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What College Students Should Know and Be Able to Do

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THE end of the 20th century provides educators and administrators with an opportunity to reflect on how well they have accomplished their goals. The communication discipline, since its beginning, has been concerned with skill achievement and knowledge generation. But not until the latter part of the century have scholars and national associations attempted to identify and agree upon what it is that students should know and be able to do. These efforts reflect maturity of the discipline and generation of a body of knowledge that allows such conclusions with increased certainty.

We have recently written about the nature and importance of communication skills training and knowledge development at the college level, arguing that instruction should be required for all college students (Rubin & Morreale, 1996). College students need to develop skills, accumulate knowledge, and increase motivation to communicate in effective and appropriate ways (Rubin, 1983; Spitzberg, 1983). Basic skills are best taught by communication faculty, whereas advanced skills might be taught jointly with faculty from the major discipline. College (Saffer, 1999) and community college graduates (Muchmore & Galvin, 1983) need to be able to communicate effectively.

Professionals agree that college students need to leave college with refined communication skills. For instance, both observational (Rubin & Feezel, 1985) and survey (Johnson, 1994; Johnson & Roellke, 1999) research has confirmed the importance of speaking, listening, and interpersonal skills for teachers, librarians (Xu, 1996), and school administrators (Geddes, 1993). Likewise, studies of accounting (Park, 1994) and finance students (Tanner & Cudd, 1999) in business programs, employers of business majors (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989; Kretovics & McCambridge, 1998), bankers (Staats, & Golen, 1985), managers (O'Connor, 1993), and business students, faculty, and employers (Bauer, 1995) identify communication skills as essential for success. Studies of social workers (Forte & Mathews, 1994), pharmacists (Parkhurst, 1994), doctors (Klamen & Williams, 1997), and registered nurses (Johnson, 1994) confirm the perceived value of communication skills in life.

In this article, we summarize efforts spearheaded by various groups in the National Communication Association (NCA)¹, federal government agencies, and research centers to identify important core communication (speaking and listening) competencies, that are

necessary in order for undergraduates and graduates to be effective in the workplace and in society. Some competencies were identified through Committee on Assessment and Testing (CAT) projects within the National Communication Association (NCA), and through national research projects (Jones, 1994, 1995a), where over 600 faculty, employers, and policy makers evaluated the importance of specific skills. These projects have resulted in lists of competencies deemed essential by researchers, educators, employers, and government policy makers alike. Others presented here were advanced extensions of these basic skills for college graduates. We also consider the nature of procedural knowledge in relation to skill.

DEVELOPING THE COLLEGE COMPETENCIES

In the late 1970s, NCA developed a Task Force on Assessment and Testing to examine current projects and efforts by NCA members to assess basic skills of college students. This task force conducted research studies and generated products such as a compilation of assessment instruments, and agreed-upon lists of speaking and listening skills for high school graduates, skills necessary for elementary students, and skills businesses expect their new employees to have. The task force grew in size and became the Committee on Assessment and Testing (CAT) in the 1980s. Members formulated lists of competencies in speaking and listening that guided educators in curriculum development and assessment, and they surveyed assessment programs and procedures in professions such as teaching, health, law, and business. In the 80s and continuing into the 1990s, CAT disseminated criteria for assessment instruments in speech communication (Backlund, Brown, Gurry, & Jandt, 1980; National Communication Association, 1998a), surveyed assessment programs/practices in higher education (Rubin, Moore, Sisco, & Quianthy, 1983), and spawned the development of assessment instruments and compilations of instruments (National Communication Association, 1993, 1994, 1995a). Out of those activities, the Commission on Assessment and Testing emerged and interest remains within NCA in K-12, college, and college graduate assessment and skills.

Concomitant with NCA's efforts, government agencies and research centers at a national level were addressing the matter of core communication competencies. In 1990, the state governors and the President of the United States declared that "by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). One objective of this goal identified the importance of communication: "The proportion of college graduates who demonstrate an advanced ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems will increase substantially." [A comprehensive summary of the development of these goals can be found in Rosenbaum, 1994.]

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) held study design workshops—composed of policy makers, college faculty, content specialists, and measurement experts—to determine how best to implement such an objective. In the first year, John Daly and Rebecca Rubin represented the communication discipline at these NCES workshops. Also participating was Barbara Lieb, who is now Director of the National Institute for Educational Policy in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, who made sure that the next NCES workshop would have increased participation by the communication discipline once the decision was made to go forward with a national assessment program (Corrallo & Fischer, 1992).

