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Social Justice and the Basic Course: A Central Student Learning Outcome¹

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The economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental dimensions of globalization impacting our society demand new ways of thinking, acting, and teaching the Basic Communication Course (BCC). By emphasizing the learning outcomes of intellectual and practical skills and acceptance of personal and social responsibility, students will experience a new central learning outcome: what we are calling a social justice sensibility. In this essay we will emphasize the need to integrate the intellectual and practical skills of oral communication and personal and social justice in the BCC. We will discuss how the BCC can help students learn habits of citizenship and the art of *parrhesia* by incorporating service learning for social justice advocacy. Importantly, we discuss how faculty can modify their grading rubric to assess this new outcome.

The BCC is included in the majority of two- and four-colleges and universities and assists institutions in meeting its general education requirement. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) reports that 56% of the institutions surveyed showed that

¹ This work is derived from the first author's PhD dissertation: *Revising Communication Context of Globalization*. The second author was a reader on this project.

general education has become an increasing priority among institutions, while only 3% says that it is diminishing in importance (Glenn, 2009). The survey also indicated that 89% reported that colleges were either re-evaluating or making modifications to their general education requirements. Carol Schneider, AACU president, argued that a general education should produce graduates with “a deep and flexible set of skills” and not rely too heavily on a narrow, technical, pre-professional model of education (Glenn, 2009). Furthermore, Schneider, citing a 2006 survey conducted by employers, noted that businesses also wanted colleges to emphasize written and oral communication, cross-cultural communication skills, and other skills not directly related to a specialized field of study (Glenn, 2009).

Schools and businesses realize that students need a different way of learning. In response, The National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) recommended learning outcomes that can be accomplished utilizing different programs of study, noting that the “world in which today’s students will make choices and compose lives is one of disruption rather than certainty and interdependence rather than ‘insularity.’” This volatility also applies to careers (AACU, 2007, p. 2)

The Council recommended that schools prepare students for the twenty-first century by gaining the following essential learning outcomes: knowledge of human culture and the physical natural world, intellectual and practical skills, and acceptance of personal and social responsibilities. The National Communication Association (NCA) acknowledges and supports the AACU’s position that “communication skills are critical to the

citizenry and workforces of the 21st century” (Simonds, Buckrop, Redmond, & Quianthy, 2012, ¶1).

According to a revised resolution on the role of communication in general education (adopted by the NCA Legislative Assembly), two of the four learning outcomes—Intellectual and Practical Skills and Personal and Social Responsibility—align with the BCC in general education (Simonds, Buckrop, Redmond, & Quianthy, 2012). The NCA resolution also acknowledges that innovative pedagogy *is* being incorporated in the classroom, including learning communities. Moreover, the resolution also confirms a growing consensus among employers that these outcomes consist of the skills employers seek in their college graduates.

In today’s society it is important to not only teach students to be competent oral communicators, but to be individuals who can use dialogue to advocate for peace and social change. In other words, the important skill sets that we provide our students should not be taught in isolation but from a holistic critical perspective (Swartz, 1997). Merging theory and practice in this manner leads to a more substantive and meaningful praxis, and ultimately serves all of the various stakeholders within and outside of the university.

Collectively, we have taught over 124 sections of the BCC over the past two decades. We have taught the course using a variety of formats, including honors, hybrid, and online. We have taught at a minimum of nine different colleges or universities on the West Coast, Midwest, and South. Through our experiences we have learned that the basic course provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate not only the intellectual and practical skills outcomes that

our discipline has provided students for nearly 100 years, but also the outcomes of personal and social responsibility. The integration of these outcomes into our courses can also help our students become global citizens and responsible leaders.

CITIZENSHIP IS A LEARNED HABIT AND PRACTICE

As taught by Aristotle in ancient times and by John Dewey in our modern era, we understand that citizenship is a habit and practice that must be learned. Aristotle and Dewey argued that citizens must be involved in their government, motivated to deliberate debate, and be involved in decisions that impact their lives. Their interpretation of participatory democracy advocates for all citizens to share in the well-being of their government and in their communities. Simply, citizens in a democracy need to learn the habit of citizenship in order to contribute to the state and to the common good. They must also cultivate the skills and intellect to critique and change their government and society.

