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Abstract

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Disciplines

Communication | Education | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

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(R)Evolution of the Basic Communication Course:
Constancy and Change in Our Discipline's "Front Porch"

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Abstract

The basic communication course, with its roots in classical Greece and Rome, is frequently a required course in general education. The course often serves as our “front porch,” welcoming new students to the Communication discipline. This essay first outlines early traditions in oral communication instruction and their influence on future iterations of the course. In addition, because fundamental changes in higher education in more modern times affected emphases and delivery of the course, we focus on the relationship between general education and the basic course and the significant curricular changes to the course during the latter part of the twentieth century. Finally, we discuss ramifications of the evolution of the basic course, as the discipline moves forward into the 21st century.

Keywords: basic communication course, history of the basic course, basic course in modern times, future of the basic communication course

(R)Evolution of the Basic Communication Course:

Constancy and Change in Our Discipline's "Front Porch"

According to Steven Beebe, past president of the National Communication Association, because the basic communication course is often required in general education curricula, it effectively functions as the metaphorical "front porch" to communication departments and programs (Beebe, 2013). Beebe's point is that potential communication majors, as well as students from other disciplines, take their first, and sometimes only, look at our discipline from the vantage point of the basic communication course. Given its prominence in the communication curriculum, a look back over time at the basic course, our disciplinary "front porch," is most appropriate in this our associational hundredth year.

The basic course, though not always referred to with this title, is perhaps the original and most enduring pedagogical element in the communication discipline. It is and has always been, after all, some version of training in oratory. This emphasis on public speaking and public address can be easily traced back to the curricula offered at Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, as well as the training offered by Isocrates and the Sophists, and the heirs to those traditions, Cicero and Quintilian (Hauser, 2002). There are other classical rhetoricians and oratorical trainers we could note, but these few serve to illustrate the importance that training in oral communication has had in various classical Western cultures. It is no surprise that with its Western roots, American higher education has recognized this importance to varying degrees throughout its history. In fact, the development of present iterations of the basic communication course in higher education is the result of an evolution that closely mirrors the historical trajectory of communication education in general.

In this essay, we trace significant milestones in the history of oral communication instruction and demonstrate how the basic course, especially its contemporary manifestation, reflects many of the changes in education over that same historical period. We begin by briefly outlining some of the early traditions in oral communication instruction that influenced the approach ultimately embraced by the discipline in the twentieth century – the “old school.” We next describe how fundamental changes in higher education influenced emphases and delivery of the basic communication course in more modern times – the “new school.” We then focus on how the symbiotic relationship between general education and the basic course played a role in structural, administrative, and curricular changes to the basic course during the latter part of the twentieth century. Finally, we discuss the ramifications of this history for the basic communication course and for the discipline, as we go forward into our next hundred years.

Old School: Traditions and Trends in Early Oral Communication Instruction

Several major disciplines lay claim to the legacy of classical thinkers like Aristotle, Plato and Cicero. Today, even ownership of instruction in rhetoric is sometimes contested by English, Communication, and Philosophy departments. This divide is a byproduct of a history during which the nature of rhetoric and oratory was never truly explicated until the twenty-first century (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Is rhetoric a function of writing, thus owned by English departments, or a function of speaking, thus owned by Communication programs, or, is it the property of scholars whose work focuses primarily on classical philosophers and the search for Truth? In this section of our essay, we trace the early traditions of oral communication instruction through roughly the turn of the twentieth century, paying attention to both the role of oratorical training in curricula and the areas of emphasis embedded in that training. We begin this discussion with the foundations laid by the classical Greeks and Romans (Peters, 1999).

There was no conception of universities or general education for the people of ancient Greece and Rome, but education, especially in oratory, was of paramount importance to them. There were two primary ways to receive what passed for formal education during that time: hire a private tutor, or attend one of the few available schools. In Athens, the Sophists constituted the largest group of tutors and provided varying advice for proper speaking to their students. For example, Gorgias focused on training speakers in ornate delivery and style. This instruction ran counter to that provided in the more prominent schools, such as Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum and the school of Isocrates. Despite Plato's inherent mistrust and dislike for rhetoric and oratory, he, like Aristotle and Isocrates, understood the power of speaking. Aristotle's contributions to oral communication are some of the longest lasting, still found in virtually every iteration of the basic communication course in some form. Isocrates, like Plato and Aristotle, stressed the importance of civic life and taught students a rudimentary version of what we now refer to as general education in contemporary universities: oratory, composition, history, citizenship, culture, and morality. The models offered by these Greeks influenced what was then taught in the Roman Republic and Empire.

