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ABSTRACT

Speaking across the curriculum programs are a readily accessible venue for the assessment of oral communication competence and in some instances are already being used for such purposes. While so far the implementation of simple holistic judgments for quality assurance purposes has emerged as one practical procedure, further exploration should locate forms of evidence which may be addressed to individual, programmatic, institutional, or public constituencies. In practice, many institutions ask that a portion of the grade in a course be granted on the basis of oral performance. In others, the departments in which the courses are offered are required to certify that students have met appropriate standards. Faculty development workshops have an important function in familiarizing faculty from many disciplines with oral communication opportunities and standards in their classes, and no overwhelming evidence exists that faculty members should not be given the responsibility to make assessment judgments. Institutions should have some form of assessment and advising system to indicate for the student that some further instruction would be desirable and should provide adequate instructional opportunities for students to improve. DePauw University has many such opportunities in place. Merits of such alternative assessment procedures in across the curriculum programs include the natural setting and context, flexibility, and relative unobtrusiveness. Limitations include: the difficulty of standardizing assessment outcomes; putting the results of the assessment into productive pedagogical form; and the limited professional resources of expertise in oral communication. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

SPEAKING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AS AN ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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SPEAKING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

AS AN ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The concern for documented assessment of student achievement has in the past decade reached the stature of a "movement" at all levels of education in this country. In institutions of higher education strenuous efforts have been devoted to specifying educational goals and developing procedures for judging whether these goals are being met.

Here we will explore how institutions might take advantage of "across-the-curriculum" programs, and more specifically speaking across the curriculum, as one possible setting for institutional assessment. Note that "spesaking" in this context encompasses all forms of talking and listening and is thus used synonymously with the term "oral communication" in across the curriculum parlance. Much of the data incorporated here is derived from Speech Communication Association reports and publications and the experience over a ten-year span of the competence assessment program at one midwestern university.

A vigorous across-the-curriculum movement has been generated by the impulse to reinforce fundamental general education skills and proficiencies (such as writing) by incorporating them explicitly into courses throughout the institution, frequently with the simultaneous aim of enhancing the learning process in the

various disciplines as well. The most extensive implementation of this approach has been writing across-the-curriculum, now in place at hundreds of colleges and universities, but analogous programs are increasingly being established in oral communication, computers, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking across-the-curriculum. Faculty development initiatives are important for facilitating fresh pedagogical approaches in these programs, as are provisions for direct instruction of students in the targeted skill areas.

Typically such programs are implemented by designating specific courses as providing intensive application of a given competence (computer, speaking, or whatever) as part of the learning experience. For example, an instructor of a speaking-intensive course on "The History of World War II" might enhance active learning by including debates, discussions, oral reports, collaborative groups, or even role-playing in the syllabus, thereby generating an abundance of student communication which would be amenable to evaluation.

In the context of a thriving assessment movement, across the curriculum programs might best be seen as providing opportunities for what is being termed nontraditional (Hay, 73-74) or "alternative assessment" plans. Educators exploring alternative assessment methods are willing to recognize the increasing sophistication of procedures taking the form of standardized and objective testing suitable for mass administration, but they have also generated concerns and reservations concerning their

suitability for dealing with some important forms of learning and for meeting the needs of students, institutions, and public decision-making. Raven notes some of the important outcomes of education which "defy conventional measurement," such as original thinking, idiosyncratic knowledge, integrated learning, development of interests, and affective and conative results (87). As one study stated, "Educational assessment is in a process of invention. All models are being seriously questioned: new methods are in development" (Herman, 74). Thus alternative assessment methods are emerging which utilize data from portfolios, research projects, recitals and public performances, and other student products or phenomena for evaluation. Both quantitative and qualitative instruments are being employed in nascent efforts to describe and evaluate these products.