In 1992, John Daly wrote one of the position papers for the second NCES workshop, "Assessing Speaking and Listening: Preliminary Considerations for a National Assessment" (see Greenwood, 1994). Daly reviewed basic concerns and issues in assessment and

identified important communication skills and criteria. Rebecca Rubin, Gustav Friedrich, Donald Lumsden, and Andrew Wolvin were invited by NCES to participate in discussions that were supposed to result in a list of indisputable competencies in speaking and listening. They used Daly's proposed categories—Informing, Persuading, and Relating—to structure basic speaking and listening skills for college students that had previously been identified in the communication literature and by NCA Committee on Assessment and Testing projects. Also attending this session was Elizabeth Jones from the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (NCTLA) who was later charged with conducting a study to further refine lists of essential skills.

Consequently, Elizabeth Jones (then at NCTLA) spearheaded an effort to identify essential communication skills and determine if there was a consensus or agreement about the importance of specific competencies (Corrallo, 1994; Jones, 1994) among faculty, employers (who hire college graduates), and policy makers (e.g., representatives of accrediting associations or state-level higher education coordinating board members). An extensive literature review provided the foundation for the development of a goals inventory. Numerous frameworks and research studies were reviewed. Samples of key skills under each major component of the communication process were included in the inventory and reflected those particular skills most frequently cited by different authors. An advisory board and focus groups of content specialists reviewed draft versions of the inventory. Ultimately, through an iterative survey process, over 600 faculty, employers, and policy makers rated the importance of specific speech communication and listening skills. These individuals agreed about the importance of 87 percent of the specific skills.

Concurrently, NCA sponsored a summer conference on assessment (National Communication Association, 1995b), which helped integrate government, NCTLA, and NCA-based conclusions. In addition, an entire program on the NCTLA report was presented at NCA in 1995 (Rubin). Jones (1995b) explained the study design and results and Lieb, Daly, Rubin, Friedrich, and Wolvin responded and discussed the implications. Also at that conference, a roundtable discussion of the undergraduate canon included papers focused on these communication skill issues (Morreale, 1995; Rubin, 1995).

It is from these efforts that the lists of basic and advanced skills presented in this article come. Some of the skills are very basic (e.g., structure messages with introductions, main points, useful transitions, and conclusions), whereas others are more advanced. A rationale for the present work and most of the findings were first published in Jones's (1996), *Preparing Competent College Graduates: Setting New and Higher Expectations for Student Learning*. However, the detailed tables of skills were not included in that volume. The skills were reviewed by NCA's Educational Policies Board, and are available in electronic form as one set of skills and knowledge that college students should have in the areas of speaking and listening (National Communication Association, 1998b).

BASIC SKILLS FOR COLLEGE GRADUATES

Basic skills are minimal competencies and represent abilities, core knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective functioning in society and in the workplace. These skills must result in effective outcomes and be seen as appropriate (a) by the audience, (b) in the context enacted, and (c) for the purpose specified. As Daly (1994) has suggested, communication has three general purposes: persuading, informing, and relating.

By incorporating Jones's (1994) list of skills (see Table 1) with those proposed for K-12 (National Communication Association, 1998c) and NCA's basic competencies for high school graduates (Bassett et al., 1978; SCA, 1978), areas of general agreement were identified regarding what skills are basic for all communication contexts (Morreale & Rubin,

1997). Moreover, the final list was reviewed in light of findings from other position papers on communication in the undergraduate canon (Morreale, 1995; Rubin, 1995).

TABLE 1
Expectations for College Graduates: Basic Communication Skills (Jones, 1994)

College Graduates should be able to:

I. BASIC SPEECH COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A. GENERAL

1. state ideas clearly.
2. be aware of language indicating bias on gender, age, ethnic, or sexual/affective orientation.
3. communicate ethically.
4. accept responsibility for their own communication behavior.
5. recognize when it is appropriate to communicate.
6. communicate candidly (in an open and direct manner).

B. MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATION

1. structure a message for effectiveness with an introduction, main points, useful transitions, and a conclusion.
2. choose appropriate and effective organizing methods for message.
3. identify their communication goals.
4. use summary statement(s) in appropriate contexts.
5. outline the key points and sub-points of their spoken message.
6. accomplish their communication goals.
7. select the most appropriate and effective medium for communicating.

II. SPEECH COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A. CONTEXT AND SITUATION ANALYSIS

1. adapt to changes in audience characteristics.
2. choose and narrow a topic as appropriate according to the occasion.
3. choose and broaden a topic according to the needs of the audience.

