

(JACA)  
1(1997): 62-68

## Assessment in Communication Programs: Issues and Ideas Administrators Must Face

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**U**NTIL about a year ago this communication administrator had not thought much about "assessment," but my interest increased upon listening to colleagues on campuses other than mine talk about their needs to begin assessment programs. After eight years as a department chair at two different universities, I managed to work in settings where "accountability" occasionally was an issue but never "assessment." At two universities I participated in formal reviews by accrediting agencies but both were completed before assessment became one of their requirements. Now our campus is in the initial stages of responding to the request of the North Central Association to prepare and present assessment plans for both graduate and undergraduate programs. The purpose of this essay is to discuss assessment with a focus on our discipline and to address the challenge we face continually as communication administrators and educators.

The challenge for a considerable number of communication administrators and other faculty was addressed intensively at the 1994 SCA Summer Conference on Assessment. The summer conference was an excellent meeting for department chairs and other administrators to attend because it provided a considerable amount of information, especially about our basic courses, which are often the alpha and the omega for undergraduate students who take a course in communication. Several months after the SCA conference an assessment conference in Indianapolis was presented by the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Clearinghouse on Higher Education Assessment Instruments. At the conference, I found myself surrounded by educators from a wide variety of disciplines and universities from around the country and abroad. A similar conference is held annually at Purdue-Indiana University at Indianapolis. Most of those in attendance are faculty and administrators from institutions where the expectation for assessment is an immediate concern, usually driven by a requirement from high levels of administration including legislative bodies.

Assessment in communication education from the basic courses through our most advanced studies is necessary. By working to meet this responsibility, communication educators can provide the quality of education their constituencies expect in order to educate students to become citizens who will find both satisfaction and success on the career paths they choose to follow.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN – “ASSESSMENT?”

Confusion about what assessment means can easily find its way into conversations among communication educators. For example, at a conference of Midwestern basic communication course directors held in Perrysburg, Ohio recently, one wag turned a discussion about assessment to the tired old theme of “easy grades in speech communication departments.” Assessment is not an activity about grades and it may or may not be linked to accountability. According to Trudy Banta (1994), a leading authority, assessment is “a process of providing credible evidence of the outcomes of higher education that is undertaken for the purpose of improving programs and services within an institution” (p. 39). Thomas A. Angelo (1994), another authority on assessment, states: “I define assessment as a means for focusing our collective attention, examining assumptions, and creating a shared culture dedicated to understanding and continuously improving the quality of higher learning” (p. 2). Assessment is a process by which we attempt to identify and evaluate the learning outcomes of our students for the primary purpose of improving our learning environment. Our primary audience for the information we gather and interpret is “us,” the educators who want to improve our courses and our programs.

There is a wealth of information already accumulating to explain, support, and guide assessment. At conferences about assessment, vendors display materials about assessment for purchase by a variety of disciplines, much like textbook publishers do at our communication conventions. There are standardized forms, CD ROMS, books, articles and other materials to use in assessment. Perhaps in our discipline the easiest place to turn for information is our national office—The Speech Communication Association. The SCA published the proceedings from the 1994 summer conference, which include 577 pages of information. Additionally, the SCA Committee on Assessment and Testing can provide practical material to guide our development of assessment outcomes and the means for measuring what we think our students have learned.

An assumption one must make is that assessment is not an activity to undertake as a primary defensive strategy. Speech communication or communication studies are titles we assign to a discipline that often produces too much anxiety in colleagues who feel a need to justify and defend “our” existence and missions on campuses. The keynoter at the 1992 New York State Speech Communication Convention in Albany and I argued that while some departments on some campuses may be in trouble, the trouble is not with the discipline, but rather the state of particular departments. Departments with weak or no leadership, outdated courses, weak standards, and faculty in-fighting, will usually find themselves in some sort of trouble, especially when campus resources diminish. I argue that our discipline is healthy overall, but we must continue to work toward improving our instruction. Assessment programs can be highly effective in bringing about important improvements.

