

Redesigning the Basic Communication Course: A Case Study

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In the competitive environment of higher education, the basic communication course is under pressure to defend its place in the curriculum. One way to do this is to engage in a course redesign program. In this case study, we detail our experience taking part in such a program to (re)evaluate our course. Over the course of a year, we collected active participation data and conducted a series of three qualitative surveys that focused on student perceptions of our course. In doing so, we explored the ways in which the basic communication course can take advantage of course redesign efforts. Specifically, we found that we were better able to (1) articulate our unique course identity to constituents across the campus as we (2) developed a more holistic view of the ways we were (or were not) achieving our stated learning outcomes. Based on these findings, we developed practical implications including explicating how a well-planned course redesign program can be used in the basic communication course, the need for “collaborative consistency” when redesigning a course, and the imperative to incorporate student voice into redesign efforts.

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Basic communication course administrators are under pressure to document the ways in which their courses contribute to student learning on campuses across the country (Boyd, Morgan, Ortiz, Anderson, 2014). This imperative encourages course directors to assess their learning outcomes and make continual improvements that show how the basic course benefits a host of campus constituencies (e.g., university administrators, students, parents). One avenue that allows for the evaluation of a basic communication course is through a large-scale course redesign program. These programs provide the time and structure needed to critically (re)assess the course and make curriculum changes while working with colleagues across campus.

In this case study, we use a qualitative approach to document our experience engaging in a course redesign program. In order to understand how course redesign programs can be used in the basic communication course, we incorporate active participation to allow for administrator and instructor perspectives to emerge and a series of qualitative surveys designed to elicit student feedback. These data come together to aid in our understanding of the redesign process and outcomes.

Through our course redesign, we found that our basic communication course needed to develop an identity that highlighted the unique characteristics of our course in an

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increasingly competitive higher education environment—one that includes basic course offerings housed in other departments. Additionally, we emphasized the importance of having stated learning outcomes lead the course redesign and assessment processes. Ultimately, we developed guidelines that underscore the ways course redesign programs can be used in the basic communication course to retain control of the course and advocate for resources. These guidelines include continuous (re)evaluation of the course curriculum to ensure learning outcomes are being met, engagement in collaborative consistency, and encouraging the inclusion of student voice in redesign efforts.

Literature Review

In this section, we weave together the literature on course redesigns and the basic communication course to set the framework for our case study. We begin by drawing on past scholarship to show that course redesigns are complex, ongoing, and multiform processes in higher education. We then narrow our scope to the basic communication course as we delve into the ways course redesigns can be used by administrators to retain control of the course and justify its position in the curriculum.

Course Redesigns

Course redesign is the term used to describe “the process of redesigning *whole courses* (rather than individual classes or sections) to achieve better learning outcomes...it is about rethinking the way we deliver instruction” (Twigg, 2013, p. 1). As such, it is a large-scale pedagogical activity that is simultaneously complex, ongoing, and multiform. When this process is placed in the context of higher education where courses must justify their role in the curriculum by demonstrating student learning, the role of course redesigns becomes apparent.

Given that higher education is in an “age of assessment” a growing number of colleges and universities have embraced course redesign as a potential solution to better structure courses in a way that will promote inclusivity and meet learning outcomes (Boyd et al, 2014). However, this process takes place within a complex and ever-changing context. Twigg (2013), notes that administrators are challenged to create better learning experiences that better integrate technology, account for a diverse student/faculty body, while considering costs to deliver a course in an already budget conscious higher education environment (Boyd et al., 2014). With that said, course redesigns have created a demonstrated path to increase access to education, improve student learning, aid in course completion, benefit perceptions of the subject matter, and address student/faculty satisfaction with the course (Twigg, 2013). Such efforts to rethink both foundational education models as well as microteaching practices have shown tremendous potential for students, faculty, and administrators alike.

Adding to the complexity that belies the success of a course redesign is a multitude of interconnected factors. Twigg (2000) argues that educators should consider the following criteria when engaging in a redesign process: “impact on the curriculum; capitol-for-labor substitution; collective decision making; faculty attitudes; curricular materials; requisite skills for participants; learning outcomes; measuring achievement; learning theory; and sustaining the redesign” (p. 1). These criteria demonstrate the inherent complexity of undertaking a course redesign, which is why the process of redesigning a course should not begin until these criteria have been critically examined.

