2015

The Invaluable Nature of Speech Evaluation Training for New Basic Course Instructors

T. Kody Frey
Illinois State University

John F. Hooker
Illinois State University

Cheri J. Simonds
Illinois State University

Recommended Citation

Frey, T. Kody; Hooker, John F.; and Simonds, Cheri J. (2015) "The Invaluable Nature of Speech Evaluation Training for New Basic Course Instructors," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 27 , Article 6.
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/6

The Forum

The Invaluable Nature of Speech Evaluation Training for New Basic Course Instructors

T. Kody Frey
John F. Hooker
Cheri J. Simonds

Recent reforms in higher education recognize the centrality of communication in general education programs (e.g., Association of American Colleges and Universities, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, LEAP, Common Core State Standards). As oral communication knowledge and skills are becoming recognized as integral to general education programs across the country, many basic course directors are finding themselves in the position of offering multiple sections of the course taught by multiple instructors. Additionally, basic course directors find themselves with the responsibility of providing clear measures of what they do and how well they do it. Because oral communication assessment is key to remaining integral to general education (Allen, 2002), basic course directors must provide instructor training on how to fairly and consistently evaluate student performances. But before this training can take place, basic course directors need to have an evaluation system in place that is fair, consistent, and reflective of actual student performance. There are several challenges to speech evaluation that warrant such a process. This essay will address those challenges and propose a systematic evaluation process

that can serve as an impetus to instructor training in this area.

CHALLENGES OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

In speech evaluation, two of the most commonly experienced problems come from assessing the reliability and validity of speech performance ratings. According to Miller (1964), raters evaluate speech performances reliably when the ratings given by a variety of critics who have received similar training procedures are consistent. Thus, multiple evaluators do have the potential to reach coherent agreement regarding speech performance standards, but require training in order to do so. Miller (1964) goes on to define rating validity as judgments that are made in regards to sound criteria that reflect educationally significant speaking standards.

Speech evaluators should strive to achieve high levels of both reliability and validity when assessing students' speeches; however, Bock and Bock (1982) argue that the fallible nature of human judgment means that any evaluation of speech performance will have certain errors associated with it. Guilford (1954) points out six areas where subjective bias can creep in to speech evaluation: first, instructors may be too harsh or too lenient based on a characteristic of the speaker that is not relevant to the speech evaluation; second, instructors may tend to avoid very high or very low scores and have grades cluster around the middle of the scale; third, instructors may suffer from a halo effect which occurs when raters become too hard or too easy in their evaluations of specific speakers; fourth, instructors may give similar scores for different parts of the speech that are

logically related; fifth, instructors may assign similar scores to different parts of the speech because the happen in close proximity in time or on the evaluation form; and sixth, instructors may compare their own communicative skills to the speaker and grade based on that comparison. In terms of reliability, Bohn and Bohn (1985) demonstrated that error is typically a function of the speech rater, and the two most commonly reported types of rater errors to occur in speech rating were leniency error and halo error. Carlson and Smith-Howell (1995) supported this claim by testing four separate types of evaluation forms commonly used in speech assessment. Results showed that the four forms produced total-score reliability, meaning evaluation forms and speech experience ultimately do not affect speech ratings, but the individual rater does make a difference.

Thus, reliability within the speech evaluation process is dependent upon objectivity in grading, and a standardized training for instructors across different basic course class sections is required. Kelley (1965) notes that objectivity in grading is necessary for four reasons: (a) creating confidence in students, (b) increasing respect for the art of speaking, (c) providing students with greater knowledge and understanding of their performance, and (d) providing instructions on how to positively improve skills. In order to meet these goals, basic course instructors and students must receive comprehensive training regarding objective criteria that will help to insure rater reliability and student understanding of how to demonstrate learned communication competencies through their speaking preparation and performance.

Speech evaluation validity is concerned with grading speeches using a set of sound criteria that reflect universally desired oral communication skills. In their study of speech evaluation forms, Carlson and Smith-Howell (1995) found that each of the four forms utilized had construct, content, and predictive validity. The forms had construct validity through their focus on both content and delivery aspects of speech performance; content validity because raters from differing backgrounds were able to detect the presence of objective criteria in oral presentations consistently; and predictive validity because observed score ratings for "A" speeches and "C" speeches fell within the expected ranges for each (Carlson & Smith-Howell, 1995). Included in the study was a criterion-based grading rubric that served as the basis for the evaluation forms. The key to this type of rubric is creating it using low-inference behaviors that are easily identifiable by new instructors once they are trained to apply the rubric to sample speeches.