During the Roman Empire, we find one educator whose writings significantly underscored the role and importance of communication in a student's curriculum. Funded by the Emperor Domitian, Quintilian developed a school and wrote what is essentially a training manual for administering a proper education. In this book, *Institutio Oratoria*, he expounded on much of what his Greek predecessors taught, but he also established a progression for training that contemporary curricular models for oral communication and the basic course come close to mirroring (1903). Essentially, Quintilian argues that children should learn grammar at an early age, and then, in their young adolescence, they should be trained in rhetoric, specifically

invention, style, and arrangement. Today, these same emphases take place at roughly the same time in a student's development—in high school or the freshman year in college.¹

Rhetorical education dissipated, however, with the Fall of the Roman Empire. Later, its classical founders Aristotle and Quintilian came under intense fire in the late sixteenth century from Peter Ramus (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001). Ramus proposed a redefinition of rhetoric, arguing that most of what the Greeks and Romans taught as rhetoric was actually dialectic. Specifically, Ramus stripped rhetoric of all elements of morality, logic, invention, arrangement, and memory leaving it only style and delivery. Of these remaining two categories, Ramus further contended that delivery was of minor importance, and style was more what we might consider psychology or sociology (Ramus, 2001). This diminution of the traditional five canons of rhetoric has had a longstanding influence on how oral communication is taught, to say nothing of respect for communication instruction. In fact, Ramus' ideas helped lead to a curricular re-appropriation of topics such as logic, argument, and invention to philosophy and later to English, while relegating speech communication to simply performance.

Admittedly, there are countless other contributors to the development of oral communication instruction during this time period. We do not wish to minimize those contributions; however, those highlighted represent some of the more central contributions to what we now refer to as the basic communication course. Specifically, we demonstrated that, to the classical Greeks and Romans, oral communication was a central, if not *the* central focus of education. Speaking represented a means to engage with civic issues, persuade groups to action, and advocate on one's own behalf. In fact, speech training took place at roughly the same time

¹ Chronologically, Quintilian had children begin education slightly earlier than students today, so the chronology of the point at which today's students receive training in rhetoric is mid-late adolescence. This time period reflects roughly the junior or senior level of high school to the freshmen or sophomore level of college—a time when most students take the basic communication course today.

in a pupil's education as it does today. However, in part due to the influence of arguments forwarded by Peter Ramus, the nature of oral communication instruction changed for the foreseeable future. By the time the university structure was up and running in the United States, English departments had subsumed communication in both written and oral forms. The prevalence of that combination of writing and speaking, however, would not last.

New School: Oral Communication and the Basic Course in Modern Times

As we have discussed, training in speech communication has long been a part of the curriculum. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, it had been largely subsumed by English departments and, although still taught, the nuances of logic, rhetorical theory, and persuasive argumentation had shifted to English, with some of these topoi located in literary criticism. Several key moments in the early twentieth century, however, presented a correction of sorts to this shift and moved elements of communication from English back to their original discipline. In doing so, these events and ideas provided a strong rationale for the Communication discipline proper, and the teaching of the basic course by speech professionals (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006).

One of the first important events for the discipline and the basic communication course occurred in 1914 when the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (later the National Communication Association, or NCA) was founded. The organization arose from a dispute within the ranks of the National Council of Teachers of English, when seventeen speech teachers broke away due to what they perceived as the reduced importance of speech instruction in English departments. The following year, the first conference for the new association drew sixty members and produced its first publication: *The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*. The name was later changed to *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, a title it bears to this day. The

association grew at an exponential rate, gathering as many as 700 members by 1920, with the simultaneous development of numerous statewide speech teacher associations during the following decade.

During this time, universities and campuses across the country began to see a proliferation of numerous academic departments, including speech communication. The notion of “departments” and concentrations of academic study, so prevalent today, actually was made possible by reforms during this timeframe spearheaded by Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell (Cohen, 1988; Thomas, 1962). Lowell also created the modern structure for general education, which required students to take foundational courses in the natural sciences and the humanities. This reform movement at Harvard was gradually emulated by campuses across the country. Scholarship in speech helped enhance these efforts and untangled Communication from English departments. One writing in particular, by Herbert Wichelns (1925/2001), served to provide a clear rationale for disciplinary differences between English and Speech by arguing that the practice and criticism of oratory is distinct from that of literary criticism. In fact, Wichelns differentiated between “the poetic” of literature and rhetoric, and speech: “For poetry is always free to fulfill its own law, but the writer of rhetorical discourse is, in a sense, perpetually in bondage to the occasion and the audience; and in that fact we find the line of cleavage between rhetoric and poetic” (1925/2001, p. 25). This distinction and emphasis on the spoken word and its effect or influence on audiences became a forceful tool for the creation of Communication departments. New resources also were developed, including one of the first and longest enduring textbooks for public speaking, *Principles and Types of Speech*, originally authored by Alan H. Monroe in 1932. The practice and study of the spoken word had once again become distinct