In addition to being complex, course redesign is an ongoing process. As Turner (2009) argues, the goal is a “never-ending course redesign affecting teaching and learning at all levels of the institution and beyond, and creating and sustaining a course-redesign community of practice” (p. 3). Turner suggests that this process involves several stages. Course administrators should continually assess their curriculum to justify resources, inform course design, and improve student gains (Boyd et al., 2014). This demands surveying students to observe changes in their attitudes toward the subject of study, thoughts on this kind of instruction, and sense of their own development. This constant evaluation and reflection significantly increases the chances of the redesign’s success.

Finally, course redesign is multiform, meaning that they can take multiple shapes, which is good given the various types of institutions, programs, and departments that make up the higher education landscape. McLaughlin, Roth, Glatt, Gharkholonarehe, Davidson, Griffin, and Mumper (2014) explored the ways in which a “flipped classroom” approach can improve student learning. This model provides students the material to learn independent of class, while class time focuses on engaging with students on how to reinforce the material in a variety of ways. They found that student attendance and learning outcomes all increased using this approach.

Ferreri and O’Connor (2013) similarly relied on a flipped classroom model when they redesigned a large lecture style class into a small group course. They explain their success: “Compared with student experiences in the previous large lecture-based class, students in the smaller-class format reported a preference for working in teams and achieved significantly better academic grades with the new course format” (p. 1). Collis, Bruijstens, and Van Veen (2003), and Vaughan (2010) each studied a “blended learning” approach to high education, with some instruction taking place online and some in person, and were able to improve student learning outcomes. In all, the redesign research focuses on redesigning traditional courses to better meet established learning outcomes.

The Basic Communication Course

Basic communication courses at colleges and universities are ripe for course redesigns. Since “the Basic Course focuses on teaching fundamental communication skills and theory to undergraduate students” (Defining the Basic Course, 2018) and contributes to lifelong learning and skills, the basic course tends to be part of general education programs (Defining the Basic Course, 2018). Given this central role of the course, each year, tens of thousands of students take basic courses and learn foundational skills instrumental to their success in college (West, 2012).

Learning outcomes as well as assessments of learning gains are at the heart of this course. In fact, learning outcomes are such an important part of the basic communication course that a task force of course administrators developed a set of core competencies that are used to inform learning outcomes for basic communication course directors across the country. These discipline-wide competencies, which are housed on the National Communication Association (NCA) website, include:

1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self
2. Practicing Communication Ethics
3. Adapting to Others
4. Practicing Effective Listening
5. Expressing Messages

6. Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes
7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies (Core Competencies, 2014).

Besides offering students critical learning outcomes, researchers have also used the basic communication course as an area of study in order to understand the scope and depth of the basic course's potential impact on students. For example, Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) explored this course from a broad perspective in the 8th iteration of a national study on the basic course and explain its importance: "Communication education and the basic or introductory communication course in particular are important pedagogical endeavors given the basic course often is the only communication course undergraduates experience. In the course, students are provided instruction in communication skills that can benefit them for a lifetime" (p. 1). The hope, then, is that redesigning the basic communication course can improve learning outcomes attainment, increase overall student success in college, and impart valuable skills essential for career success. This is an important point given that faculty, and in this case course directors, are held accountable regarding their learning outcomes and student achievement to their University (Boyd et al., 2014).

Research confirms the potential impact of the basic communication course in a variety of ways. For instance, Zabava, Ford, and Wolvin (1993) assessed the impact of a basic speech communication course on students' perceptions of their communication competencies in class, work, and social settings, and their results showed perceived improvements for all three contexts. Similarly, Dwyer and Fus (2002) studied the relationship between the basic communication course and decreased student communication apprehension and saw very positive results.

It is also worth noting that the basic communication course can take many forms—from traditional public speaking courses to hybrid classes that incorporate other foundational communication content areas (e.g., interpersonal, group) (Defining the Basic Course, 2018). The size of these courses can also vary. In this case study, we look at a multi-section course taught by graduate students that is part of a larger oral communication program. However, other institutions may have stand-alone sections that are led by faculty members.

The format and size of the course matters in terms of how the course is structured/delivered, especially when accounting for technology. For example, Schwartzman (2006) found that even when moved to a digital format, the basic course results in significant success in achieving student learning outcomes. Denker (2013) explored the value of clickers in a basic course with a large lecture setting, finding fairly inconclusive results. This research indicates that educators have been working to improve the basic communication course in terms of the student experience and learning outcomes mastery for decades.