Among the types of student competencies which have been found suitable for across-the-curriculum treatment, oral communication especially has features which make the speaking-intensive courses excellent venue for demonstration of its competence. (1) For instance, oral communication is inherently contextual, so a course with established content and objectives provides a setting where utterances may be judged for their appropriateness as well as their effectiveness. (2) Oral communication is best seen as a social phenomenon, and affective and relational constituents are revealed in a course where interaction with others is necessary. (3) Oral communication is manifest in many forms, and a speaking-intensive course may allow for formal reports, small group work, and class

participation, to name a few of the many which are available. Speaking and listening in the classroom constitute "authentic" oral communication in which students produce purposeful messages adapted to an intensive academic atmosphere. Speech performance, in its broadest sense, can take place abundantly across the curriculum and is available for examination by a wide range of emergent alternative assessment instruments.

With these provisions in mind, we will explore (1) the aims of assessment which may usefully be met through the venues being described here, (2) the components of speaking and listening competence, (3) the role of professors as assessors in the disciplinary classroom, (4) programatic considerations in such an effort, and (5) some strengths and potential weaknesses in procedures utilizing speaking across the curriculum as part of a competence assessment initiative.

Aims of Assessment

The wide public concern for educational assessment has led to a proliferation of advice for conducting it and even a wide variety of formulations of its intended aims and purposes.

The central characteristic of assessment processes in academic institutions is the production of evidence as to whether a specified educational objective is being met. This evidence may be employed for several purposes.

(1) The evidence may be employed as a form of "quality

control." Whatever standards students are expected to meet, whether a second grader's ability to add a column of figures or a law school graduate's readiness for legal practice, they may possibly be determined through assesment practices. Traditional classroom evaluations serve the same purpose. A passing grade means comprehension of a given subject matter. Fulfillment of institutional objectives may be ensured as well as course objectives, and when objectives are not being met storm signals may go up. The extended observations by qualified assessors in an across-the-curriculum program might well be ideal for this purpose.

(2) Many educationists contend that the evidence from assessment procedures should reveal more directly the influence of the institution's educational program. How much "talent development" (Astin, 14) has taken place? The available evidence must then include inputs and outputs derived from pre-testing and post-testing procedures. Since students do not take the same course twice, considerable exploration would be necessary to adapt speaking across the curriculum to this aim. At DePauw University, instructors of first year courses do provide observations for advising purposes and portfolios are evaluated ("A Decade"), but no direct measures of growth have been employed.

(3) Legislative and other societal pressures impel the development of evidence which can be used for comparative purposes. A third aim of assessment, therefore, is to be able to reward, punish, and redirect resources. To put information derived from across the curriculum assessments into a form standardized enough

for legislative or administrative purposes presents another challenge worth attention.

Competence in speaking and listening is among the general educational outcomes explicitly professed by many institutions of higher learning and thus is an important and specific target for assessment. Even when the objective is implemented through a required course in speech communication, supplementary evidence of student achievement will be desirable.

When instructors incorporate active learning components within their instructional plans, their primary goal is the enhancement of learning of the subject matter. However, in making judgments which are useful in oral communication assessment they have many options. The assessor may make a single holistic judgment, may use standardized rating wheets or check lists, may create discursive or narrative accounts. In the exploration of the speaking across the curriculum venue, more refined reports will undoubtedly be useful. Instructors may somehow be able to employ standardized prompts or to report scores on particular aspects of speaking and listening, such as abilities to develop ideas fully or adapt them to a specific discussion.

While so far the implementation of simple holistic judgments for quality assurance purposes has emerged as one practical procedure, further exploration should locate forms of evidence which may usefully be addressed to individual, programatic, institutional or public constituencies.

Assessment Components

For speaking-intensive courses to serve as a venue in which assessment of oral communication will take place, some description of the behaviors to be observed and the standards to be maintain is necessary. These behaviors may be set forth in terms of the kinds of activities the individuals are supposed to be able to complete satisfactorily or in terms of competence standards which have been established.

