

Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 29

Article 9


2017

Adapting the Basic Communication Course for a Globally and Technologically Mediated 21st-Century Context

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Recommended Citation

Strawser, Michael G. and McCormick, Janet K. (2017) "Adapting the Basic Communication Course for a Globally and Technologically Mediated 21st-Century Context," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 29 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol29/iss1/9>

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Cover Page Footnote

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Basic Course Forum: Adaptation

Adapting the Basic Communication Course for a Globally and Technologically Mediated 21st-Century Context

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The global marketplace is ripe for a reiteration (or a reminder) of the characteristics of an effective international communicator. Thankfully, the basic course, the “front porch” of the communication discipline (Beebe, 2013), may serve as a catalyst for pinpointed transcultural communication skills training. As communication knowledge and skills training increases in domestic and global importance (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016), it is imperative that the basic communication course adapts to meet the demands of an international job market for communication practitioners. As such, this forum piece will address desirable international professional communication behavior and position a revised basic

course outlook as a necessary and relevant means to address a diverse global and technologically mediated 21st-century landscape.

In the most recent basic communication course report, Morreale, Myers, Backlund, and Simonds (2016) released the ninth iteration of comprehensive basic course information. The final survey inquiry of the report asked participants “*the extent to which they believe their basic course is keeping up in light of the importance of communication skills in the global and technologically mediated 21st century*”. Results revealed that 10.1% of two and four-year institutions believe they are keeping up to a small extent, 46.6% said the course is keeping up to a moderate extent, 32.2% acknowledged that the course is keeping up to a great extent, and 9.0% believe the course is keeping up to a very great extent. We believe, as institutions attempt to “keep up” or, better yet, lead in light of evolving global communication standards, the basic course can serve as a haven of consistent communication instruction and global communication education.

It is important to recognize that “keeping up” requires an element of being in front of global growth and requires regularly monitoring the population, assessing their needs and adapting accordingly. We already know that good communication skills are imperative to being productive and successful in the workplace (Quintanilla & Mallard, 2008). Additionally, employees that possess a high emotional intelligence are in constant demand, often because of the professional global network, emerging technologies, as well as increased workplace diversity with an emphasis on teamwork and collaboration (Sigmar, Hynes, & Hill, 2012). Our institutions must meet the needs of today’s marketplace and develop strategies that encourage faculty and students to prepare for a rapidly changing world and interdependent global communication challenges (AAC&U, 2007; Van Roekel, 2011). As a result of these new communication challenges, one 21st-century mandate is the responsibility of U.S. institutions, especially those offering a basic communication course, to produce globally competent communication practitioners.

This new domestic global curriculum mandate is, in essence, a microcosm of a worldwide problem (or maybe an opportunity). Developing and nurturing professional communication skills cannot be overstated. Considering the context, adapting the basic course to reflect the global marketplace, and therefore a global communication skillset, is crucial (Sigmar, Hynes, & Hill, 2012). Currently, over 100,000 U.S. firms have a presence overseas and, as a result, our own graduates face an ever-increasing necessity to be well-versed in global communication (Marquardt, 2011). Communication training, the process of developing communication skills in

order to perform a specific job more effectively, is of the utmost importance in the 21st-century corporate climate. In 2015, as part of their ranking of 122 top business programs (all require a general education communication course), Bloomberg surveyed 1,320 job recruiters at more than 600 companies to find out which skills employers “want but can’t find.” The report indicates that the rarest skills in today’s college graduates that employers want include strategic thinking, leadership, communication skills and creative problem solving (Levy & Rodkin, 2015). These skills can be fostered in basic communication courses across the country.

For our graduates, the necessity to function as a global communication practitioner is now ever present. Considering the U.S. corporate international presence (and influence), and the desire for college graduates to function as highly competent communicators, an opportunity exists for the basic course to address a growing need and adapt curriculum to address domestic and international communication skills training and theoretical understanding. As such, the utilization of a framework that focuses on consistent attributes and characteristics of a global communication practitioner may be a helpful commodity as universities reach international students and train domestic students for international communication professions.