In all, the basic communication course can be a fruitful ground for implementing the course redesign process for several reasons. First, the class is offered in a multi-section format that is taught by many instructors ranging from graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to instructors (limited term, adjunct, professional track faculty). Thus, consistency is crucial, as students in one section should expect a similar learning experience as their friend in another section. Second, there is often a need to clarify the course identity. By this, we mean that the foundation of the course—the learning outcomes—needs to be examined and reexamined to make sure that they meet the student's communication needs while still demonstrating the uniqueness and impact of the course.

With that rationale in mind, we developed this case study research project in order to understand the role course redesigns play in the basic communication course. Specifically,

we asked: *How can course redesign programs be used in basic communication courses?* To address this question, we participated in a campus-wide program that tackled course redesign efforts and documented our experience, tracked the changes we made to our basic communication course, and qualitatively assessed the changes we implemented.

Method

We took a case study approach to understand the role that course redesign programs can play in basic course administration. A case study is “the detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984, p. 34). In other words, a case study approach is a systematic study of a given topic within a specific context. In this case, we analyzed our experience working in a course redesign program during 2016 (the context) to understand how these types of programs can be used in the basic communication course (the topic under investigation). To accomplish this goal, we will rely on several complementary sources of data; specifically, active participation and a series of qualitative surveys.

Context

We house two versions of the basic communication course in our department. The one we focused on for this research is a presentational speaking course that is grounded in the rhetorical tradition. Students enrolled in this class are exposed to rhetorical theories and concepts (e.g., Fisher’s narrative paradigm, Toulmin’s model of argument) as they learn to develop and critique arguments and deliver presentations.

Each semester, five sections of the course are offered. Enrollment is capped at 19 students and the course is taught by advanced graduate students who research topics related to rhetoric. The instructors assigned to teach the course during spring 2016, fall 2016, and spring 2017 partnered with the course administrators to engage in a course redesign program to address issues of course consistency.

Creating consistency between sections was our original rationale for starting the course redesign process. This is an issue for many multi-section courses that have multiple people teaching the same course. Therefore, we sought to rebuild the class from the ground up to ensure that learning outcomes are being consistently met and that students are having a similar learning experience regardless of their instructor. To do this, we first redesigned the learning outcomes. We created two sets of outcomes—one that matched the University’s general education program (see Table 1) and one that was course specific (see Table 2). Based on these goals, we chose a new textbook, created new assignments that mapped onto the general and course specific learning outcomes, and created a common syllabus and schedule that structured each section of the course.

Table 1: General Education Learning Objectives

On completion of an Oral Communication general education course, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate competency in planning, preparing, and presenting effective oral presentations.
- Use effective presentation techniques including presentation graphics.

- Demonstrate effectiveness in using verbal and nonverbal language appropriate to the goal and the context of the communication.
- Demonstrate an ability to listen carefully.
- Demonstrate skill in asking and in responding to questions.
- Demonstrate awareness of communication ethics in a global society.

Table 2: Course Specific Learning Outcomes

At the completion of the course:

- Students will be able to apply rhetorical theories of argument to develop and evaluate practical discourse.
- Students will be able to identify and analyze the appeals, premises, and values in practical argument.
- Students will be able to locate and use credible evidence to build a body of related knowledge to create an argument.
- Students will be able to create and deliver messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context.

To address the consistency issue and aid in our redesign process, we joined a course redesign program facilitated by our university's teaching and learning center. This program is a competitively selected award that provides participants with a \$22,000 grant to pay for costs related to the redesign (e.g., teaching assistants, software programs, materials). The program was led by the teaching and learning center's directors and teaching specialists, as well as past program participants. Given the access to pedagogical specialists and administrative support, we decided that this redesign program would be an ideal way to devote the time and resources necessary to completely overhaul our course.

Data Collection

We relied on our experience engaging in the course redesign process. Most notably, we participated in monthly meetings during 2016 at our University's center for teaching. This course redesign program started with a "kickoff workshop" that provided an overview of the year-long program as well as highlighted a successful course redesign. We then met a total of 12 times for two hours each during spring 2016 and fall 2016. During these meetings we discussed a variety of pedagogical topics with other faculty focused on redesigning their courses. These topics included, writing learning outcomes, integrating active learning into the classroom, responding to student concerns, and committing to embracing diversity and inclusion practices. Moreover, we reflected on our readings that corresponded to the weekly topics. These readings were academic and were used to inform our group discussions as well as our plans for course redesigns.

