 3-100 ($M = 66.63$, $SD = 14.37$) and 4-100 ($M = 74.12$, $SD = 13.86$) on the posttest assessment. The *t*-test result was significant: $t(685) = 14.59$, $p < .001$, indicating the mean of the students' perceived conflict management skills was significantly higher at the end of the semester than at the beginning.

This result indicates instruction provided during the semester likely contributed to the improvement of students' behavioral learning of conflict management skills.

The range of scores on the PRICA pre-assessment was 16-70 ($M = 52.73$, $SD = 9.76$) with the same score range on the posttest assessment ($M = 55.05$, $SD = 9.58$). The t-test result was significant: $t(685) = 7.72$, p < .001, indicating students' perceived greater comfort levels in intercultural communication encounters at the end of the semester. Therefore, participants were less apprehensive about communicating in the intercultural context at the end of the semester suggesting that instruction provided a positive change in students' affect toward course material.

In addition, it is also important to note that the greatest improvement for students was made in the cognitive learning assessment, followed by conflict management and intercultural competence. The calculated t exceeded the critical values in all cases but in descending values in the three areas (cognitive: $t = 20.27$; conflict management: $t = 14.59$, and intercultural competence $t = 7.71$)

DISCUSSION

The current research serves as a case study for assessing the core components and objectives of a basic communication course. This study examined cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning outcomes in order to statistically provide a more holistic impression of student learning. Additionally, the current study provided evidence that intercultural communication can be ad-

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dressed and apprehension reduced through teaching within the basic communication course. Upon completion of the course, pretest and posttest results revealed an increase in students' cognitive learning, improvement in behavioral learning and skills, and a positive change in affective learning measured via attitudes toward intercultural communication. Although these results are only generalizable to the students attending the present institution, the data provides implications for basic communication courses at other institutions and are discussed in the implications section.

Results revealed that students' scores on the posttest for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment were significantly higher than the scores on the pretest. Therefore, after receiving instruction in the basic course, students had a better understanding of the concepts associated with the principles of human communication taught in the class. These results demonstrate the importance of designing clear learning objectives and providing adequate instruction to meet the criteria of these objectives. Additionally, the statistical tests provide confirmation that the cognitive learning objectives are being met and that students are, in fact, developing knowledge of course content through instruction in the basic communication course. These results can be used to provide evidence to university officials that the primary components of communication outlined in the course goals are being learned.

Results also indicated great improvement in student perceptions of their conflict management skills determined by the increase in the behavioral learning scores on the pre- and post-assessments. Students reported a significant increase in their perceived conflict manage-

ment competency after completing the basic course. Based on the results of the pretest-posttest, it can be concluded that the instruction provided in the course enhanced students' perceived ability to utilize effective behaviors to manage conflict. This competence is vital to dealing with conflict in contexts taught in this course (interpersonal, small groups, and organizations).

Results of the PRICA provided evidence of students' feelings or affect toward their intercultural communication. Students reported being less apprehensive when communicating with individuals of different races and/or cultures after completing the course. Specifically, compared to the scores on the pretest, students reported an increase in intercultural communication comfort levels (or reduced intercultural communication apprehension) on the posttest. The outcome of the statistical analysis suggests that students not only developed an awareness of their intercultural fears, but were less apprehensive when considering a communication encounter with individuals of different cultures after taking the basic course.

Intercultural communication apprehension is an obstacle individuals constantly face when interacting with others from different cultures and backgrounds (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). With the dynamic and growing diversity in our population, it is imperative to not only teach students how to communicate with people who are culturally different but also to demonstrate that the students are motivated to do so (Evangelauf, 1990). Researchers have argued that learning intercultural communication skills is essential to survival in both the professional and personal realms (Funkhouser, 1995), and with the increase of administrators in higher education

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focusing on diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999), the findings from the current study are essential for the justification of the basic communication course as a general education requirement. In addition to the inclusion of an intercultural dimension, educators should also focus on effective assessment as a means to improve the basic communication course.