In the first instance, some programs specify the activities which will occur in the speaking intensive class. To the degree that the student completes certain tasks satisfactorily, he or she will be deemed competent by the observing faculty member. For instance, one institution posits that "each student must be involved in the individual preparation and delivery of at least three course related presentations of at least five minutes duration each, to an audience of at least 12 persons." Or alternatively, that "each student must be involved in at least one on-going group project or team of 5 to 8 members, with the group spanning 7 to 8 weeks duration" (Strohmaier, et al, 44). At another institution, "The course will include a minimum of two oral presentations of at least five minutes each. It is recommended that one presentation involve a structured group discussion or extemporaneous format" (Rosso, 48).

Where more leeway is given with respect to assignment options, criteria for assessment may be provided. The Borough of Manhattan

Community College adopted these speaking and listening competencies (Budner and Lane):

(1) the ability to engage critically and constructively in the exchange of ideas during class discussions.

(2) the ability to answer and ask questions coherently and concisely and to follow spoken instructions.

(3) the ability to identify and comprehend main and subordinate ideas in lectures and discussions, and to report accurately what others have said.

(4) the ability to conceive and develop ideas about a topic for the purpose of speaking to a group, to choose and organize related ideas, to present them clearly in standard English, and to evaluate similar presentations to others.

(5) the ability to vary speech to suit different situations.

Many schools have found it useful to draw upon the standards set forth by the Speech Communication Association, which may also serve as guidelines for holistic assessments (Quianthy).

In practice, many institutions ask that a portion of the grade in a course be granted on the basis of oral performance. In others, the departments in which the courses are offered are required to certify that students have met appropriate standards. At DePauw, a separate evaluation is provided for oral communication in each speaking-intensive class, in addition to the letter grade in the course.

Professors as Assessors

When we ask professors from disparate subject matter fields to make judgments about the proficiency of their students in speaking and listening (or writing, mathematics, computers, etc.), we need to make sure that they are equipped to make such judgments. An obligation exists to assist them in acquiring the requisite observational standards and methods. That is where faculty development comes in.

It should be noted, though, that those professors themselves bring a great deal to the judgment process. Trained in their disciplines, they may be expected to recognize student talk which is appropriate or which is not in the setting of a particular classroom. They usually value good oral perormance for what it contributes to the learning process in their disciplines and will form expectations about the kind of talk which enhances that learning.

As mentioned earlier, the enhancement of learning is frequently an explicit aim of across-the-curriculum programs, sometimes a more important role than simple augmentatioon of a given academic competence.

However, once faculty members begin to focus on the oral communication of their students, they frequently are motivated to explore the components of speaking and listening and to acquire a vocabulary to deal with them. Thus, perhaps the most characteristic feature of any speaking across the curriculum

program is the establishment of faculty development workshops. Here, for instance, these instructors can look at the assignment options which are open to them, share notes with other faculty about teaching practices in those classrooms, and decide which formats (ranging from formal debates to informal interviews) are most suitable to their situations. Special topics are often considered, such as problems with reticent students, with social intimidation, or with unprepared students.

When speaking across the curriculum is being used for assessment purposes, or when any part of a grade is to be based upon oral participation, the workshop will devote some attention to standards and instruments for evaluation. An important function of this phase of a faculty development workshop is to develop common standards for evaluation and achieve some consistency among ratings, which will make the institutional assessment effort more reliable.

But we still need to ask what evidence there is that the individual assessments made by all these professors, even though they have undergone the workshop experiences described, are reliable enough to provide evidence that an institution is achieving the stated goal of oral communication competence for its students.

On the whole, the testimony of participants in this regard is encouraging. When asked whether their oral communication activities were fairly evaluated in speaking intensive courses at DePauw University, 71% of current students and 76.6% of alumni

surveyed agreed or agreed strongly that they were indeed fairly evaluated (A Decade). (This represents an especially strong response in light of a survey of seniors a year later in which only 56.5 percent felt that the faculty are accurate and fair in awarding grades generally.)

One report which took up the question of whether faculty in diverse disciplines can evaluate communication competence accurately concluded that little contrary evidence had surfaced (Weiss, 1989). Programs where assessment is done within such classes, as at Alverno Colklege, Central College, and King's College, do not report such difficulties, although the Speech Communication Association remains strong in saying that all assessment should be provided by qualified communication faculty members.

