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## Student Learning Outcomes: Primary Drivers of Course Design

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## *The Basic Course Forum*

### **Student Learning Outcomes: Primary Drivers of Course Design**

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*Samuel P. Wallace*

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) should be the core around which every college course is centered. As a result of taking this course: What should students know? What should they be able to do or to demonstrate? What should students value? Perhaps most important, How should students be changed or affected by taking this course? Effective course planning is made possible when these outcomes are focused and specific, and when the outcomes themselves are a high priority of the course. In spite of this maxim, student learning outcomes have not always been the primary driver of the design(s) of the basic course in Communication.

One of the questions on the table, then, is "What forces have typically driven basic course designs?" A primary driver is likely found in the traditions in the field of Speech or Speech Communication. The basic course, much like the modern field of Communication itself, began nearly a century ago with its focus on public speaking. That tradition endures to the present, and it still merits our attention. Course designs are also driven by department traditions. That is, the course is taught in a particular way because that is the way the course has always been taught at a particular institution. Sometimes the shape of the course is based on the

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preferences or the particular expertise of the faculty member who directs the course. In those schools in which the basic course is service oriented or is part of the general education curriculum, the design is frequently influenced by the expressed needs of other departments whose majors take the course. Finally, to some extent, mandates from legislatures, boards of regents, or other governing bodies influence basic course content.

Few of the drivers mentioned above constitute a strong rationale or validation for a particular design. This lack of justification and clear focus has placed many programs in jeopardy when budget cuts loom, when turf conflicts crop up, or when questions of centrality to institutional mission arise. To combat these and other threats, the basic course program should have a solid rationale and a strong connection to the mission of the institution and the general education curriculum.

The other question on the table, and the focus of this essay, is: "What *should* drive the design of the basic course in Communication?" Instead of being driven by traditions, or preference, or mandates, the design must be driven by student learning outcomes. What specifically do we want our students to know and be able to do, and how do we want them to change as a result of taking this course? This is easy to state in a strong way, but determining those student learning outcomes is a much larger and more complex task. Where do these SLOs come from? Following are some suggested primary and secondary sources.

**Source:** *The traditions of the field of Communication* certainly need to be considered. One of the central objectives of NCA and its membership is, and has al-

ways been, engaged citizenship. Even since the time of the ancient Greeks, participation in civic affairs has been made possible by competent speaking in public and the ability to move others with words. So the knowledge and skill necessary to move others should be considered for inclusion on our list.

**Source:** *The environment* in which the basic course lives should have some influence on the student learning outcomes. The institution housing the department of Communication has a mission to accomplish, as does the general education curriculum in which many basic courses operate. As such, the basic course should recognize its obligation to support those missions, even if it is in some small way. Many institutions want its graduates to be good citizens, or leaders, or ethical communicators. The basic course can certainly make a contribution to the support of those goals. In addition, if the course is part of general education (or if other departments require the course for their majors), the faculty members of those departments and the professions that they represent should be regularly consulted to determine what kinds of oral communication knowledge and skills can benefit their students. This does not mean, as many basic course directors have said, that Communication professionals should allow the content of their courses to be determined by others. It does mean that, once those oral communication needs have been identified by consultation with the mission, general education, and representatives of constituent departments and professions, that Communication professionals will deliver the course design to achieve those outcomes. Fulfilling needs and supporting the mission will establish a strong

rationale for the course as well as position it as central to supporting the institutional mission.

**Source:** Although this might be considered a temporary problem, course designers should consider remediation for the current generation of students, often identified as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001), who have been drawn into text and other digital media based means of interacting with others. As Carr (2011) and McLuhan (1964) have pointed out, the tools that people use shape the way their brains work. One result of this reshaping phenomenon, according to Mullen (2011), is that the digital natives are becoming less skilled at empathy and social interaction, have lower acuity of perception of nonverbal behaviors, and they have a reluctance to interact socially. This decline in face-to-face communication skill is resulting in a reduction of the repertoire of situation or context appropriate communication behavioral strategies that we customarily build up from childhood well into adulthood. A focus on oral communication in interpersonal settings should be considered by the basic course.