B. MESSAGE SUPPORT

1. recognize and be able to use basic reasoning.
2. support arguments with relevant and adequate evidence.
3. identify facts, issues, and problems relevant to the topic.
4. research effectively information required for message preparation.
5. demonstrate credibility.
6. demonstrate competence and comfort with information.
7. state intentions and purposes when appropriate.

C. MESSAGE TYPE

1. develop messages that influence attitudes, beliefs, and actions.
2. describe or express feelings to others when appropriate.

III. INTERPERSONAL AND GROUP COMMUNICATION

A. SITUATION ANALYSIS

1. recognize when another does not understand their message.
2. identify and manage misunderstandings.
3. recognize when it is inappropriate to speak.

B. RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

1. manage conflict.

2. allow others to express different views.
3. effectively assert themselves.

C. INFORMATION EXCHANGE

1. listen attentively to questions and comments from other communicators.
2. ask questions effectively.
3. answer questions concisely and to the point or issue.
4. give concise and accurate directions.

D. CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT

1. be open-minded about another's point of view.
2. convey enthusiasm for topic through delivery.

E. GROUP COMMUNICATION

1. work on collaborative projects as a team.
2. keep group discussions relevant and focused.

IV. COMMUNICATION CODES

1. use pronunciation, grammar, and articulation appropriate to the designated audience.
2. use appropriate vocal behaviors for the message and the audience.

V. ORAL MESSAGE EVALUATION

1. listen attentively.
2. listen with an open mind.
3. distinguish facts from opinions.
4. identify important points when given oral instructions.
5. distinguish main points from supporting details.

Table 2 contains specific skills for the three purposes. College graduates should be able to construct persuasive messages adapted to the audience, present the messages, and achieve their goals. They should be able to present and solicit information and understand when they're understood. And they should be able to develop healthy interpersonal relations with other, managing conflict that might arise along the way.

TABLE 2

Expectations for College Graduates: Basic Skills for Persuading, Informing, and Relating (Rubin, 1995; Rubin & Morreale, 1996)

I. GENERAL

- A. Students can encode clear messages, using appropriate language, articulation, pronunciation, paralinguistic qualities, and organizational patterns.
- B. Students can decode messages correctly, understand others' nonverbal cues, critically evaluate messages, and distinguish between various communicative purposes.
- C. Specifically, students can:
 1. recognize when it is inappropriate to speak.
 2. speak clearly and expressively, using appropriate articulation, pronunciation, volume, rate, and intonation.
 3. decode verbal and nonverbal cues accurately.
 4. be aware of language indicating bias regarding gender, age, ethnicity, or sexual/affectual orientation.
 5. detect errors in the communication of others.
 6. achieve goals without jeopardizing more important goals in other contexts.

7. assess the communication context and adapt the message to the audience.
8. present their ideas in an organizational pattern that allows others to understand.
9. distinguish between different purposes and goals in communication (persuading, informing, relating).
10. listen attentively.
11. select and use the most appropriate and effective medium for communication.
12. convey enthusiasm for one's topic.
13. structure a message with an introduction, main points, useful transitions, and a conclusion.

II. PERSUADING

- A. Students can (a) construct a persuasive message, adapted to the audience, purpose, and context of the situation, (b) present the message, using effective delivery, reasoning, and organizational pattern, and (c) achieve their persuasive goals.
- B. Students can tell when someone is trying to persuade them and critically evaluate those attempts to influence.
- C. Specifically, students can:
 1. defend their positions with evidence and reasoning.
 2. use an effective organizational pattern to persuade.
 3. adapt the message to the audience and communicative context.
 4. provide feedback to someone who is trying to persuade them.
 5. distinguish fact from opinion.
 6. distinguish between informative and persuasive messages.
 7. evaluate critically another's spoken or mediated messages and attempts to influence.
 8. identify others' level of receptivity to the message.
 9. recognize when others do not agree.

III. INFORMING

- A. Students can present information, answer questions, give directions, and give assistance clearly and effectively.
- B. Students can recognize when others do not understand, understand others' messages, ask questions, and follow directions.
- C. Specifically, students can:
 1. give information and support it with illustrations and examples.
 2. give directions accurately and in order.
 3. ask clear questions.
 4. ask for information.
 5. identify main points, understand what is said, and remember important points in others' messages.
 6. answer questions directly and accurately.
 7. recognize when others do not understand.
 8. summarize messages for others.
 9. understand others' messages, follow their ideas, and draw inferences.
 10. describe and summarize viewpoints different from their own.

IV. RELATING

- A. Students can (a) develop, maintain, and nurture interpersonal and small group relationships with others; (b) fulfill their own interpersonal needs; and (c) manage conflict while respecting all interactants' rights.