from the art of literature and written composition, and the basic public speaking course returned triumphantly to higher education.

In 1956, what amounted to the first attempt to systematically examine the state of the basic course took place when Donald E. Hargis reported the results of the Speech Association of America (now NCA) Committee on Problems in Undergraduate Study. Hargis found that the basic communication course was primarily a course in public speaking (Hargis, 1956). This state of affairs would change somewhat, as more and more schools across the country responded to the general education reforms at Harvard and began to use various models for teaching the core communication elements required for all students and included in the basic course.

The Twentieth Century: General Education and the Basic Communication Course

The 1960's: Organizing the Contemporary Basic Course. In the years following World War II general education models proliferated in higher education, departments of Communication appeared at universities across the country, and modern approaches to scholarship and publication became more the norm. By the 1960's, these developments resulted in a need to both examine the state of the basic course, but also provide organization for its implementation across the discipline and in higher education. Indeed, this decade saw the basic communication course receive a great deal of attention.

The dawn of the 1960's brought further systematic investigation of the status of the basic course in the United States. The primary questions focused on the content and the activities of the course as it was delivered at colleges and universities (Dedmon & Frandsen, 1964; Jones, 1955; London, 1963). While public speaking was the dominant approach, basic courses took a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Instructors used at least 84 different textbooks, and the courses were required of all students as part of general education programs at some schools. Dedmon

(1965), one of the leaders of the effort to examine the basic course across the country, suggested that the course could make a greater contribution to general education if it was “designed as a course in oral communication in which we combine the better features of traditional types of required first courses” (p. 121). His suggestion was that, to be a valuable general education requirement, the basic course should be a combination of communication theory and skills practice. Dedmon’s ideas were prescient in that they appear today in the focus on learning outcomes in the basic course, related to knowledge and to skills.

Dedmon’s (1965) systematic study was an attempt to discover what we would now call best practices, so those ideas could be included in the basic course in general education. He suggested that communication “fundamentals” usually meant a collection of activities considered most important by the textbook author or course instructor, rather than by the discipline, university, or community. In effect, basic courses were designed based on the content of a textbook. Perhaps a redeeming quality of this approach was that the most popular textbook (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970) remained *Alan Monroe’s Principles and Types of Speech* (1965), a later edition of the 1932 text published by the same author; so many classes based on this text stood on relatively firm ground.

Overall, the data gathered in the 1960’s suggest a diversity of types of basic courses across the United States, representing a subtle shift from the public speaking focus that had been maintained from the time of the Greeks. Although still the most popular form of the basic course, public speaking encountered competition from courses designed to teach communication theory, or a combination of “multiple” areas of communication. The communication theory courses accounted for a very small percentage of the total, while the public speaking category dominated at over 50% (Gibson, et al., 1970). Courses labeled “multiple” or “combination” more or less

evolved into what is now commonly referred to as “hybrid” or “blend” classes, which typically include a mix of communication theory, public speaking, interpersonal, often small group communication, and sometimes interviewing. In addition to what appeared to be a move toward more variety in course content during this period, department administrators also recognized the importance of including the basic course in general education curricula. Dedmon’s (1965) proposal for course content, specifically the importance of the basic course and its role in general education, did not go unheeded.

The inclusion of the basic course in general education made it a graduation requirement at many institutions. This connection greatly expanded the reach and influence of the basic course to a large percentage of college graduates; however, it also brought complications and other challenges. The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 created an impetus for colleges and universities to prepare students for the workplace, resulting in an increase of course offerings in disciplines that stressed skill development and not liberal education, like those in Communication, for example. As a result, Communication departments began to emphasize speaking skills even more in their basic courses in order to maintain a presence in general education. These curriculum changes more broadly led to the creation of a “menu” of courses that students could draw on to fulfill broader general education requirements.

