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Basic Course Central Student Learning Outcomes: Enhancing the Traditional with the Critical

David H. Kahl, Jr.

A primary goal of the basic course in communication is learning to communicate effectively. The National Communication Association explains the importance of effective communication: “Competence in oral communication—in speaking and listening—is prerequisite to students’ personal and academic success in life” (Morreale & Backlund, 2007, p. 1). Because most college students are only required to take one communication class, it is imperative that students reap the benefits of instruction in the basic course in communication. One way to ensure that this occurs is by providing students with well-developed learning outcomes that help students meet the overall goal of becoming competent communicators.

Effective learning outcomes are important because they “state the specific skills, abilities, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, or dispositions that students are expected to develop as a result of completing a class” (McConnell & Doolittle, 2012, p. 19). Well-developed learning outcomes are beneficial for both instructors and students. First, instructors benefit because the learning outcomes help them to organize the basic course, plan assignments, and develop assessment procedures (Sellnow & Martin, 2010; Suskie, 2009). Second, students benefit because outcomes explain the course

requirements and expectations for the basic course, which make students aware of the skills and knowledge they will gain by the conclusion of the semester (McConnell & Doolittle, 2012).

Given that well-developed outcomes are crucial for instructor and student success, it is necessary to delineate the central learning outcomes for the basic course in communication. Therefore, I will first articulate four traditional outcomes that I believe are necessary for students to become effective public speakers. Second, after discussing the benefits of integrating a critical approach in the basic course, I will present a fifth, critical, learning outcome. After doing so, I will discuss how this additional critical learning outcome can enhance the course by expanding upon each of the traditional outcomes.

TRADITIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

I believe that students should gain proficiency in four areas in order to become competent communicators in their academic and personal lives. To do so, basic course outcomes should articulate for students the speech-development process from idea generation to speech delivery. The outcomes should elucidate for students that they need to develop proficiency in speech delivery, speech structure, types of speeches, and their connections to effective communication in their lives.

The outcomes necessary for student success can be articulated as follows: 1) Students will develop effective formal and speaking outlines, 2) Students will present a variety of types of speeches (informative, persuasive,

impromptu, and special occasion), 3) Students will utilize effective delivery techniques in their speeches, and 4) Students will comprehend the role of communication in everyday life. Because these traditional learning outcomes guide students through the process of speech development to speech delivery, they address most of the major concepts that students should learn in the basic course in communication in order to become competent communicators.

Critical Learning Outcome

The traditional learning outcomes are important in aiding students to develop speaking proficiency. However, the basic course in communication, specifically when its focus is on public speaking, has been criticized because of its narrow focus and its “how-to” formulaic approach to speaking (Emanuel, 2005). Although I see value in the basic course in communication and its traditional learning outcomes, I argue that the inclusion of a fifth, overarching outcome is necessary that embraces the goals of critical communication pedagogy. A critical learning outcome moves the basic course beyond a “how to” course by challenging students to examine hegemony and marginalization that occur in their communities. By applying a critical lens to the basic course, a critical outcome can guide the content of the speeches that students produce, can enhance the learning of the traditional four outcomes, and can affect change in students’ lives beyond the classroom. To explain the background of this learning outcome, a brief description of critical communication pedagogy is necessary.

Critical communication pedagogy. Critical communication pedagogy examines power in terms of its effect on communication practices (Simpson, 2010). This pedagogical approach serves to heighten students' awareness of hegemony in the classroom and in the community (Fassett & Warren, 2007; Kahl, 2013). I believe that the inclusion of a critical outcome to the basic course will enhance students' communicative abilities by challenging them to apply their knowledge of communication by confronting hegemony and marginalization that exist in their communities.

The roots of critical communication pedagogy derive from Freire. Giroux (2010) explains Freire's critical approach to education:

What Freire made clear is that pedagogy at its best is not about training in techniques and methods... Education ... provides the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to explore for themselves the possibilities of what it means to be engaged citizens. (n.p.)