Michael Lerner (2000) contends that effective citizenship education should challenge students to think critically and that pedagogy itself must change. He contends that pedagogy “must be directed at engaging the student in asking critical questions and learning to see the possibilities in every given actuality” (p. 261). West contends that Socratic questioning is the “enactment of *parrhesia*—frank and fearless speech is the lifeblood of any democracy” (p. 209). Critique, however, requires more than skills and intellect. It requires a commitment to truth speaking. In 1983 at the University of Califor-

nia at Berkley, Michel Foucault delivered six lectures in a seminar entitled “Discourse and Truth.” In this seminar Foucault (2001) discussed the Greek concept of *parrhesia*, or “frankness in speaking the truth” (p. 7). Foucault describes how *parrhesia* appears in Euripides (c. 484–407) and is subsequently used in the Greek world until approximately the close of the fifth century BCE. More recently, the word has been translated into English as “free speech” and *parrhesiastic*—the individual who uses *parrhesia*—is the person who speaks the truth. Foucault depicted *parrhesia* as “verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his [or her] personal relationship to the truth, and risks his [or her] life because he recognized truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people as well as himself” (p. 19). Foucault viewed *parrhesiastes* as a moral and ethical virtue connected with truth (as cited in Peters, 2003).

In our classroom we directly address in the beginning of the semester that controversial topics may be addressed in the classroom and we encourage a frank and bold discussion (for example, the concept of intersectionality and privilege). Foucault contends that frank discussion indicates a special relationship between the speaker and the audience and that the speaker engages in forthright discussion on matters of social consequence.

We argue that Aristotle and Dewey’s emphasis on individual involvement and desire are critical traits in their models of citizenship education and that, combined with *parrhesia*, citizens must and can be engaged in speaking for and against what they consider to be the common good. Aristotle and Dewey’s belief in individual engagement and drive are critical aspects in their citi-

zanship model that can serve as a foundation for redesigning the BCC in the twenty-first century. Rather than the “good person speaking well” (in Quintilian’s classical model), we educate for the engaged citizen speaking critically and civically.

The concept of *parrhesia* can be operationalized as topic selection during persuasive presentations. Students can be encouraged or assigned to develop a persuasive speech dealing with questions of policy. Sample topics from our courses have included the affordable health care act, marriage equality, the wars on terror, social spending for organizations such as the United Way, or local campus issues such as gender violence or rape culture on campus.

A foreign exchange student from Brazil practiced the art of *parrhesia* in one of our courses. The student’s informative presentation focused on the mandatory voting laws in Brazil and compared these laws to voting practices in the United States. The student delivered for her final speech a parrhesiastic speech challenging the American students to participate more in campus, state, and national elections. Her presentation sparked a discussion and debate on what freedom means in our society and the role of the citizen in the democratic process. Following her presentation, many classmates enthusiastically congratulated her on such a bold speech. The exchange student, who was hesitant and shy at the beginning of the semester, blushed and beamed. In this cultural space we became teacher-students and students in the spirit of Paulo Freire. We learned that we must strive harder to instill this type of parrhesiastic enthusiasm in each student if we want them to become pas-

sionate about using their public speaking skills to communicate for social justice, advocacy and peace.

One place where this development has already been undertaken is the movement toward embedding a service learning component in the BCC. The integration of service learning into the basic course crystallizes Dewey's vision of the transformational role that education can play in a democratic society (Swartz, Campbell, & Pestana, 2009). We as communication educators must continually reflect upon how we can help create, in the words of educational theorist Svi Shapiro, a "pedagogy of peace" to better reinforce democratic institutions (2010, p. 70). We have a moral and professional responsibility to teach our students the basic communication skills that are needed to critique, challenge, and address what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) calls "the kind of social order responsible for unhappiness, human suffering, and the [duty] to help those in danger" (p. 215).

Due to globalization and the interconnectivity among all peoples of the planet, it is imperative that college students in the United States "develop and internalize a global perspective into her [or his] thinking, sense of identity, and relationships with others" (Chickering & Braskamp, 2009, p. 27). This is easier said than done. It is important to realize that to develop this critical habit in our students to become global citizens takes *intentionality* on the part of communication educators. This is something that we have to deliberately focus on doing, which is not always easy given the demands placed on our time as overburdened teacher/scholars.