- B. Students can respond to others' attempts to build relationships and reciprocate by self-disclosing, focusing on the other, empathizing, and displaying affinity.
- C. Specifically, students can:
1. achieve interpersonal goals (giving/seeking inclusion, affection, and control).
 2. identify conflict situations.
 3. respect others' rights and stand up for one's own rights.
 4. feel and convey empathy to others.
 5. build relationships with others.
 6. describe others' viewpoints.
 7. describe differences in opinion.
 8. express their feelings to others when appropriate.
 9. perform social rituals (introductions, telephone answering, greetings, farewells).
 10. maintain conversations by taking turns, managing the interaction, reciprocal conversation, self-disclosure, and altercentrism.
 11. receive affinity (e.g., compliments) from others.
 12. work on collaborative projects in teams.
 13. keep group discussions relevant and focused.
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ADVANCED SKILLS FOR COLLEGE GRADUATES AND BEYOND

Advanced skills are more than just knowing, doing, or feeling (Rubin & Morreale, 1996). They are blends of knowledge, skill, and attitude; they require greater levels of behavioral flexibility/adaptability. For instance, a basic skill such as "Identify communication goals" at an advanced level becomes "Manage multiple communication goals." This advanced skill requires both identification of the goals and the behavioral component of managing the goals, both of which require adaptability.

Advanced skills also require reasoning and audience analysis. Examples of advanced skills include being able to understand people from other cultures, organizations, or groups and adapting messages to the demands of the situation or context (Jones, 1994). Both require greater emphasis on creating appropriate and effective messages, two main components of competence. College graduates also need to refine their listening skills; they need to identify important issues or problems, draw conclusions, and understand others to better manage conflict and empathize with their colleagues. Jones concluded that "advanced skills in both writing and speech communication require the development of reasoning skills" (p. 38). Speech communication educators have long been teaching reasoning skills because they realized that even basic communication skills require sound reasoning. Table 3 contains some of the more advanced skills, again supported by the survey of faculty, employers, and policy makers (Jones, 1994; Rubin & Morreale, 1996).

TABLE 3
Expectations for College Graduates: Advanced Communication Skills
(Morreale & Rubin, 1997)

College graduates should be able to:

A. GENERAL SKILLS

1. Identify and adapt to changes in audience characteristics.
2. Incorporate language that captures and maintains audience interest in message.
3. Identify and manage misunderstandings.
4. Demonstrate credibility.
5. Demonstrate competence and comfort with information.
6. Recognize time constraints of a communication situation and know how to operate within them.
7. Manage multiple communication goals effectively.
8. Demonstrate attentiveness through nonverbal and verbal behaviors.
9. Adapt messages to the demands of the situation or context.

B. SPEAKING IN PUBLIC

1. Incorporate information from a variety of sources to support message.
2. Identify and use appropriate statistics to support the message.
3. Use motivational appeals that build on values, expectations, and needs of the audience.
4. Develop messages that influence attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

C. RELATING TO OTHERS

1. Manage and resolve group conflicts effectively.
 2. Approach and engage in conversation with new people in new settings with confidence.
 3. Negotiate effectively.
 4. Allow others to express different views and attempt to understand them.
 5. Effectively assert themselves while respecting others' rights.
 6. Convey empathy.
 7. Understand and value differences in communication styles.
 8. Be open-minded about and receptive of another's point of view.
 9. Motivate others to participate and work effectively as a team.
 10. Understand and implement different methods of building group consensus.
 11. Set and manage realistic agendas.
 12. Lead meetings effectively.
 13. Understand and adapt to people from other cultures, organizations, or groups.
 14. Identify important issues or problems, draw conclusions, and understand other group members.
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The descriptors presented in Table 3 could be used to develop expectations for graduates from any academic discipline. Any discipline could examine these skills and determine their applications for their graduates. Faculty and alumni groups could identify examples of how the skills could be manifested by their graduates. In capstone courses and before graduation, students' skills could be assessed through observation and testing. The department and the institution could use the assessment results to inform their accountability and program review efforts (Rosenbaum, 1994). Students could use the results of their personal portfolios to inform potential employers of their advanced communication skills.

PROCEDURAL KNOWLEDGE

In addition to the skills already describe, competence in communication requires procedural knowledge. Spitzberg (1983) argued that we cannot tell if a student has knowledge until behavior (e.g., performance on an exam or during a speech) indicates such, so knowledge and skill are intricately entwined through performance. Behaving in appropriate and effective ways is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for competence (Rubin, 1994). People must understand how to act and the reasons for their actions, as well as how their actions affect others (Harris & Cronen, 1978).