**Source:** Counteraction of the influence of media on the nature of discussion and civic communication. Somehow, the United States and some other countries have developed a culture of shouting that has replaced reasoned discussion and debate. Much media attention is given to "civic discussions" of this type, and an apparent result is the perception by our citizens that this is how it should be done. Listening either does not exist, or it is done simply to find an opening to express one's own point of view. As conversation becomes more "competitive," there is little attempt to consider or understand the point of view of any other person. A lack of civility

has evolved from the shouting matches that masquerade as "town meetings" to the point that many politicians and average citizens see no use in this type of forum. The basic course should consider student learning outcomes that encourage listening and dialogue. This civil dialogue should be aimed at open minded consideration of the point of view of others with the goal of understanding, and not necessarily agreeing with, that point of view.

It is unlikely that this list is exhaustive; but it is a starting place to get us thinking about the possibilities. This brief list also illustrates two issues. The first is that it's probably not productive to try to standardize the basic course across institutions. As mentioned earlier, basic course designers should be trying to adapt the course to the mission of the institution and to the needs of constituent departments and professions. As every institution has a different approach to missions and specific constituent needs, to apply a standard course to all situations weakens the value of the course as well as weakens its position in the institution. This would be equivalent to the dark ages physicians who prescribed a customary "blood-letting" as a cure of every disease and injury (For a silly but meaningful illustration of this point, see the YouTube replay of "Theodoric of York: Medieval Barber" from the 1970's Saturday Night Live series.). The second issue is that we should consider student learning outcomes to be somewhat "fluid" or transient in nature. The digital natives issue would not have existed 25 years ago, so there would have been no reason to treat it. While civic communication has nearly always had a contentious nature, we still might be hard-pressed to find many examples in recent history where

the political communication climate is as uncivilized and non productive as it currently seems to be. There might be times when the need to learn lessons of civility is not as acute, so it might take a lower priority. Even so, the lesson seems to be that basic course designers and instructors should always be looking out for potential problem areas related to oral communication. Finally, in the event that the institutional or general education mission is modified, the student learning outcomes of the basic course should be revisited and perhaps adjusted to continue to support that mission and allow the basic course to maintain its central position in the institution.

Following is an example of the application of the SLOs that have been discussed in this essay. Based on the university and general education mission, feedback from professionals, consultation with faculty members of constituent departments, recognizing the idiosyncratic needs of the current generation of students, and recognizing the nature of the current trend of non-productive "civic" communication, a medium sized Midwestern University adopted the following student learning outcomes:

**\* Explanation:** Students will be able to explain abstract, complex, or specialized concepts to listeners who are not specialists but who have a need to understand the concepts being explained.

**\*Advocacy:** Students will be able to advocate a position based on sound logic and credible evidence.

**\*Civil Dialogue:** Students will be able to engage in true dialogue, using open minded listening, using civil attitudes and behaviors, in the attempt to understand

the points of view of others and to express their own points of view.

**\*Critical Analysis of Messages:** Students will be able to attend to, accurately interpret information and intentions, and craft appropriate responses.

The course design resulting from these student learning outcomes is not the focus of this essay. However, it should be clearly noted that the design of this course was the result of and flowed from the student learning outcomes. The student learning outcomes were not the result of the course design. In addition, it was determined that the SLOs identified for this particular course could be achieved in a "context agnostic" design. All of the SLOs mentioned above could be achieved in a variety of communication contexts. None of the SLOs absolutely demand to be taught in a public speaking, group, interpersonal, or other setting.

To be sure that the course design is achieving the student learning outcomes, a regular and systematic program of assessment should be implemented. Along with allowing clear and sharply focused course design, the use of student learning outcomes can be used to develop equally clear and focused assessment tools. The process is made more efficient if the measures are directly based on achievement of the student learning outcomes rather than trying to measure the effect of specific assignments. Designed in this way, a single rubric or other assessment tool can measure the effect of any number of assignments or types of assignments designed to achieve the outcome. By extension, it allows changing the design or specific assignments as needed without an overhaul of assessment procedures.



The design process described in this essay should not be considered a "one-time" activity. It is essential for the designers of the basic course at any institution to regularly examine the mission, the needs of constituent departments and professions, and the transient needs of the times.

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