The faculty who participated in the course redesign program ranged from full professor to assistant professor and their area of specialties spanned the gamut of the natural sciences to the humanities. Through these interactions, we saw similar problems/struggles arise even though our course content was vastly different. For example, we discussed how to incorporate active learning classroom techniques when teaching basic chemical compounds

as well as classroom assessment techniques in a discussion about the role of ethics in journalism.

There were three main stages of the course redesign process we participated in. During the spring, we conceptualized our redesign plan. Next, we spent the summer planning to launch the redesigned course. Finally, the fall was devoted to offering the newly redesigned course. We collected data throughout this time period. Additionally, as the semester concluded, we incorporated qualitative assessment surveys to assess how students perceived our course redesign changes.

The series of qualitative surveys that we launched during the fall of 2016 served as an important data source in this case study. We conducted the surveys in five sections of the course each with an enrollment of 19 students. The students who participated in this research self-selected into the study. No identifying information was collected and no points/course credit was used as an incentive. Using student feedback as a form of qualitative data is a rich source of information regarding the student experience (Anderson, Gardner, & Wolvin, 2016; Gardner, Anderson, & Wolvin, 2017).

We conducted a pre-test, midterm evaluation, and post-test online using the University's Qualtrics system. We administered the pre-test during the first week of classes. This survey asked students questions that directly corresponded to our stated learning outcomes. For example, we asked: (1) What is rhetoric?, (2) What is a practical argument?, (3) What contextual factors should be considered when preparing a message?, (4) What is an effective oral presentation? What does it include?, and (5) What is the role of ethics in rhetoric? In all we collected 61 student responses.

The midterm evaluation was conducted in between the pre-test and post-test. The focus of this survey was to gather information about the student experience in our basic communication course. The questions we asked mirrored end-of-semester evaluations like: (1) course guidelines were clearly described in the syllabus, (2) given the course level and number of credits, the workload was appropriate, and (3) the pace of the course is appropriate. These questions were designed to assess the structure of our course. In addition, we asked questions that elicited written student feedback, such as: (1) What have you learned from this course that you found particularly interesting or exciting?, (2) What material that was covered is still confusing or unclear?, (3) What is going right?, (4) What is going wrong?, (5) What would help you get more out of this course?, (6) What were your expectations/perception of the course at the beginning of the semester? How, if at all, have your expectations/perceptions changed?, and (7) Would you recommend this course to another student? We were able to gather 75 student responses.

The post-test was made available during the last week of the semester. Here, we asked the same questions that were in the pre-test in order to qualitatively gauge the learning gains that our students made over the course of the semester. A total of 22 students responded to this survey. We hypothesize that the drop off in respondents is related to the end of the semester rush and onslaught of other surveys/questionnaires (e.g., final papers and end of the semester evaluations).

Data Analysis

We used a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This form of analysis prioritizes the participant voice/experience as researchers analyze data in an open manner rather than through theoretical lenses that can limit what is seen by the

researcher (Charmaz, 2006). As such, this data analysis approach allows results to emerge in a more organic manner.

After collecting, organizing, and scrubbing our data for identifying information, we began coding our experience and qualitative survey responses. Coding is the process of assigning meaning to a unit of data in a way that distills, sorts, allows for comparisons, and aids in understanding (Charmaz, 2006) and broadly describes the ways a researcher makes sense of collected data. In this case, we used the constant comparative coding method associated with the grounded approach to data analysis. Here, we completed a round of open coding during which we developed preliminary categories following an initial reading of the data. Example themes included, rhetoricians, course vocabulary, nerves/speaking anxiety. Next, we started to compare these categories as we collapsed and expanded the preliminary coding categories. For example, our emergent categories included student expectations, argumentation, and presentation skills. Finally, these codes were organized into larger themes that represent the data and experience. In completing this process, we uncovered themes that helped us to understand how our basic communication course used the course redesign efforts.

Results

Our results center on two central themes: (1) developing an identity and (2) evaluating learning outcomes using the student voice. These themes will be used to organize the results section.

