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## Invited Essay

# Reflections about Future Directions for the Basic Communication Course and Basic Course Scholarship

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The importance of the basic communication course is underscored by a somewhat overused but decidedly meaningful phrase—it's our discipline's front porch! While serving as the president of the National Communication Association, Beebe (2013) coined that phrase in reference to the basic course serving as the critical point-of-entry to the communication discipline, introducing students to communication studies for the first time. More recently, others (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Morreale et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2021) have pointed to the increasing presence of the basic course in general education and the fact that it is one of most frequently taught courses in most communication departments. Against this backdrop, it may be time for communication scholars to engage in public conversations about the need for reflection and dialogue about the most promising future for this critical course in the communication curriculum. At the core of these conversations would be a concern for the basic course changing with changing times in order to make its finest contributions to the discipline, to higher education, and, more importantly, to our students.

As Morreale et al. (2022) noted in the most recent survey of the basic course, these changing times include national and international events that commenced in 2020 and resulted in social, political and cultural upheaval (e.g., the COVID-19

pandemic, migration to remote workplaces, a tumultuous economy, extremes in political polarization, and an increase in racial tensions and hostilities). Amidst such upheaval, higher education itself now is challenged with mandates to migrate and expand online education, assuage financial concerns, address declining institutional enrollment, and embrace teaching and learning challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Obviously, these challenges were not instigated by those involved in the basic communication course and the course itself cannot solve all of these problems. But communication is ubiquitous and certainly is embedded in and relevant to each of these challenges. Therefore, these new realities should inform how basic course instructors, directors, and institutional administrators adapt and modify teaching and learning in their basic courses, regardless of the fact that such issues are occurring externally to the course.

It is not a leap of faith to suggest that the time is right for communication scholar-teachers interested in the basic course to pull back and reflect about how the course is addressing these challenges and any opportunities in this present environment for generating useful scholarship. This essay, though not all-encompassing, intends to spur reflection and dialogue about how the basic course perhaps could change to accommodate the challenges of our changing times. To ground this conversation in our shared history, this essay begins with a backward glance at challenges and opportunities the course has encountered in the earlier years of the 21st century, as reported in the last four national surveys of the basic course.

### **The Basic Communication Course in the 21st Century**

For the past 65 years (i.e., 1956-2020), communication researchers have carefully and continuously (often in five-year intervals) studied the basic course's content and pedagogy. A series of 10 basic course surveys conducted during this time period provided descriptive snapshots portraying how the basic course was changing and evolving, typically seeking answers to questions posed around seven categories: course and school demographics, course expectations and content, teaching and instruction, testing and grading, administration and course coordination, technology and online learning, and administrative problems (Morreale, 2020).

In the past four iterations of the survey (i.e., Morreale et al., 2006; Morreale et al., 2010; Morreale et al., 2016; Morreale et al., 2022), researchers began probing the challenges and problems associated with teaching the basic course and made changes to the survey in light of the contemporary social, political, and cultural issues surrounding the teaching of the course. In Study 7, for instance, Morreale et al.

(2006) included questions in the survey about the ethnicity of students at the reporting institutions and offered the recommendation that “future surveys might examine diversity in hiring practices, teaching staff, and classroom strategies” (p. 435). This survey also identified and began to explore the emerging importance of the relationship between technology and pedagogy, with a recommendation for future inquiry to “gain greater understanding of what constitutes a good online communication course” (p. 435). A further recommendation called for surveying students themselves and employers about whether the basic course meets their needs, professionally and personally, in order to answer the question, “How does the basic course need to change to meet academic, theoretical, and skills needs identified by various stakeholders?” (p.435). Interestingly, these recommendations were prescient in light of the racial tensions and migration to online education that began in 2020 and the increased interest in the acquisition of soft skills obtained by, and the employability of, college graduates.

In Study 8, Morreale et al. (2010) reiterated and extended the aforementioned recommendations for basic course stakeholders to address the multiple communication dimensions embedded in “globalization, diversity, and emerging communication technologies” (p. 426). Special attention was drawn to the role that technology was playing in the basic course, including the emergence of new technological tools for teaching and learning, technological and computer-mediated communication (e.g., text messaging, social media, technology-assisted presentations), and audio and video conferencing. This survey also called for increased attention to “the needs and requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student” (p.427). Accordingly, basic course students would need to be prepared as future professionals and leaders to take their places “in a complex global environment and as good citizens in a democratic and diverse society” (p. 427). Now 12 years hence, these topics are considered commonplace, but again, the basic course survey and the recommendations for change identified in this iteration remained prescient.

Study 9 (Morreale et al., 2016) continued the emphasis on the basic course “preparing students with the critical communication skills and competencies to work in profit and non-profit sectors, often in multinational organizations” (p. 352). The concerns introduced in Studies 7 and 8 were addressed more emphatically, calling for basic course pedagogy and scholarship to address the communication skills students need to actually flourish “in the global and technological mediated 21<sup>st</sup> century” (p. 353). Moreover, “considering the centrality of communication in a democratic and increasingly diverse society,” students in the basic course would need to acquire

those skills necessary to be prepared for “competent participation in civic life” (p. 353).