The goal of this central learning outcome for developing a social justice sensibility, along with the integration of service learning in the basic course, helps stu-

dents experience another central learning outcome of integrative and applied learning. This outcome is situated in involvement and with opportunities and challenges. It is grounded in immediate life problems and application relevant to our students' lives. Thus, our proposal of social justice helps the BCC incorporate those essential learning outcomes of intellectual and practical skills (i.e., oral communication, personal, and social responsibility) while highlighting the importance of voice in our multicultural democracy. The merging of social justice responsibility with service learning in the BCC helps our students realize the power of their voice in a real world setting. In our view, the BCC could, in practice, fulfill three of the four essential learning outcomes in the general education curriculum. This type of flexibility in the general education curriculum may be critical in a political environment where one may have to defend the viability of the basic course itself.

We acknowledge and realize that not every section of the BCC may allow instructors to integrate the element of service learning due to time, class size, location of university, constraints of transportation, etc. However, students can still experience this idea of civic engagement through developing informative speeches enlightening their audiences about issues of social justice in our communities; for example, a topic as food banks and food kitchens introduces them to the concept of food justice (Dougherty, 2011). Students may also develop informative speeches about nonprofit organizations in their community to which their peers have little exposure (i.e., a local civil rights organization). This idea may also be extended to the persuasive speech; in one of our classes, for instance, a student gave a persuasive

speech on how she could support a new nonprofit organization for victims of domestic violence in the community. In some courses, we require each student to develop a presentation for a non-profit agency. As part of this assignment, students must interview a staff member for an organization they select and ask that person what areas they would like to raise more public awareness. One student developed presentations for Habitat for Humanity (HH). Her informative speech outlined the process of how to qualify for a Habitat home. The special occasion speech focused on the home dedication ceremony. Her final presentation emphasized the importance of fulfilling one's financial obligations with HH and other creditors. The student also persuaded a student organization she is a member of to adopt HH as their service learning project for the school year. This student developed not only her intellectual and practical skills of oral communication, but developed an acceptance of personal and social responsibility. This example embodies our new envisioned central learning outcome: Social Justice Sensibility. Such sensibility demonstrates the type of integrative learning that the AACU's essential learning outcomes were intended to address.

A social justice approach requires a different way of assessing oral presentations when integrating the learning outcomes for intellectual and practical skills and for social and personal responsibility. This new approach, entitled Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education or (VALUE), was created by the AACU in 2007. These rubrics represent the fifteen areas of learning directly related to these outcomes including: civic engagement, creative thinking, ethical reasoning,

foundation and skills for life-long learning, intercultural knowledge and competence, oral communication, problem solving, quantitative literacy, reading, teamwork, and written communication. A more recent rubric—global learning—was released in 2013. These rubrics were not designed as grading rubrics; rather, these rubrics were intended to assess learning over time at the institutional or programmatic level. However, “the rubrics can be translated into grading rubrics for a specific course, using the same criteria or dimensions for learning, but the performance descriptors would need to be modified to reflect the course content and assignments being examined” (Rhodes & Finley, 2013, p. 6). For instance, instructors can review the VALUE rubric for Civic Engagement and change the criteria to reflect the environment of a particular course or campus. Rhodes and Finley, in their discussion of rubric modification, report how one university modified the VALUE rubric of Civic Engagement and added criteria. One suggestion is that an instructor may add the criteria of civic responsibility to the grading rubric used in his/her individual course. The descriptor for this criterion specifically links it to its demonstrative “ability and commitment to collaboratively work across and within community contexts and structures to achieve a civic aim” (p. 20).

In addressing how we can, as educators, help students develop their oral communication skills to effect change and foster a sense of personal and social responsibility, it is our contention that integrating the essential learning outcomes of oral communication and personal and social responsibility in the BCC can help us move our students further down the path of becoming

global citizens who understand the possibilities that public speaking can offer to change our world.

CONCLUSION

Effective citizenship education should encourage Americans to think more globally, realizing that our actions, language, and deeds impact not only the United States, but the rest of the world. Communication educators who teach the BCC have an excellent opportunity to promote the concept of citizenship education in connection with public speaking. Doing so reinvests in our tradition of speech a modern critical sensibility. As Cornel West (2004) observes,

the Socratic love of wisdom holds not only that the unexamined life is not worth living, but also that to be human and a democratic citizen requires that one must have the courage to think critically for oneself. Socratic questioning yields intellectual integrity, philosophic humility, and personal sincerity—all the essential elements of our democratic armor for the fight against corrupt elite power. (pp. 208–209)

Along with West we contend that Socratic questioning is the “enactment of *parrhesia*—and frank and fearless speech is the lifeblood of any democracy” (p. 209). In no small sense, we are on the front lines of our great national effort to reinvigorate the American spirit.

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