Developing an Identity

In the competitive higher education environment, communication courses must demonstrate their uniqueness. As such, developing an identity becomes an important aspect of course redesign. Our campus allows for any academic unit to propose and offer a basic communication course as long as it meets the learning outcomes required by the General Education Board. To be competitive with other basic communication course offerings, we have worked to establish a campus-wide identity that highlights what makes our course unique. In analyzing our data, we found that our course identity centered on three ideas: (1) the course is complex, (2) argumentation is at the heart of presentational speaking, and (3) refined presentational speaking skills are important to communication.

Complexity. Students often came into the basic course with the assumption that it will be an easy class. However, students enrolled in our course recognized that the basic communication course was actually more complex than expected. Ultimately, we realized that this complexity was a key characteristic of our course identity that needs to be better communicated to our constituents.

First, complexity was expressed in the way students explained that they thought the course would be easy, but in fact, was much harder than expected in terms of time and workload. For example, one student said, “I thought this class was going to be really easy and boring, but it's really interesting and useful.” Another student expressed a similar sentiment as they explained, “I thought the class was going to be relatively easy to where if I read and went to lecture then I could understand the material, but it is not the case.” By countering the idea that communication courses are easy, we set ourselves apart from other general education oral communication courses.

The second way complexity emerged is that students came into the class assuming that since they communicate every day, that they do it well. However, over the time, students realized that the act of communication is much more involved than they originally thought. For example, one student explained, “my perception has changed because I had no idea all of these models and concepts existed.” This comment gets at the of-repeated notion that since communication is so ubiquitous, that it must be simple, but this redesigned course powerfully challenged this assumption.

Arguments. The focus on arguments, both critiquing and creating them, was another way that this course established its identity. This component is what set us apart from other basic communication course options offered on campus. We first noticed that our focus on creating and critiquing arguments was special during our faculty course redesign meetings. During these meetings, we were able to better situate the course identity on campus and articulate the nuances of the class. In these discussions, we shared the unique characteristics of the basic communication course and other faculty from different units asked clarifying questions. For example, while discussing the role of critical thinking in developing and critiquing arguments, one of the fellow faculty participants mentioned that he wants to encourage the majors in his program to take this course instead of one of the other options that meets the University’s Oral Communication General Education Requirements.

Students also homed in on this central characteristic of the course. One student explained that they initially thought “that this was a boring gen ed, but I enjoyed that we are learning to argue our opinion.” While we know that we need to better capitalize on this point, some students already knew that this was one of the features of the class. One student noted, “I expected to break down arguments and to be able to formulate my own more effectively, and that is what I got.”

In all, we found that this redesigned course challenged student expectations about the basic communication course—making the experience more intellectually challenging by incorporating foundational aspects of rhetoric into a traditional public speaking class—and this became a hallmark of the course that we decided to embrace.

Presentational Speaking Skills. The course is a general education course that focuses on presentational speaking, so it is not surprising that improved communication skills is one of the key components of our identity. With that said, students recognized that this was an important characteristic of the course, as evidenced by their comments regarding expectations. For instance, one student said, “I expected a rigorous course that not only expanded my communication skills but taught me more about rhetoric in the real world. The course has so far fit my expectations.” Another student echoed this sentiment as they explained, “My expectations going into the course were to learn how to be a better speaker especially in front of others that I do not know. I still have the same expectations.”

Students also noted that the improved presentational speaking skills they hoped to gain became more than an expectation, as they perceived real growth. For example, one student noted their perceived gains in presentational speaking, “I’ve become a more effective public speaker. I feel like I am growing in this way, so it's working!”

Evaluating Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are the foundation of any course. In order to show that our course redesign was successful, we needed to be able to show that we had developed informed learning outcomes and that these goals were being met after a semester of instruction. To accomplish this task, we relied on an open-ended pretest-posttest format where students were asked questions relating to each of our stated learning outcomes and we qualitatively compared the responses from the beginning of the semester and end of the semester to assess learning. Our learning outcomes will serve to organize this results section.

What is rhetoric?

Initial responses to this question centered on the act of persuasion. These were short answers that simplified the concept of rhetoric to the act of persuasion. For instance, students would often equate rhetoric with persuasive thinking. Common responses were “rhetoric is persuasive speaking” and “persuasive writing or speaking”

However, by the end of the semester, students were able to better articulate their responses to this prompt. Their answers were more complex as they were able to recognize that there is not a singular accepted definition of rhetoric. “Rhetoric is not one definition. Rhetoric in the eyes of Bitzer is associated with rhetorical situations while Toulmin describes it as claims, data, warrants.”