Freire advocates for pedagogy that strives for conscientization, which includes: developing a heightened awareness of hegemony, identifying avenues for praxis, and taking steps toward praxis. For Freire, praxis, or taking action based upon knowledge, is a necessary step to reach conscientization (1970). Thus, the learning outcome that meets the goals of critical communication pedagogy and conscientization should be as follows: 5) Students will become critically engaged with marginalized groups in society and, through their speeches, articulate steps toward praxis.

Facilitating a Critical Learning Outcome

Instructors can incorporate a critical perspective in the basic course assignments that assists students in achieving the critical learning outcome. For example, students may complete a series of informative and persuasive speeches in which they examine hegemony in their communities. A useful means to examine hegemony in the community is through programs such as service learning (Kahl, 2010). To do so, students may complete service-learning projects with local nonprofit agencies that assist marginalized groups in order to learn about marginalized groups' experiences. This experience, along with research, can form the basis for public speeches. After completing the service-learning project, students could develop informative speeches that make the class aware of the problems they encountered. Next, students could develop persuasive speeches about the issue that go beyond simply providing information to suggesting detailed solutions that students can actually do in their own communities to begin to work toward praxis. Through these speeches, students move through Freire's (1970) idea of conscientization as they become aware of hegemony and work toward ameliorating it.

**PRAGMATIC VALUE
OF A CRITICAL LEARNING OUTCOME**

I believe that pragmatic value exists for the integration of a critical learning outcome into the basic course. A first pragmatic benefit is that when students are exposed to difficult questions of marginalization through hegemony in society, they become more engaged learn-

ers who are concerned with social justice, and, thus, they also become more engaged citizens who want to intervene in society. Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl's (1956) cognitive taxonomy explains that when students are asked to take course knowledge and apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate it, as they would do in the aforementioned service-learning project, they are able to take the knowledge and transfer it to other areas of study and internalize it for use in their own lives.

A second pragmatic benefit is that a critical learning outcome has the potential to make connections among each of the four traditional outcomes. Outcome 1 involves the development of effective formal and speaking outlines. A critical learning outcome can assist students in achieving outcome 1 because students will write from direct experience in addition to research they have conducted on the subject. Numerous public-speaking textbooks indicate that personal experience combined with research enhances speech development (e.g., Lucas, 2012; Nelson, Titsworth, & Pearson, 2014; O'Hair, Stewart, & Rubenstein, 2012; Verderber, Sellnow, & Verderber, 2012).

Outcome 2 states that students should develop the ability to prepare a variety of types of speeches (usually informative, persuasive, and impromptu). A critical learning outcome has the potential to improve students' performance in speech preparation because students are able to make clearer connections among speech topics. For example, as noted earlier, when students prepare informative speeches about their experiences with knowledge of hegemony, they can more easily transition to actuation persuasive speeches in which they offer

solutions to work toward praxis. Additionally, students can develop impromptu speeches about hegemonic issues relating to their direct experience in the community.

Outcome 3, the acquisition of knowledge and application of effective delivery techniques, has the potential to be improved as well. Because students will speak about real-world problems that they have directly experienced and that can impact our society, students are more likely to use verbal and nonverbal cues because they are more interested in the material about which they speak. Using such immediacy behaviors may increase listeners' affect for the speaker and the subject (Ozmen, 2011).

Finally, students' experiences strengthen their knowledge of the way that communication functions in society. These experiences enhance the learning of outcome 4, the comprehension of the role of communication in everyday life. Working in the community to learn about hegemony and marginalization not only assists students in developing and presenting effective speeches, but also allows students to gain a greater understanding of how communication can serve to both empower and marginalize others in everyday life. A critical learning outcome provides students with the direct experience of communicating with community members informally and with classmates formally.

In sum, I believe that the addition of a critical learning outcome will enhance the traditional focus of the basic course. By moving beyond a "how to" model to one that encourages the application of communicative abilities, students are challenged to apply their public speaking skills to work toward praxis in responding to

hegemonic forces that affect the lives of others in the community. Thus, a critical learning outcome gives students the opportunity to make a difference in society by becoming more engaged citizens. I contend that a critical learning outcome, combined with the four traditional learning outcomes for the basic course in communication, will assist students in becoming better public speakers, communicators, and engaged members of society.

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