In response to these national trends in higher education and the increasing importance of the basic course to the communication discipline, another milestone event took place. In an attempt to develop and coordinate the basic course, the Directors of the Basic Speech Course at Midwestern Universities (later the Midwest Basic Course Directors) met for the first time in 1962 (Munger, et al., 2011). The first conference, held at the University of Kansas, was chaired by the well-known debate coach E.C. Buehler. Now taking on a national presence as the Basic

Course Directors' Conference, this group has met every year since 1962, and it has developed substantial influence on the shape and direction of the basic course through its research and training activities.

The 1960's witnessed increased recognition of the importance of the basic course by communication faculty, which resulted in increased scrutiny, by way of the work of Dedmon (1965). In fact, Dedmon's efforts at tracking the state of the basic course through scholarly inquiry and analysis has been maintained by others over the years. At present, the study is in its seventh iteration (Morreale, et al., 2010). This attention, coupled with the creation of what became the annual Basic Course Director's Conference in 1962, illustrates how effectively the discipline organized efforts to build and maintain the basic course by strengthening its ties to general education. On the surface, such a presence provided significant benefits, but as would soon become apparent, it carried risks and challenges as well.

The 1970's to the 1990's: Maintaining the Basic Course in a "Disaster Area." The general education approach, first forwarded at Harvard University by Abbott Lowell decades earlier, had taken on many forms and stretched into countless academic domains. It had become so unwieldy that, in 1977, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching referred to general education as a "disaster area." The Carnegie Report (1977) stimulated a good deal of surface level reform activity in the ensuing years, but the result was essentially additional courses added to the labyrinth of options students currently tried to navigate. With its inclusion in general education, the basic communication course, like other courses, often became just another class for students "to get out of the way" in their effort to learn more relevant information in their major. Continuing efforts to monitor the basic course, using methods first

deployed by Dedmon, provide a window into how the course fared in the wake of the Carnegie Report.

In tracing studies on the state of the basic course, we see some distinct trends, such as the continuing prevalence of public speaking versions of the course. That said, the 1974 Gibson, Kline, & Gruner national survey, a successor to Dedmon's work, indicated a significant drop in the number of basic courses emphasizing public speaking in the first half of the 1970's, from more than 50% of all courses to just over 21%. Careful examination of the 1970 data, and subsequent studies (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985) suggest that the reported drop was more of a labeling error than an actual change in emphasis. The top textbooks of the period: Monroe and Ehninger (1967), Samovar and Mills (1972), and Walter and Scott (1973) provide further evidence that the emphasis of the course at the majority of institutions remained public speaking; but interest in Scheidel's *Speech Communication and Human Interaction* (1972) indicated an increasing popularity of the blend, or "hybrid," course. Data from studies became a bit clearer after this period, showing the continued dominance of the public speaking course through the 1980s, but also a stronger presence of the blend course on the national scene (Gibson et al., 1980; Gibson et al. 1985).

Whereas the 1970's and early 1980's saw an increase in the multi-format nature of the basic course, the late 1980's and early 1990's ushered in significant efforts to strengthen the communication network and research efforts of course instructors, and especially, directors of the basic course. The most significant of these efforts occurred in 1989 (Wallace), with a proposal at the Midwest Basic Course Directors' conference and the subsequent publication of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* (BCCA). Larry Hugenberg, himself a basic course director at Youngstown State University, organized an editorial board, solicited manuscripts,

secured a publisher, and created the first edition of the new peer-reviewed journal dedicated entirely to the basic course, in the same year the journal was proposed. Now in Volume 26, the BCCA remains a centerpiece for research on pedagogy and administration of the basic course. In that same year, the Basic Course Interest Group of the Central States Communication Association was formed. Just a few years later in 1993, the Midwest Basic Course Directors' group instituted the "Basic Course Listserv" as a means of sharing information and encouraging informal discussion of basic course issues. Still in existence, the listserv has nearly 400 members and remains a vital communication network for basic course instructors and administrators across the country. Finally, in 1994, the National Communication Association established a Basic Course Division for its membership, the first such emphasis on the basic course by the national association since the inception of NCA in 1914.

The creation of the NCA division coincided with an Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 1994) report that echoed the Carnegie Report criticism of general education requirements at member institutions. The AAC&U report identified three significant concerns with the way general education was administered. First, the "menu" approach to general education curricula contained no organizing philosophy that students could understand. Second, there was often very little philosophical or other substantive connection among the required courses. Third, these two issues combined to create confusion for students and reduced their motivation to learn foundational ideas and concepts in general education. Upon hearing such a critique, for the second time in seventeen years, higher education began to slowly respond in ways that continue to impact the structure and implementation of the basic course in general education at many institutions.

