

Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 27

Article 12


2015

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Recommended Citation

Hooker, John F. and Simonds, Cheri J. (2015) "From the Outside Looking In: Employers' Views of the Basic Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 27, Article 12.
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol27/iss1/12>

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From the Outside Looking In: Employers' Views of the Basic Course

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Valenzano, Wallace, and Morrale argued that the role of the basic communication course in general education has shifted from a focus on course driven instruction to an outcome-based model of core communication competencies based on feedback from employers and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The changing nature of higher education has necessitated many course directors to build a rationale for keeping their course(s) as a part of general education. Basic course directors have seen a barrage of pleas for help in justifying the importance of the course to administrators through e-mail listservs and at sessions and conversations at conferences. This trend of general education overhaul, which can find the basic course on the outside looking in, has not gone unnoticed.

During his term as National Communication Association (NCA) President, Stephen Beebe established the basic communication course as his presidential initiative. Beebe (2013) referred to the basic course as “our front porch” and solicited resources from directors around the nation to create a repository of resources on the NCA webpage. Also, a resolution was adopted at the 2012 NCA conference arguing for the inclusion of the role of communication in general education in order to help illustrate the necessity of communication skills for students to acquire and maintain jobs following gradua-

tion. In 2014, a task force commissioned by NCA created a document listing core competencies that should be addressed in introductory communication classes. Additional resources included extensive reference lists and made suggestions on how to teach and assess these competencies.

Communication knowledge and skills in the workplace are often listed as one of the most important attributes employees can possess (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). While this notion is often seen in the popular press, academic researchers have also found that communication skills are a necessity for success in careers and for organizations themselves (Dilenschneider, 1992; Du-Babcock, 2006; Robles, 2012; Roebuck, 2001). The AAC&U (2013) reported that in a national survey of business and nonprofit leaders, 93% of employers indicated that clear communication skills are more important than a potential employee's undergraduate major. However, a disconnect occurs in identifying exactly which communication skills employers value compared with those valued by academics and students (English, Manton, & Walker, 2007; Rubin & Morreale, 1996, 2000; Shivpuri & Kim, 2004; Wardrope, 2002). It should be noted that while this disconnect occurs, sometimes it is due to other influences such as disciplinary traditions of communication and the overall aim of general education, and an argument can be made that there is more to the basic course than simply vocational training (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013). The focus of the current piece is to provide specific information about communication skills desired by employers that basic course directors and instructors may

not currently understand or utilize due to the vagueness of previous descriptions.

While students from all majors complete coursework in hopes of getting a job and starting a career, students who are not in the communication discipline get their first and possibly only instruction dedicated to communication in the basic course (Valenzano et al., 2014). Therefore, it is incumbent upon basic course directors and instructors to learn which communication skills business leaders desire, recognize where those skills are taught in the basic course, identify where there might be gaps in the current core competencies taught, and show students how these skills are necessary in their future jobs.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) conducted an examination of courses offered in communication across 148 four-year institutions and compared these with a similar study by Wardrope (1999) to determine the ten-year trend in types of communication courses offered. Bertelsen and Goodboy concluded that there had been a significant movement to respond “to private and professional demands for communication skills and competencies” (p. 270). Morreale and Pearson (2008) conducted a content analysis of 93 publications including non-academic sources and employer surveys and developed six general themes that showed the importance of communication education for personal and professional success. However, these general themes are not supported with many specific skills valued by professionals in the

workplace and do not tie directly to the basic course, just communication education on the whole.

In order to specifically tie tangible communication skills necessary in the workplace to introductory communication course pedagogy, the 2014 Basic Course Directors' Conference included a session inviting business leaders to engage in a conversation about communication in the workplace. Those included on the panel came from a global engineering company, a worldwide branding company, a nonprofit hospital foundation, an international manufacturer of health care products, a national home improvement chain, and an art institute. The panelists and basic course directors and instructors in attendance were able to engage in a dialogue to clarify which communication skills were most desired in future employees and discuss ways to best develop these skills through the basic course curriculum. While each speaker's presentation and the following question and answer session with the panel provided specific actions and skills, the business leaders were speaking mostly in layman's terms and, while they were clarifying what they meant through follow-up questions, were not in the phraseology of the communication discipline. This study attempts to translate layman's terms into phraseology of the communication discipline to determine which needs are being met through the basic course and which are not.