## WHAT DO WE ASSESS?

Because a vast number of our students pass through our “basic skills” courses usually offered at the 100 and 200 levels of instruction, we often place considerable attention on the assessment of basic skills that are central to our initial courses such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and listening skills at cognitive, affective, and performance levels. Typically, we have generated instruction in these courses around the model of lectures, activities, and evaluation which can be quite satisfactory. For instance, we can lecture to a class on the tasks and the relational dimensions of a dyadic encounter, give the students a dyadic encounter assignment, and then observe them armed with criteria to enable us to evaluate their work, provide them with feedback, and

assign the "all important grade." Admittedly there are alternative styles of teaching and evaluating student achievement, but the illustration is certainly not out of the ordinary. From the view of assessment procedures, communication educators are to look, collect information, and measure in some fashion what students appear to have learned for the purpose of determining the extent of their growth as competent communicators. The line between critiquing a student's work to determine a grade and to determine whether she or he demonstrates competency, may at times be blurred. I suspect quite frequently the choice or requirement to engage in assessment can serve as a "wake up call" to many of us to genuinely review and evaluate what we think we are teaching. Communication educators have a two-fold responsibility: (1) to educate students to think and communicate critically about a wide-range of ideas, (2) to prepare students for success and satisfaction in their professional career paths. Administrators and teachers need to know that these responsibilities are being met and, whether they like it or not, they will have to provide evidence to important internal and external constituencies to demonstrate, if not prove, these responsibilities are being met.

In the early 1970's there appeared in the literature in communication several studies about preparing and implementing instructional or behavioral objectives (Kibler, Barker, & Cegala, 1970). Readers were advised about the levels of learning students may experience and guided to construct carefully objectives that would identify what a student should be able to do after completing an assignment. Some teachers continue to construct careful learning objectives and others do not, but all communication educators have some expectations about what a student should learn in their courses. An assessment program requires faculty to identify important learning outcomes and to measure in some confident fashion whether students completing our courses and our programs demonstrate to our satisfaction competency or proficiency as learning outcomes. What is discovered is information to be shared with students and pertinent others—information about the value of both "content" and "methods" in communication education. One's mind set should not be focused on whether or not she or he has information to justify the existence of communication studies on campus, but whether or not important and useful information is being learned by students upon the completion of courses and programs. This information must be education that prepares students for critical thinking, problem solving, and responsible citizenship through communication.

The learning outcomes in communication education, of course, usually can be lined up under one of two categories: "knowledge" about communication, and "performance" in the process of communication. We know our studies are not atheoretical nor are they grounded in invisible principles acquired through divine dictation. Communication studies from antiquity to the present provide strong theoretical ground and important historical perspectives that supply considerable knowledge in the discipline. Obviously there is considerable information as theoretical and social knowledge to discover, teach, and have students learn. Assessment requires us to determine what knowledge we expect our students to learn (that has some lasting value, as well) and to discover what knowledge our students are actually learning and how well it is being learned. Daly (1994) acknowledges that assessing knowledge is "perhaps the most difficult collection of measures to devise" (p. 23). Faculty can carefully design questions for students that focus on what educators believe to be essential as core information. Students who take one or two courses in communication as service courses can be assessed appropriately in terms of those courses while students who are communication majors or minors require information to be gathered comprehensively through a careful program assessment action plan. Information for program assessment can be obtained in a variety of carefully developed procedures. For example, important data can be captured in a core sequence of two or three courses through assessment tests carefully placed at different levels in the accumulation of grades in courses, but the primary purpose

of the examinations is for faculty to discover whether or not most students are actually learning knowledge they believe to be essential. Such tests must be constructed after careful study and discussion with like-minded colleagues about what should be assessed and in what ways. In addition to knowledge, of course, we need to assess performance. Surprisingly, at the Indianapolis Conference I attended, several presenters from the "hard sciences" indicated that one of the ways assessment is conducted for students nearing graduation in scientific and technical programs at their institutions is through oral presentations. Other ways include interviews or in small group communication that provide the opportunity to communicate knowledge and what to do with it. These activities are, of course, among key performances communication educators require of students in a number of undergraduate courses. There is information available about student portfolios and how portfolios can be developed by students in courses or through a sequence of communication studies leading to graduation (Hessler & Kuntz, 1994, pp. 6-9). A department can prepare a report by investigating what alumni think and how they feel about the use of communication education in personal and professional life after graduation. When faculty want to discover whether or not their students have learned knowledge and skills for success on their career paths, highly informed sources for this information are the graduates. I graduated from three institutions, and the only information I have been asked for consistently are requests for financial support from various alumni and college or university officials.