Moreover, students began to use names and state standpoints of the people discussed in class. For example, “Rhetoric has many definitions according to numerous sources. While *Aristotle* thought it was the art of persuasion, *Fisher* thought it was narratives, *Toulmin* thought it was data, a claim, and the warrant that bridges the two together, and *Jasinski* thought it was a problem, its cause, the solution, and the consequences of it.” (emphasis added).

What is a practical argument?

When students were asked about practical arguments at the beginning of the semester they provided very unsure responses like, “I guess it's an argument that attempts to use logical reasoning to assert its message.” Other students provided short responses that did not attempt to guess at the definition. For example, “Not sure” and “I don't know.”

When students did venture a guess, their answers were simple and often focused on the idea of logic “An argument based on logic.” Other responses honed in on the term practical and translated that to applied settings. For instance, one student said that a practical argument is, “an argument about real world events that has a real world application”

By the end of the semester, students were able to provide more sophisticated responses to this prompt. For example, one student wrote, “a practical argument is an argument made in order to achieve a purpose, namely to convince the audience of the speaker's point of view. This is a mainly pragmatic form of argument and does not usually focus on the philosophical forms of rhetoric.”

Logic still plays a major role in the definitions, but its role is more fully fleshed out. One student demonstrated this point as they stated, “a practical argument includes logical data to back up a claim that addresses an issue. A practical argument includes speaking on an intellectual issues either one on one or to an audience.”

What contextual factors should be considered when preparing a message?

Initial responses focused on the audience, which is a good sign of awareness on the part of the students. Common responses prioritized the audience, such as, “the culture and beliefs of the audience you're speaking to” and “the audience's background and recent events.”

Not surprisingly, the situation was also a common theme in the initial response. Students discussed current events. For example, one student said, “You should be concerned with whom you are speaking to along with the current events of the time.” In addition, environmental factors like the presentation, available technology, and the communication medium, were discussed as contextual factors of which a speaker should be aware. One student exemplified this point as they said, “the audience, the situation, the platform for communication (i.e., speech, PowerPoint, email).”

The biggest gain seen in this learning outcome was the correct use of course vocabulary. For instance, one student explained that a speaker “should consider the context of the message, opposing messages and reasoning, the audience, time constraints, personal ethos, and location.” Moreover, students often incorporated elements of argument, like “grounds, warrants, and claims.” They also offered questions to guide a speaker’s decisions. For example, “do you have background information to support your claim/argument, and the logic to back up the transition from the background information to your claim?”

What is an effective oral presentation? What does it include?

At the beginning of the semester, students tended to equate an effective oral presentation with delivery. Physical and verbal delivery were the focus of this round of response. One student exemplified this focus by saying, “It takes into account all of the following: body language, facial language, conciseness/clarity, how effectively the listener can interpret it, tone of voice, diction, speed, etc.” Another student echoed this point as they explained, “fluid speech, limited pauses, etc.” Make for an effective oral presentation.

After taking the course, students were better able to integrate both content and delivery into their responses regarding what makes for an effective oral presentation. Moreover, and as seen before, they used course vocabulary correctly in their responses. For example, one student said, “an effective oral presentation includes a strong point with backing, along with an introduction, body, and conclusion. It also includes a speaker who is confident in themselves and their topic. This may be shown through movement along with their tone. This presentation may also include a visual aid to help enhance the argument.” A fellow classmate furthered this point as they explained: “an effective oral presentation contains the necessary context—grounds, warrants, and claims, it may also utilize a visual aid, and requires proper presentation of the person speaking, in terms of appearance, gestures, tone, etc.”

What is the role of ethics in rhetoric?

Our last learning outcome looked at the role of ethics in rhetoric. The students’ initial responses were basic. For example, one student said, “I didn't know ethics had a role in rhetoric”; while another student equated rhetoric with unethical communication. Here they said, “the presenter has a responsibility to not use rhetorical devices to mislead or trick listeners into believing something they know is wrong.” Another common idea was that ethics was synonymous with plagiarism. For instance, one student said, “Ethics plays a role in rhetoric because it is plagiarism to steal another person's language.”