METHODOLOGY

While a transcript was unavailable to the authors, they took copious notes and solicited notes from other attendees to provide the data for the current study,

which analyzes statements made by industry professionals at this public conference. From these notes, the authors looked for themes to emerge that related to concepts taught in the basic course based on Morreale, Worley, & Hughenberg's (2010) most recent basic course survey. The authors also looked for themes that seem currently to be lacking based on the core competency task force recommendation and the aforementioned basic course survey.

The authors aimed to take terms and concepts used by those in industry and translated them into the parlance of the basic course. This was an attempt to identify where these skills are already taught in order to allow basic course directors and instructors to tie their assignments and content to potential workplace communication skills as well as address potential deficiencies. Understanding how to translate terms will better allow instructors to demonstrate the relevance of the course for future employment to students and also address potential changes to explore where the basic course may not be meeting vocational needs. A secondary goal of the study was to allow those in the communication discipline to strengthen the position of the basic course nationally in general education by being able to translate what already is taught into layman's terms understood by administrators and decision-makers outside the discipline. This analysis can be used as a data point in the argument on how to construct basic courses based on direct feedback from industry professionals and can be compared with the NCA (2014) Core Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses report to see if and how the course can be strengthened further.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Common Skills Taught in the Basic Course

The current study used data collected to determine which skills common to the basic course translate into the business world. The remainder of this section looks at individual skills and uses comments from the panelists to illustrate what we are and are not doing as a discipline to meet students' communication ability needs.

Thesis Statements

The second panelist from the global branding company made multiple references to specific business communication situations that are analogous to thesis statements. Panelist two stated "meetings need to have a clearly communicated purpose. So do e-mails." Panelist three from the nonprofit hospital foundation said that it is very "important to explain to coworkers and clients what is about to happen to reduce their uncertainty." In the question and answer session when the panelists were asked what the most important skills were, one mentioned was to have a point when you speak, which is what our basic course students should be communicating in their thesis statements and then it should be evident they are building the rest of their speech or written assignment around that point. This skill is found as a recommendation in the NCA (2014) Core Competencies Task Force report in the Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies section.

Extemporaneous Speaking

While thesis statements are the bedrock for speeches given in the basic course, panelist one from the global engineering company went so far as to say “eliminate the term public speaking.” This panelist stated that extemporaneous speaking was the transferable skill that could be used across many business communication settings and will be done far more often than presenting a public speech. In the question and answer session, the panelists addressed that while presentations will be given in a work setting, employees need to practice these presentations (much like basic course students practice their speeches) so they can be knowledgeable enough to respond extemporaneously to questions from others during and after the presentation. While it could be argued that the Core Competencies Task Force report peripherally recommends this in the Monitoring and Presenting Your Self section, the word extemporaneous does not appear in the document. While it is likely many basic courses do have students speak extemporaneously, it may not be in the fashion or to the extent mentioned at the conference. The panelists listed this as one of the most important skills, stating that employees need the ability to think before they speak and respond to others on the fly based on knowledge they have previously obtained and mentally organized. Extemporaneous speaking other than giving a speech may be an area of deficiency in the basic course as this skill is not explicitly outlined in the NCA recommendations for basic course core competencies.

In addition to extemporaneous speaking skills, the idea of the elevator speech, where an employee has just the duration of an elevator ride to pitch an idea, was

mentioned. This would likely require more planning and memorization, and is analogous to the NCA (2014) Core Competency Task Force recommendation under Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies with the suggestion of developing a one-minute message targeting a specific purpose.

Audience Analysis

Another facet of being able to successfully respond to others was pointed out by panelist six from the art institute who stated that traditional college students just entering the working world will likely experience a “generational gap in communication” with at least some of their coworkers, especially ones who have been at the company for many years and have been promoted to the level of the incoming workers’ boss. Therefore, audience analysis of the formalities of communication within the company is essential for new employees to understand. Similarly, we ask our students to analyze the audience for speeches in the basic course when choosing topics and adapting their speeches utilizing what they know about to whom they are speaking. While audience analysis may be a confusing term for students who think about it as only relating to speeches, NCA (2014) recommends the core competency of adapting to others; discussing audience analysis on a broader scale may be a potential area of improvement for basic course instructors to clarify the transferability of the skill.