Anderson's (1983) theory of cognition identifies three stages of knowledge acquisition. *Declarative knowledge* is the verbal rules or facts that help people perform a skill (e.g., by understanding what a transition is, a student can use one at a later date). In the *knowledge compilation* stage, knowledge is organized so that it can be used to guide actions (e.g., once students know what a transition can do, they can use it to move to a different topic in a speech). And in the **procedural** stage, people know how to act and these actions become subconscious and automatic (e.g., students might use transitions in their everyday conversations without even thinking about them).

Assessment of knowledge can occur, then, by stimulating behavior. Teachers can create situations in which students or observers evaluate the knowledge base lying behind the student's performance. Multiple techniques might uncover knowledge that a student has that is not observed in one performance mode (e.g., students may have declarative knowledge of what a transition is, but might not demonstrate knowledge compilation in a speech). Knowledge acquisition might be tested through examinations, but automatic performance might only be observable through speaking behavior tasks (see Royer, Cicero, & Carlo, 1993).

Currently there is no general agreement, other than the content presented in basic textbooks, as to what knowledge about communication students should have when they graduate. Furthermore, the advanced level skills expected of graduates require more automatic processing of knowledge because blends of skill and cognition require a faster analysis of the situation, managing multiple goals, and acting in ways that are more automatic in nature. While there is not agreement as to what should be taught, colleges do provide an arena in which communication skills and knowledge can be integrated in meaningful ways.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the following goals will probably never be achieved completely, they are worthwhile directions for future research. Policy makers will undoubtedly be asking questions such as these, as they determine the role of communication in the classroom of the future.

What communication skills are essential for inclusion in the undergraduate curriculum?

Communication faculty and administrators need to know what communication skills students need, not only to get by in (i.e., minimal competence), but to succeed and excel in college classes (i.e., optimal competence). By arriving at a list of communication abilities targeted to college students, faculty can devise curricula to help students achieve those goals. As Jones (1994) learned, through focus groups and survey questionnaires, opinions vary greatly regarding which skills are important and the relative importance of those skills to one another. But if administrators, faculty, policy makers, and researchers can agree on important skills, curricula could be structured accordingly.

What communication skills are essential for college students to succeed in college?

In addition to determining skills to include in curricula, testing of the impact of these skills on college success might be a next step. Institutional research might examine student experiences and achievements to uncover those skills that best predict college success. Past efforts in this direction identified speaking and listening skills (Rubin & Graham, 1988), but often these skills are considered in a molar fashion (e.g., being a good listener) rather than molecularly (e.g., being able to distinguish a fact from an opinion). Jones's list of skills and those presented here might be a good starting point for evaluating the relative worth of these skills in everyday college contexts.

What communication skills can curricula address and which need practice in other environments and extracurricular activities?

The communication classroom provides students with an opportunity to learn and practice new skills and correct those that are ineffective, inefficient, or inappropriate. But learning is hardly limited to the college classroom; in fact, college students might develop communication skills introduced in the classroom more effectively through extracurricular activities and practice in real-world settings. Basic skills are more easily taught in classrooms, whereas advanced skills are often not honed until practiced in real life settings. Faculty might examine possible ways of providing new curricula to allow students to practice advanced skills. Forms of pedagogy such as service-learning and internships are ideal vehicles for practicing advanced skills and allowing supervisors to assess students' performance of them.

Which advanced skills will students need in the professions of their choice?

Researchers in assorted professions have begun to examine the communication-related activities in their fields. It is these professionals who can best identify and describe communication activities that college graduates need in their professions. With the assistance of communication faculty, they could sort through the advanced skills and encourage training and practice in those areas in their respective curricula. Faculty in advanced classes in these professions can be taught what to look for and how to evaluate student progress and encourage development of essential advanced skills.

This article has provided historical background and the results of the development of one set of essential communication skills for college students. Because skills and knowledge are inextricably related to one another, issues related to procedural knowledge also were discussed. Because being able to communicate and understanding how and why to communicate is essential to student's academic, personal, and professional success and happiness, the need for inquiry and discussions such as these are vital to communication curricula. Once agreement is reached as to what skills and knowledge should be taught and learned, then communication faculty can be about the business of teaching those skills and knowledge.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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1. The Speech Communication Association changed its name to the National Communication Association in 1997. To avoid confusion, we've referred to SCA

activities as NCA activities in this article, but have kept the old name in the references for the sake of accuracy.

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