Findings that students performed better on the cognitive learning assessment at the end of the semester was not necessarily surprising but certainly good news for the department and the course. This is typically the priority of most departments—that students learn the course and text material. However, others goals of this course are behaviorally and affectively-oriented and though students may not have improved as much in these two areas, they did change. Students did perceive they could more skillfully manage conflict in their relationships and felt less apprehension during interactions with individuals from other cultures. The information gleaned from these rather simple results can aid instructors in developing activities and teaching methods to assist students in honing their skills in these two areas. The change is positive, but more can be done to advance these areas of learning in the basic communication course.

Assessment instruments are powerful tools that can enhance instruction as well as student learning outcomes. In addition, they provide vital evidence to administrators that the basic communication course fulfills the expectations of general education courses. As results of the current assessment confirm, instructors were able to meet the course objectives and stimulate learning among students. As previous research has

demonstrated, without providing evidence of successful student learning, the basic communication course may lose its position as a general education requirement (Morreale et al., 2006). Current results indicated that instruction of communication principles through the basic course enabled students to perform significantly better on an assessment of their communication knowledge, skills, and affect. The findings provide evidence that the basic communication course is achieving its goal of supplying students with these three vital aspects of learning within the communication discipline. It may also provide direction for basic course directors whose courses are facing the possibility of elimination or those hoping to be recognized for the value and essential learning tools provided in their course.

Limitations/Implications for Future Research

Limitations. The current study offers valuable information concerning assessment practices and inclusion of an intercultural dimension in the basic communication course. However, the results should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The sample size served as a limitation, as only 25 percent of students enrolled in the basic communication course participated in the assessment process. Even though the sample of students likely represents the population of students enrolled in the basic course, they did not all participate nor was the sample random. In addition, many students drop the course throughout the semester and many completed the pretest, but not the posttest, which prevented the authors from using their data. Along with this, demographic information was not gath-

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ered, thus, valuable information regarding sex, ethnicity, and classification were not included in the study.

Another limitation concerns inconsistency in the distribution of the pre- and post-assessment instruments. The majority of the basic course instructors asked students to complete the pre-assessment instrument during the first lab session and the post-assessment during the final lab session. However, some basic course instructors advised students to complete the pre- and post-assessments outside of the classroom. The inconsistency in the administration of the assessments serves as a limitation because those who completed the assessments outside of the classroom were not given ample opportunity to ask questions about any confusion related to assessment items. It is important to view the study within these limitations in an effort to ensure valid and reliable assessment practices in the future.

Implications for future assessment practices. Given the research concerning assessment practices in the basic communication course, there are several implications for future research. First, based on the limitations of the study there are several recommendations for future assessment practices utilizing a pretest-posttest methodology. In an effort to enhance reliability and validity, future assessment practices should incorporate the use of technology to aid in reaching a larger sample. The current study utilized surveys that were bound in the course guidebook, which is a required text for all students. Therefore, the response rate was not representative of the total sample of students enrolled in the basic course. Rather than examining a portion of the sample, future assessment practices should consider providing

students with a variety of options including paper and electronic surveys to increase participation.

Future assessment practices should also consider utilizing a control group to compare the results of students who received instruction in the basic course with those who did not. Students in the control group should be given the pretest and posttest assessments in the same manner as students enrolled in the basic course. This assessment design could provide greater confidence in the results and indicate instruction as the primary change agent (Beebe et al., 2004). These assessment procedures would enable educators to demonstrate to university administrators that the basic course is achieving its intended goals (Backlund & Arneson, 2000) and should remain in the general education curriculum.

Implications for teaching the basic course. The results of the current case study provide valuable information and have large implications for the basic communication course at this and other institutions of higher education. Although the results of the study were statistically significant, the increases were not as considerable as preferred. In order to create a more noteworthy increase in scores on the assessment measures, the authors must evaluate all aspects of the course and the assessment process itself. Thus, the following changes will be discussed as means of improving the instruction and student learning in the basic communication course.

The first major change which will be implemented in the basic course deals with the behavioral domain of learning. Although the scores increased from the beginning to the end of the semester, the authors suggest fo-

cusing more time in the lab sessions practicing skill building in order to experience a more significant increase in scores. In the current case study, lab instructors have been allowed to select lesson plans regarding the conflict management skill sets, and many instructors utilize media examples and have students analyze the skill sets of the characters. However, the results of the study suggest that lab instructors should focus their plans to more effectively train students to deal with conflict through experiential practice and role-play scenarios. This would allow students to actually engage in conflict behaviors, while having a trained evaluator present to provide feedback.