Establishing Credibility

Analyzing your audience and conveying that you have their interests at heart also can lead to establishing credibility, which was typically referred to by the

panelists as establishing trust. Panelist three stressed the importance of eye contact, which is evaluated through speeches in the basic course. In the question and answer session, other skills listed as being important trust builders were to be inquisitive, which students demonstrate through their research to establish credibility on speech topics and to maintain deadlines, which also is reflected in students' accountability to one another when working in groups.

Conflict Management

Panelist five from the national home improvement chain stated that, besides establishing credibility, another way of building trust is being able to manage conflict, which is a skill basic course students can learn through group work. Panelist four stressed the ability to handle disagreements through communication and that being able to change one's mind if necessary can build trust. These manifest themselves in the basic course both when the students are doing group work and in their role as audience members for a persuasive speech. NCA (2014) recommended the core competency of adapting to others, which can be accomplished through the development of conflict management skills.

Ethical Communication

The NCA Credo for Ethical Communication (1999) lists respect for other communicators before responding to their message and honesty as key principles. Some of the communicative behaviors reflecting ethical communication noted by the panelists dealt with listening. Panelist four stated that listening in its entirety to something you disagree with is a valuable skill and one

that the basic course addresses both in ethical communication and persuasion. Panelist one noted the importance of accepting constructive feedback, which shows respect for other communicators and can be accomplished through instructor and peer evaluation of speeches or having respectful discussion and dialogue during class. During the question and answer session, another facet of ethical listening that emerged was the ability to recognize when empathy is needed and the importance of being able to convey it in communication with coworkers. Also in the question and answer session, one of the most important communicative behaviors mentioned was that it is acceptable to say, "I don't know." This reflects honesty and could be seen in question and answer sessions following speeches where the class and instructor get to probe the speaker's knowledge further.

IMPLICATIONS

There are implications for both instructors and directors of the basic course. Instructors can find value in relating topics in the basic course to the outside world to provide relevance, among other things, to their students. Basic course directors can also use the information from this study to shape their courses in a way that both introduces students to the communication discipline and provides them with the knowledge that skills learned are transferable after college.

Instructors

As previously discussed, those in the professional world may use different terminology for some of the

same communicative behaviors taught in the basic course. It would behoove them to familiarize themselves with these terms and be able to relate those to students as synonyms for terms that are specific to the basic course. In addition, instructors may be able to take some ideas from the discussion above and come up with additional ways of getting students to develop skills such as practicing extemporaneous speaking in ways other than the traditional public speech. Being able to make these connections for the students can also help them understand the importance of the basic course.

Course directors

Course directors can also benefit from learning what specific communication behaviors are valued because they can adapt their course structure and be able to position themselves better when threatened with loss of general education status. Rather than dictating what should be taught based on disciplinary convention, the dialogue with and the vocabulary used by professionals can help the director keep the basic course relevant and advocate for it outside the discipline. Being able to speak to the importance of corporate communication skills without using communication jargon can make a course director a better advocate.

As stated earlier, former NCA president Stephen Beebe coined the phrase that the basic course was the “front porch” of the communication discipline. If basic course advocates are not willing to listen to multiple constituencies and change with the times, it can threaten entire departments. Chairs need to be able to demonstrate the value of the course to administrators in layman’s terms because without it, departments can be

subsumed or disbanded entirely (and have been already).

CONCLUSION

The importance of student acquisition of communicative skills for use in the workplace has been discussed in many different forums but has often lacked clarity as to which skills are most important due to a disconnect between academia and industry. Opening a dialogue between the basic course directors and instructors and those who work with our students after they graduate such as the one that took place at the 2014 Basic Course Directors' Conference allows for greater understanding of what specific communication skills and behaviors are most desired. This analysis is designed to marry the information gathered from the professionals at the conference with basic course pedagogy to create a better understanding of student needs and how to meet those needs.

In addition, this mapping of course assignments to communication behaviors which are valued in the workplace can also strengthen the position of the basic course in general education by providing tangible evidence that what we do is vital in preparing students for the types of communication that they will be required to be proficient in once they graduate and start their careers. There is also value at looking at the gaps in what we teach in relation to the needs of the professional in terms of communicative skills and addressing those through adapting our course. As those who are responsible for possibly the only formal communication instruction a college student receives, basic course direc-

tors and instructors need to be able to translate to students and administrators the relevance of what students get out of the course that will allow them to succeed in the workforce and the consequences of not being formally taught these skills.

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