SYSTEMATIC SPEECH EVALUATION

To address these concerns of reliability and validity, Stitt, Simonds, and Hunt (2003) tested a training program on speech evaluation assessment. They argue that basic course directors must explore the ways speech evaluators are trained to assess student speeches in order to develop effective and consistent rating procedures and to ensure a common student experience across multiple sections of the course. They introduce the notion *evaluation fidelity,* which is a shared understanding among raters and between instructors and their students in terms of established performance criteria. They

found that instructor training significantly reduced the range of scores instructors provide for a given speech. In addition, there was greater evaluation fidelity between instructors and students. However, they also found that instructors could be more constructive in their instructor feedback. To address this concern, another team of scholars examined instructor feedback on student speeches (Reynolds, Hunt, Simonds, & Cutbirth, 2004) and also determined that instructors were tempering their comments with positive politeness statements and that they needed to be trained to provide more effective feedback. In answering this call for training, Simonds, Meyer, Hunt, and Simonds (2009) developed a more comprehensive instructor-training program. This training program consisted of a common evaluation form including categories for evaluation (e.g., introduction, body, conclusion, delivery) and low-inference behaviors or skills within the categories (e.g., introduction—attention device, relevance statement, credibility statement, thesis sentence), a grading scale for each category, the development of criteria or level of expected performance for each skill, and the development of models of expected performance for both the instructors and students involved in the evaluation process. Additionally, they developed categories of feedback (positive, positive descriptive, negative, and constructive) for instructors to use in determining how to use language from the criteria to determine a score. They found that with the revised training program, instructors were able to more accurately and reliably apply the types of feedback using language from the criteria to determine a student's score.

When criterion-based assessment tools such as a "Criteria for Evaluating Speeches" form are implemented within the classroom, the grading process becomes routine and fair across different sections of the course and consistent from speech assignment to speech assignment for individual students. As conceptualized by Topping (1998):

> When the criteria for assessment have been discussed, negotiated, used in practice, and clarified by all participants, greater clarity concerning what constitutes high-quality work is likely, which focuses assessee (and assessor) attention on crucial elements. Access to concrete examples of assessed work can also help students articulate the attributes of good and poor performance and promote the development of a vocabulary for thinking about and discussing quality (p. 255).

As previously reviewed, standardized grading rubrics can lead to increased levels of reliability across multiple sections of the basic communication course when paired with proper instructor training. Rubrics also lead to increased instructor-student dialogue through the explanation and clarification of the grading criteria (Broeckelman, 2005). Theoretically, an explanation of how students can achieve certain grades should lead to a greater level of shared understanding between the instructor and the student. Consequently, this opens up a constructive dialogue between the instructor and the student.

Promoting confidence and consistency in new instructors through speech evaluation training is essential to the success of the basic course. As noted above, there are many potential benefits to training new instructors

to evaluate speeches using a standardized, low-inference criterion-based system. Students learn more when they have clear expectations for how their speaking will be evaluated and also want to know that they are being evaluated in a consistent, fair fashion with their peers in every section of a basic course program. When speech evaluation training is not done systematically with new instructors, students and instructors both may face uncertainty and give in to some of the subjective biases listed above that prevent them from fairly and consistently evaluating student performances. Therefore, speech evaluation training is invaluable on many levels and is the most important area of training for new basic course instructors.

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.

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *Liberal education and America's promise (LEAP).* http://www.aacu.org/leap/ Retrieved from http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/Introduction_to_LEAP.pdf

American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). *The leadership association of public colleges and universities delivering America's promise.* Retrieved from http://www.aascu.org/programs/RedBalloonProject/

Bock, D.G., & Bock, E.H. (1982). *Evaluating classroom speaking*. Urbana, IL: ERIC.

Bohn, C.A., & Bohn, E. (1985). Reliability of raters: The effects of rating errors on the speech rating process. *Communication Education, 34,* 343-351. doi: 10.1080/03634528509378626

Broeckelman, M.A. (2005). *Bakhtin speaking: A dialogic approach for teaching the basic public speaking course* (Master's thesis). Available from K-State Electronic Theses, Dissertations, and Reports: 2004.

Carlson, R.E., & Smith-Howell, D. (1995). Classroom public speaking assessment: Reliability and validity of selected evaluation instruments. *Communication Education, 44,* 87-97. doi: 10.1080/03634529509379001

Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2012). *In the states*. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org/in-the-states

Guilford, J.P. (1954). *Psychometric methods* (2nd ed.), New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kelley, W.D. (1965). Objectivity in the grading and evaluation of speeches. *Communication Education, 14,* 54-58. doi: 10.1080/03634526509377415

Miller, G.R. (1964). Agreement and the grounds for it: Persistent problems in speech rating. *Speech Teacher, 13,* 257-261. doi: 10.1080/03634526409377384

Reynolds, D., Hunt, S.K., Simonds, C.J., & Cutbirth, C.W. (2004). Written speech feedback in the basic communication course: Are instructors too polite to

students? *Basic Communication Course Annual, 16,* 36-70.

Simonds, C.J., Meyer, K.R., Hunt, S.K., & Simonds, B.K. (2009). Speech evaluation assessment: An analysis of written speech feedback on instructor evaluation forms in the basic communication course. In P. Turman (Ed.), *Basic communication course annual 21* (pp. 65-90). Boston, MA: American Press.

Stitt, J.K., Simonds, C.J., & Hunt, S.K. (2003). Evaluation fidelity: An examination of criterion-based assessment and rater training in the speech communication classroom. *Communication Studies, 54,* 341-353. doi: 10.1080/10510970309363290

Topping, K. (1998). Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities. *Review of Educational Research, 68,* 249-276. doi:10.3102/0034654306800 3249