Another change which will be implemented based on the results of the current case study deals with the measures used to assess student learning. Although the measures appear valid, the items should be examined to ensure they are the most effective to use when measuring the course's objectives. Specifically, the conflict management competence and the cognitive learning outcome scales are being examined for their usefulness. The assessment team suggests revising the cognitive learning outcome scale by adding additional questions in order to provide evidence of further reliability. For the conflict management competence scale, the authors have a few suggestions. First, it would be beneficial to assess students' actual conflict behaviors rather than ask students to complete a self-report measurement regarding their behavioral perceptions. This would require the development of a rating system and evaluators trained in effective conflict behaviors which they would utilize to assess students' conflict competence. If the department does not have the funds for implementing this

assessment plan, another option would be to revise Cupach and Spitzberg's (1981) Self-Rated Competence Scale to fit the conflict management competence dimension. Utilizing a scale which has previously demonstrated reliability and validity is crucial to the assessment process and should be done in the future of this basic communication course.

Finally, it will be important and informative to collect demographic information from students in future assessment instruments. This will allow instructors to know more about the diversity of students who may be facing challenges with the course material. Additionally, as the nation's population continues to become more diverse, higher education curricula must accommodate the changing nature of society. Thus, it is the objective of the authors to urge others to incorporate intercultural communication into the curriculum of the basic course. Instructing students in this area not only provides them with critical knowledge and skills for interacting with others who are culturally different, but it also provides additional justification for the basic communication course to maintain its general education status.

CONCLUSION

The assessment process is critical in determining students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning; therefore, communication scholars must continuously improve assessment practices. Without providing evidence of student learning, the basic communication course may be at risk for elimination within the general education curriculum. If the basic communication course

were removed, students would not gain essential communication knowledge and skills in the interpersonal, small group, and public speaking arenas. Thus, it is imperative to continue improving our assessment measures as a means to keep the basic communication course a component in this curriculum.

Furthermore, it is only through assessment that educators will know if they need to revise their methods of instruction. Providing students with communication knowledge, affect, and skills should be the ultimate goal for communication educators. Therefore, we must effectively evaluate these domains in order to ensure that our students are receiving a well-rounded education. Additionally, researchers should continue to explore various means of assessment in order to provide basic course instructors with innovative ways to measure learning outcomes. Without analyzing the assessment process in general, we will be unable to "know if we are actually doing what we intend to do in the classroom and in our educational programs" (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, p. 88). The current study should be viewed as a case study for other basic communication courses across the nation. Although the results of the study may seem unique to the institution where the study takes place, the implications move far beyond that limited scope. Other basic communication courses may look to this as an example in assessment.

Specifically, other basic communication courses should be assessing student learning based on the three domains of learning relative to the course's objectives. Furthermore, it is the intent of the authors to encourage department chairs and basic course directors to be proactive in examining their assessment process and the

results from this process in an attempt to promote growth and retention of the basic communication course. Without this process, instructors will be unsure if the information they are providing is actually being received and internalized. Thus, educators will have no way of knowing whether student learning is being achieved. Finally, the assessment process is quickly becoming the most effective means of justifying the need for a basic communication course as a general education requirement. As a general education requirement, the basic communication course may provide departments with large enrollment, which in turn, provides financial support as well as a means by which graduate teaching assistants receive financial support and teaching experience. To sum up, assessment affects every level of higher education institutions including students and instructors, and courses and departments, providing further evidence that educators need to evaluate the means by which they assess in order to refine the process to its best capabilities.

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APPENDIX

Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment

Instructions: Please place your student identification number in the space marked "Identification Number." Please circle the multiple-choice response that most accurately answers the question or completes the sentence.