The students seemed to have a better grasp of ethics by the end of the semester based on their responses. Students recognized that ethics were important in the construction and communication of a message. One student said, “ethics is what determines whether or not rhetoric should be implemented.” While another student pondered a bigger issue regarding rhetoric. Here, they said, “Rhetoric that is good in implementation but is overall detrimental to society as a whole is deemed ethically bad and should be chastised by rhetoricians for its underhanded techniques.”

The idea that rhetoric is powerful seemed to emphasize the importance of ethical decision making on the part of the speaker. For instance, one student explained, “Ethics have a role in rhetoric because of the action that may result from an act of rhetoric. You want to make sure the rhetorical act is ethical, in that it would not lead to detrimental or harmful action. Additionally, the rhetorical act should be composed with ethics, making use of the proper authorities, sources, and appealing to appropriate emotions, etc.”

In all, our qualitative data showed gains in each category. Students were better able to articulate responses to the questions we posed that were directly related to the learning outcomes set in the course. The final answers were more sophisticated, incorporated course language, and correctly used course ideas; all of which point to positive student learning outcomes.

Discussion

We found that engaging in the course redesign process was useful for bolstering our basic communication course. Specifically, our research reaffirms the need to constantly (re)evaluate the basic communication to establish and maintain a clear course identity, ensure that the course is guided by the stated learning outcomes, and make sure the course is up to date. Courses should focus on these aspects not only to enhance the teaching-learning process, but also to remain competitive in the higher education environment.

Implications

These findings have led us to develop implications for our research. First, this project demonstrated how a well-planned course redesign program can be used in the basic communication course. In our case, the redesign process gave us a dedicated time to critically evaluate our course. In doing so, we were able to hone in on the areas that we needed to improve (establishing our identity and letting learning outcomes guide the course). Other basic communication course programs will have different areas of focus, but the benefits of course redesign should still hold true as it adds structure to the evaluation and change process. In addition, participation in course redesign programs can also be used demonstrate the pedagogical commitment of course administrators and emphasize the strengths of the class to further establish the importance of the basic communication course in communication departments and across campus.

Second, our research underscored the need for collaborative consistency in the basic course (Anderson, Gardner, Wolvin, Kirby-Straker, Bederson, Yalcin, 2016). Collaborative consistency refers to the way that basic communication course directors work in tandem with course instructors to develop and institute changes. In other words, course administrators need the buy in of those who teach the basic communication course in order for curriculum changes to be successful. We took this approach in our redesign process as

we developed a team of course administrators and experienced instructors to tackle the course redesign. As a result, we had multiple perspectives that served to enhance our course.

Finally, this research emphasizes the need for course administrators to focus on the student experience while engaging in the redesign process. Traditional assessments have tended to focus on quantitative accounting of learning gains or improvements made. However, this approach only provides a partial picture of what is going on in the course as student voice is all but neglected (Anderson, Gardner, & Wolvin, 2016). Prioritizing the student experience and taking a case study approach to understanding how the course redesign process can be used in the basic course demonstrates the strength of method variation when assessing learning outcomes. We believe that student perceptions of the course and learning serve as a critical source of information that course administrators can and should use for the redesign process.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, this case study has limitations that should be noted. First, the case only accounts for one year of data. With that said, we are still enmeshed in the redesign process as we assess how the changes we made to the course support our learning outcomes. Second, there may be sample bias in the results. By this we mean, that the students who took part in the optional qualitative surveys may not represent the experiences of all students who took our basic communication course. Finally, this case study focuses on one specific course, while conventional academic thinking criticizes case studies for their lack of social-scientific standard of generalizability, objectivity, and validity; this thinking is an over simplification of the methodology and case studies provide useful insights into the phenomena under investigation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). While our findings are not generalizable, the lessons we learned can be passed on to other basic communication course administrators and adapted to the specific contexts of their universities, departments, and courses.

There are several avenues for future research. In terms of our course, the redesign process is ongoing. This research is based on the first round of data collection and analysis but we continue to make changes each semester and see this as an iterative process where we use the data to inform course changes. We plan to continue to document our course redesign experience to demonstrate the iterative nature of course administration. Moreover, we believe that this type of research could demonstrate how to close the assessment loop by showing how data collection and analysis can lead to course changes, which are then further assessed.

Course redesign programs, like the one we detailed here, are a resource that basic communication course directors can use to (re)evaluate their course. By participating in these programs, course directors not only have the opportunity to critically assess their course and corresponding learning outcomes, but to also promote their course and among key constituencies.

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