Several organizations have developed initiatives to address the international communication employment landscape and build a framework for communication education. One such organization, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), has established a consistent set of international communication skills and is a leading voice in the efforts to create a global definition of a communication professional. In an effort to conceptualize this new global communication workforce imperative, the IABC defined the career purpose of a communication professional through a lens that is transcultural. The IABC defines a communication professional as someone who:

Represent(s) the voice of an organization as it interacts with customers, clients, employees, partners, shareholders, competitors and the community. The communication professional brings the organization to life with a brand voice that aligns its verbal, visual and digital messages and activities with its mission and vision. By clarifying the brand, communication professionals also help ensure the organization runs efficiently and effectively. Communication professionals build a strategic communication plan based on

thorough research, they communicate with a variety of audiences in a range of styles, they develop and edit content, and they assess where and how to communicate and how to evaluate the results of their work. They act as the organization's conscience and strive for its financial, social and environmental sustainability (International Association of Business Communicators, 2016).

The IABC would argue that this definition is helpful for clarifying characteristics of a communication professional no matter the cultural environment. This definition can serve as a starting point basic course globalized student learning outcomes. In terms of praxis, this definition could be used by instructors as a general conceptualization of a communication practitioner. One way that the basic course could adapt to the global communication environment is by using this definition to design and align the curriculum to the description.

In a move to further solidify the importance of global communication training, the IABC also recently created a Global Standard to identify core principles of universal, or global, communication success (International Association of Business Communicators, 2016). These standards include: ethics, consistency, context, analysis, strategy and engagement. We believe that adapting the basic course to more closely align to these standards may enhance the global marketability of future basic course students.

Basic course instructors could use the six principles from the IABC to adapt current curriculum to address an international communication imperative. One end goal may be to cultivate students who exemplify the IABC definition of a communication professional mentioned above. To accomplish this task, basic course curriculum could include activities, readings and class discussions that allow for participants to learn how to adopt the highest standards of professional behavior (ethics); act as an organization's voice while presenting a single, consistent story for internal and external audiences (consistency); understand an organization's internal culture and external environment and advocate successfully for the organization (context); research and evaluate how to serve and promote the organization most effectively and then recommend strategies supported by direct and secondary evidence (analysis); identify opportunities and challenges both inside and outside of the organization (strategy); and, finally, identify and communicate with employees, customers, shareholders, regulators, government agencies and other groups with an interest in the organization's activities (engagement).

The basic course is one avenue where we can encourage students to embrace international professional communication principles, participate in cross-cultural communication training, and even perform certain activities during the class that reinforce the idea of a global communication practitioner. One way to integrate the six principles into a basic communication course would be to highlight the foundational vocabulary terms/concepts of communication ethics, consistency, context, analysis, strategy and engagement throughout the course. Students should be exposed to the IABC terms/concepts repeatedly in discussions, assignments and grading rubrics in order to build recognition and expectations of achievement in these areas of global career importance. Requiring experiential assignments built around the six principles of the global standard, the basic communication course can better promote global competence for students in terms of communication knowledge and skills.

Next steps should come swiftly and with great intentionality. The results of the most recent basic course survey are encouraging. Instructors and administrators recognize that the global and technologically mediated 21st century necessitates a “keeping up” with new advancements. Communication educators, especially instructors in general education courses, like the basic course, may recognize this rapid revolution better than most. However, we believe that keeping up with the fast-paced global marketplace first requires a consistent set of global communication standards, followed by curriculum revision that aligns, at least in part, to the idea of a global communication practitioner. Global influence and international hiring standards may have significant impact on basic course content, and even delivery, in the very near future. The basic course is in a wonderful position to adapt, and thrive, not just survive, in light of the evolving international employment landscape because of the overarching mission of the basic course as a vehicle for understanding the communication discipline and training students to be communication-focused activists for change.

Basic course advocates could constitute a vocal populous that recognizes the global landscape while signifying the importance of a consistent set of transcultural communication standards. If used appropriately, the basic course can serve as a pedagogical training ground. Specifically, it can serve as a laboratory for new instructional practices (Valenzano III, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014) like experiential activities designed to address international communication skills training. Therefore, the development of activities, assignments, and instructional materials that address the global imperative and can be used in the basic course is essential. While this

forum essay prompts a global framework that may seem business-oriented, it is important to consider that principles that enable a globally and technologically mediated basic course can cross conventional boundaries. However, discussion that explores a global perspective in public speaking, interpersonal, liberal arts and other contexts is appropriate. In addition, further discussion on the ideal global communication practitioner, and potentially additional standards, may be warranted. Finally, a research agenda that examines the effectiveness of basic course international skills training and pedagogy focused on global imperatives may help align curriculum ideas with data-driven results.

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