The most recent survey of the basic course—Study 10 (Morreale et al., 2022)—not only continued to investigate an array of variables related to course content, delivery, and format, but also expanded the study’s areas of inquiry in three important regards. First, the survey carefully probed how the contemporary socio/political/cultural issues in the United States (i.e., political polarization, racial tensions, and diversity, equity, and inclusion issues) were affecting teaching and learning in the basic course. The general conclusion was that these contemporary issues introduced new and different challenges to teaching and learning in the basic course classroom, which need to be collaboratively addressed by interested scholars and instructors. For example, Morreale et al. (2022) called for research focused on handling difficult conversations in basic course classrooms and pedagogy concerned with communication skills related to dialogue across differences.

Second, the survey examined the extent to which survey respondents thought their basic courses were meeting each of NCA’s nine student learning outcomes (see National Communication Association, 2022). The findings indicated that the learning outcomes related to public speaking, speech preparation, and speech delivery were well represented in the basic course, but the outcomes related to the communication discipline; its theories, perspectives, and concepts; and communication scholarship were less well represented. In future work, Morreale et al. (2022) recommended basic course administrators and instructors might consider enhancing course content, readings, assignments, and activities with a general description of communication studies and its areas of inquiry and point students to the specific subfields represented in their particular departments.

Third, the survey also investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting migration to online instruction in the basic course. Not surprisingly, the 2020 migration to online teaching was ranked as the biggest challenge to basic course instruction followed, in this order, by political polarization, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and racial tensions. The findings specifically called attention to a hesitancy to embrace technology, a lack of proper technological training, and changes to course quality that resulted in increased grade inflation and decreased student attendance and engagement. Also not surprisingly, Morreale et al. (2022) called for additional research to explore more fully the transitional challenge to online teaching in the basic course.

In sum, this brief overview of trends in the basic course obtained by the four studies conducted in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is intriguing in the manner that the scholarship recommendations evolved and matured over time. The 2006 survey study introduced concerns about ethnicity and diversity and called initial attention to an emerging interest in technology and pedagogy and in understanding the skills expected of college graduates by employers. The 2010 survey augmented those recommendations by adding concerns about globalization and increased diversity, the emergence of a digitized age, and the changing communication needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students. The 2016 survey similarly expressed interest in students' communication skills and competencies, particularly the need for those skills in a democratic and increasingly diverse society as well as in multinational organizations and a complex global and technologically mediated 21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2022 survey explored in depth the use of technology in teaching and learning in the basic course and the impact of contemporary socio/political/cultural issues in the United States on the teaching and learning of the course. While these concerns have remained somewhat the same over the past 20 years, they also have matured over this time period and perhaps are yet more critical and in need of further reflection by all basic course stakeholders.

### Conclusion

Now we ask you, the reader, to pause for a moment and think about the basic communication course as a blank slate. Set aside all you know about the content and pedagogy presently included in the basic course. Given the findings of the 10 studies obtained on the state of the basic course, how would you design a basic communication course to respond to the realities of today's changing times? What would the course look like, and how would it be taught in order to prepare our students—personally, professionally, and as good citizens—to communicate in a diverse, digitally mediated, and rapidly changing world?

To assist you in your response, we offer these questions to stimulate collaborative disciplinary dialogues:

- What is the purpose of the basic course? Is it to train students to be more effective communicators, competent organizational workers, or productive members of society?
- To what extent should the basic course be considered as *the* introductory course to the communication discipline? How would this consideration influence the development of course content and assignments?

- What do our students need to know about communication? What principles, constructs, concepts, and theories are essential to creating a knowledge base for what students need to know about communication?
- What should students know and be able to do as a result of completing a basic communication course in order to succeed in today's complex society?
- How should basic course content and pedagogy be shaped and informed in light of the contemporary issues (i.e., i.e., political polarization, racial tensions, and diversity, equity, and inclusion issues) omnipresent in confronting today's world and tomorrow's workplace?
- Of the nine learning outcomes created by the National Communication Association, which outcomes are most salient to the teaching of the basic course? To what extent are these outcomes dependent on how the course is taught?
- What are the most effective and accessible delivery methods and formats to ensure that learning takes place equitably across student populations?
- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic (and the migration to online learning and then back to face-to-face learning) had on teaching and learning in the basic course? How has the pandemic positively influenced the basic course?
- How might past studies of the basic course, in concert with recent research conducted on the basic course (e.g., Anderson et al., 2021; Joyce et al., 2019; Morreale, 2020), influence future basic course content and pedagogy?
- What metaphor—aside from the front porch—would you use to describe the basic course? What are the instructional implications associated with this metaphor?

These are not simple questions, of course, and you, the reader, likely can raise other critical queries about our shared basic course. But multiple voices, in concert, will produce the best answers. We close these reflections by paraphrasing the conclusion of the 2010 basic course survey: “These surveys carry forward a proud tradition grounded in an abiding respect for a course with proven value, an impressive history, and an exciting future” (p. 428). We could not have said it better.

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