1. Luke is driving his car to the grocery store. The music is playing, his wife is talking to him on his cell phone, and the A/C is buzzing. Luke begins to sing the words to the song on the radio. Which stage of perception has Luke engaged in?
   a. Attention
   b. Interpretation
   c. Selection
   d. Organization

2. In the perception process, the process of converting information into convenient, understandable, and efficient patterns that allow people to make sense of what they observed is defined as:
   a. Attention
   b. Selection
   c. Organization
   d. Interpretation

3. Robin suspected that her roommate, Julie, wanted to break up with her boyfriend. Rather than asking her specifically, Robin paid close attention to how Julie complained about him, avoided his phone calls, and was late getting ready for dates with him. What method was Robin using to check her perception of Julie?
   a. Active perception checking
   b. Direct perception checking
   c. Indirect perception checking
   d. Avoidant perception checking

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4. The difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of words is that:
   a. Connotative meanings are direct and objective while denotative meanings contain emotional elements.
   b. Denotative meanings are personal and subjective while connotative meanings are restrictive and literal.
   c. Connotative meanings are less meaningful than denotative meanings.
   d. Denotative meanings convey content while connotative meanings convey feelings.

5. In response to his son's request, Dad says, "I don't care what you want. You'll do what I tell you, when I tell you, and that's that!" Which strategy for creating a supportive climate does his outburst most likely violate?
   a. Solving problems rather than controlling others
   b. Being genuine rather than being manipulative
   c. Empathizing rather than being apathetic
   d. Describing your own feelings rather than evaluating others

6. Kenny is having trouble with his girlfriend Liz. During one of their conflicts, Kenny said that she was a "high maintenance" girlfriend. Liz became very defensive. After taking COMM 1310, Kenny learned the difference between supportive and defensive verbal messages. He realized that he should have said, "I receive five calls a day from you asking my advice and I'm beginning to feel uneasy about your dependence on me." This scenario represents which pair of supportive versus defensive verbal messages?
   a. Descriptive vs. Evaluative Verbal Messages
   b. Empathic vs. Apathetic Verbal Messages
   c. Equal vs. Superior Verbal Messages
   d. Flexible vs. Rigid Verbal Messages

7. Angela is becoming aware of how touch stimulates mean-
   ing in the minds of others. Her awareness focuses on:
   a. Haptics
   b. Kinesics
   c. Proxemics
   d. Vocalics

8. Jen and Lisa are tubing down the Guadalupe River. Jen
   sees a group of good-looking men floating their way. As
   they near, Jen and Lisa suck in their stomachs, tense up
   their muscles, and try not to look at the guys as they are
   approaching. Jen and Lisa's behaviors illustrate:
   a. Affect displays
   b. Back-channeling cues
   c. Courtship readiness
   d. Positional cues

9. You and your friends congregate at the same table in the
   Alkek library almost every day. You always sit in the
   same chair each time you and your friends meet. Your be-
   havior illustrates:
   a. Adaptors
   b. Territoriality
   c. Personal space
   d. Public space

10. Hearing is different from listening in that hearing is a
    _____ process.
    a. Affective
    b. Cognitive
    c. Physiological
    d. Psychological

11. The process of confirming your understanding of a mes-
    sage represents which step of the listening process?
    a. Attending
    b. Understanding
    c. Remembering
    d. Responding

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12. As Juan sat in his biology lab, the lab instructor was droning on about the techniques of vivisection. Juan kept thinking about the concert he was going to attend this weekend on 6th Street in Austin. Which of the following stages of listening is Juan having the most trouble with?
    a. Selecting
    b. Attending
    c. Remembering
    d. Responding

13. Which of the following is a typical value of a masculine culture?
    a. Caring for the less fortunate
    b. Valuing traditional roles for men and women
    c. Building relationships is more important than completing tasks
    d. Being sensitive toward others

14. Which of the following is a characteristic of a centralized approach to power culture?
    a. There are clear lines of authority in who reports to whom
    b. Leadership is spread out among a number of people
    c. Power and influence are shared by many people
    d. Decisions are made by consensus

15. Men place more emphasis on the _____ dimension of communication because they view communication as functioning primarily for information exchange. This dimension contains primarily _____ messages.
    a. Relational, verbal
    b. Content, verbal
    c. Relational, nonverbal
    d. Content, nonverbal