1990's to the Present: Shifting Ground for the Basic Communication Course. Any changes to general education, as advanced by Lowell at Harvard and in place for decades, have occurred more glacially than rapidly, and have largely resulted in the calls for reform such as those proffered by the AAC&U. Since the 1994 report, the AAC&U has strongly endorsed an outcome-based model for general education. This model calls for replacing the “menu of courses” approach with one that requires students to effectively demonstrate the achievement of core competencies, instead of taking specific courses (Valenzano & Wallace, 2014). Even still, NCA asserted the importance of oral communication and the basic course with their Policy Platform Statement on the Role of Communication Courses in General Education (1996). That statement sought to encourage disciplinary recognition of the importance of communication education, but also the inclusion of communication knowledge and skills in a college education, as called for by businesses across the country (Darling & Dannels, 2003; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997).

Whether communication continued in general education as a specific course, or as an outcome produced through a variety of possible courses, remained an open question, as institutions sought to adapt to the shifts in higher education. Wehlburg reports that in 2010 regional accrediting agencies in the United States began moving toward requiring achievement and outcome-based models, rather than specific courses or subjects. This approach called into question the traditional public speaking model and the newer “hybrid” approach by emphasizing specific communicative outcomes not necessarily tied to the content traditionally taught in those courses. This move placed several communication departments’ basic courses in jeopardy, but the changes have been slow to spread and take hold, and communication departments have been somewhat resistant to the changes in approach (Wehlburg, 2010).

Survey results in the 1990's and 2000's continued to indicate the dominance of the public speaking design in the basic course (Morreale, Hanna, S., Berko, & Gibson, 1999; Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). In addition, Alan Monroe's *Principles and Types of Speech* has been replaced by Stephen Lucas' *The Art of Public Speaking* (2011) textbook at many schools, and the hybrid class design remained as a stable second option to public speaking in the surveys. However, both the public speaking and the hybrid designs appeared to be losing some ground recently to a rise in courses categorized as "other." This movement began in 2004 and rose to 14.1% of course designs in the 2010 survey of the basic communication course (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). We can speculate that the "other" courses on the rise are those that have departed from the traditional forms of the course, perhaps in response to the calls for outcome-based courses. Such courses often are unique, as they attempt to adapt to the new needs of their particular colleges and universities. To be sure, the decades from 1990 to 2010 continued the tradition of the basic course as an agent of change and flexibility in higher education.

Our Next Hundred Years: Looking Back and Looking Forward

Looking back over our disciplinary history, several milestones and significant events seemed to shape and move the basic communication course in different directions. Surely, training in oral communication has been a central focus in education from Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Quintilian to today. But based on arguments made by Peter Ramus, some of the components of classical rhetoric were repositioned away from our discipline, only to return in the early twentieth century. The startup in 1914 of a national association devoted to oral communication provided new impetus and opportunities for scholarship and exchange of information related to the basic course. The proliferation of Communication departments,

communication textbooks, and research studies on the status of the basic course soon followed. Then the basic course, most appropriately, found a home in general education on many campuses across the country. Finally, the formulation of a national basic course directors' conference and a peer-reviewed journal devoted to the course continues to provide direction and focus for research, development, and training.

Today, there is no doubt there are deep ties that bind the basic communication course to the discipline and to general education. In fact, some communication departments depend upon the course's inclusion in general education, so much so that former NCA President Frank E. X. Dance (2002) calls the course the discipline's "bread and butter" (p. 355). Businesses and organizations like the AAC&U now identify communication knowledge and skills as essential tools college graduates must have (AACU, 2013). Additionally, in today's hypermediated environment, such skills are even more vital to personal and professional success, but they are changing to accommodate technology.

Even with our long traditions and connection to general education, basic course instructors and administrators, and the discipline at large, should always expect to find themselves on the precipice of change. At this moment, we are presented with new opportunities to redesign the basic course to fit the needs of our students, departments, universities, and the communities we serve. Throughout our history, the basic communication course has adapted to the circumstances; paid attention to audience, if you will. Perhaps now, the time is again right to remodel our "front porch," enhance its structural integrity and create more "curb appeal" for the foundational course of our field. We must continue, as a discipline, to make it as useful as possible to students and to our colleagues in the twenty-first century academy.

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