The basic forms of communication performance to assess in undergraduate education usually include interpersonal communication skills, public speaking skills, and small group communication skills (including listening skills) that provide students with the opportunity to put theory into practice. How well a student speaks with confidence, in an organized way, designed to serve a communication purpose, with sound reasons, clarity, and with effective nonverbal expression are skills are certainly desirable. How well a student interprets, evaluates and responds to what she or he perceives in a communication situation is also considerably important. After identifying what constitutes competence in communication performance, faculty must make careful observations that result in assessing learning outcomes.

Earlier I referred to the *1994 SCA Summer Conference Proceedings and Prepared Remarks* from the conference on "assessing College Student Competency in Speech Communication" published by the Speech Communication Association. This resource moves from "Getting Started" to "Issues in Assessment" to "How To Assess." While some of the ideas may be less important than others and some of it may raise rather than answer questions, overall the *Proceedings* provide an extremely valuable resource and guide to other resources in assessment.

The *Proceedings* provides broad informational perspectives and specific assessment methods. For example, there are papers in which James McCroskey (1994) focuses on assessment of affect in communication; Rebecca Rubin (1994) writes about assessment of the cognitive component of communication competence; Michael Moore (1994) writes of assessing speaking and listening performance; and Pat Arneson (1991) writes about assessing communication competence through portfolios, scoring rubrics, and personal interviews. To detail this information would be an exercise in redundancy when the material is readily available from the Speech Communication Association.

### HOW TO CREATE A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

In any comprehensive consideration of assessment, administrators and teachers must take into account the levels of complexity students encounter as they move from fundamental and basic performance to higher levels of theoretical thought and application. While faculty certainly want to assess the speaking and listening skills of students in a variety of contexts, consideration must be given to the work of students as they attempt to master

theories included in such advanced studies as persuasion, conflict resolution, and free expression. What students have actually learned can be measured not only through examinations, but through analysis of case studies, basic research activities, and portfolios that include written arguments, strategies, and ethical considerations. This material should reflect a student's knowledge, writing skills, and decision-making judgments. One noteworthy effort to establish a comprehensive set of standards and objectives to be inclusive of competency in basic communication skills and advanced theoretical material is presented in a report from members of the faculty of the Department of Speech Communication at Northern Colorado State University (*Proceedings*, pp. 287-291). The department has developed a standards-based performance assessment. A report of their efforts outlines departmental commencement standards, key performance indicators of those standards, and the departmental objectives that provide the foundation upon which the commencement standards were built. While assessment can be achieved with any students taking a course in our programs, departments have a particular need to have a comprehensive plan for those it claims as majors or minors. The UNC report states that "To be certified for graduation from the University of Northern Colorado with a major in speech communication students must demonstrate competencies in the following: Content knowledge and behavioral skills to demonstrate effective speaking and listening across interpersonal, small group, organizational and public speaking contexts. Self-directed learning with knowledge and skills in research, critical thinking, and writing. Communication competency and the ability to adhere to a positive work ethic. In addition, students seeking endorsement in teacher education from the Department of Speech Communication must demonstrate: Pedagogical content knowledge and skills appropriate to the discipline and level of endorsement" (Karre, p. 289).

The UNC outline then identifies what the department determined to be "key performance indicators of commencement standards" (Karre, p. 289). The reader who examines these indicators will find them quite familiar and certainly worthwhile to observe and evaluate. Three of the student learning goals and objectives provide ample illustration of the range found in the report. Whether one agrees with all of the standards and indicators is not important. What is important is that the department has established assessment criteria that apply to all graduates. For example, during my seventeen years on the faculty of the Department of Communication at Ohio State University, the faculty knew that a considerable number of majors had pursued a program of study that gave little or no attention to presentational or public speaking skills. Indeed, it was possible for a communication major to go into a career path with minimal (if any) competency in speaking to an audience. Some would graduate as competent speakers and others would not; Northern Colorado faculty indicate they will not certify a major for graduation without public or presentational proficiency. Having standards an entire department agrees with provides a guarantee to students and pertinent others that learning desired by a department will take place. Assessment is crucial to the creation and maintenance of these standards. To provide simply a glimpse at the sort of goals and objectives found in the report, two brief portions of the outline are quoted below:

- I. The speech communication student will demonstrate proficiency in speaking, listening, and writing skills from a variety of communication contexts.
  - A. Students will demonstrate the ability to speak in a variety of communication contexts by:
    1. Researching, developing, and delivering messages to an audience.
    2. Analyzing, understanding, and using appropriate messages in dyadic, serial, small group and/or organizational settings.

3. Distinguishing, evaluating, and formulating messages of influence in dyadic, serial, small group and/ or organizational settings.

(Then later in the report)

- II. The speech communication student will demonstrate knowledge of the speech communication discipline.
  - A. Students will be familiar with communication theory and concepts associated with interpersonal communication by:
    1. Studying the impact of self on communication interaction.
    2. Experiencing, identifying, and analyzing the dynamics of verbal and non-verbal language in interpersonal communication.
    3. Appraising, appreciating, and verifying the impact of communication in interpersonal relationships.

The goals and objectives focus on a variety of learning goals and objectives and a departmental document "identifies specific required and elective course in the Undergraduate Speech Communication Program which provide learning opportunities and assessment in this knowledge and skills" (Karre, p. 291).

A department that aims at successful assessment must determine its standards of proficiency and how proficiency is to be determined. We can often suspect that colleagues know what they are but we still need to outline them together. A growing number of departments use the "capstone course" as a key course in program assessment. The capstone course is an excellent way to assess student proficiency in regard to goals and objectives through the use of oral, aural, and written assignments that require students to demonstrate knowledge and skills learned in courses leading up to the capstone course and the completion of studies in the major program.

In the process and procedural phases of assessment, departmental faculty must examine all of the data with an eye toward what is being offered, how it is being presented, and with what results. While the competency or proficiency of students is being determined, the content and instructional styles of "we faculty" must also be assessed. The number and nature of courses in communication programs must be assessed as well. One cannot simply assume that the department's curricula is "just fine" and take special satisfaction in the departmental offerings and outcomes unless they are examined and assessed regularly. Nine years ago, I became the chair of the Department of Communication at The State University of New York's Geneseo campus. The college was rated highly by national publications and received more than 10,000 inquiries for about 1,000 admissions. Yet close examination of a number of the courses in the communication department uncovered out-of-date "content," ambiguous procedures for critiquing the work of students, and a popular major that was often considered "soft" by majors in other programs. Informally, as well as formally, a freshly created curriculum committee began a process of review that, with gentle persuasion, resulted in a number of meaningful changes that strengthened several important courses in the program as well as the image of the program in the eyes of students and faculty around the campus. Reflecting back, I am convinced that a carefully developed and implemented assessment plan would have been an effective means for making far greater positive changes. At Bowling Green State University, where I serve as communication administrator as well as a member of the faculty, the central administration recently formed a campus-wide assessment committee to inform and assist departments as well as ensure that success is achieved. The School of Communication Studies has initiated steps and committees that, with considerable work and positive attitudes, can bring about successful assessment plans, instruments, and procedures.

Positive attitudes and genuine commitment are essential to achieve success in assessment. If a faculty has not faced assessment yet, some are likely to resist. I have learned, especially as a department chair, that professors often resist change and frequently claim

infringement on their academic freedom, when matters such as assessment confront them. Faculty have been heard to complain they have had enough agony over the student evaluations of teaching, often recorded on unreliable and invalid forms either created by faculty or provided by the administration. The cynical educator or burned out professor might argue "now to have to have assessment promoted if not pushed by central administrators or even state legislators is simply more meddling in affairs better left to we professors who know best what to teach and how to teach." The administrator's task is to present assessment to her or his colleagues, students, and other pertinent constituencies as an exciting and insightful means to create a fresh, healthy, useful, and contemporary learning environment beneficial to our students, institutions, and ourselves.

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