Faculty themselves are more reserved about their own ability to make these judgments. At DePauw, "46% of the faculty report some difficulty in evaluating oral communication skills," Furthermore, the data suggest a considerable lack of uniformity among the expectations of various instructors (A Decade). More orientation of students and instructors may be desirable.

The matter is subject to further investigation. Meanwhile, faculty development workshops do appear to have an important function in familiarizing faculty with oral communication opportunities and standards in their classes, and no overwhelming evidence exists that they should not be given the responsibility to make assessment judgments.

Instructional Components

If the competence of students is to be assessed, instructional components must be provided in order that the designated competence may be established. In the case of oral communication at the college level, individuals may well have had opportunities which provide a basis for the demonstration of competence. They may have had good high school speech courses, extracurricular activities, job experiences, and even family environments whish called for and promoted excellence.

Most students will need some further instruction, however, and to provide that an institution should consider two elements.

The first is some form of assessment and advising system to indicate for the student that some further instruction would be desirable. Information for such assessment may be obtained from testing designed for the purpose or from other kinds of data analogous to the final assessment provided in the speaking-intensive course.

The second is that adequate instructional opportunities be provided for students to improve in preparation for the assessment which is ultimately to take place in the speaking-intensive course. To use the example of my own university, the following are in place.

(1) A full panoply of academic courses in communicationm with substantial performance components. These include fundamentals of speech, group dynamics, persuasion, oral interpretation, and

acting, among others. Although no speech course is required at this university, more than 60% of the students have chosen to take one or more of these courses by the time they graduate.

(2) A Speaking and Listening Center. Under competent direction and management, a center offering assistance to students at all levels of competence can serve substantial developmental functions. Through tutoring, workshops, and other activities students may voluntarily work as much as they feel necessary. An arm of such a Center will also provide therapy for those who need such help.

(3) An extracurricular program in speech normally includes instructional as well as abundant presentational opportunities. Well-directed programs of intercollegiate and intramural forensics, a campus theatre and theatre groups, and radio and television participation are among the more common alternatives available.

(4) Other instructional sources may well be developed. For instance, DePauw University labels numerous lower-division courses as "class participation" courses, where students know they will have ample opportunities to talk as well as listen as part of the structure of the course (Weiss, 1988).

Opportunities and Reservations

As alternative assessment procedures are increasingly explored in educational institutions, there is much to be said in favor of taking advantage of across the curriculum endeavors, especially in

the area of oral communication, for such purposes. This process can find its place as one of many assessment procedures an institution may want to use. At the same time, the limitations and hazards of procedures based on this approach and the reporting of their results need to be fully realized.

(1) One obvious merit of the classroom-embedded assessment made possible in across the curriculum programs is that the setting is natural and a context is provided. The purposes of the performance being assessed are intrinsic to the understanding of the subject matter in the course in which the asessment is being conducted. Again, competence in speaking and listening, inherently social and adaptive, especially calls for an environment where this may be demonstrated. The classroom will provide an opportunity for authentic performance.

(2) The flexibility of the classroom struation should be seen as another asset for the assessment of oral communication. The "prompts" are dynamic and interactional. They may range, for example. in degrees of formality from formal reports to informal conversation. Assignments and activities may call for careful planning and coherent argument or exposition or for small grouop situations involving cooperation and collaborative learning, from exposition to inquiry.

(3) Assessments using rating forms, check lists, narrative reports, and holisitc judgments are nevertheless relatively unobtrusive. The performance being judged is not so much a test as a genuine part of the learning process itself. The activity being

assessed is going on anyway; no special times, space, or personnel need to be set aside for what might otherwise be a notably cumbersome and time-consuming effort to assess the oral communication competence of large numbers of students.

A number of limitations and reservations will need a good deal of attention as alternatiuve assessment methods are explored in regard to speaking and listening competence.

(1) The foremost reservation concerns the difficulty of standardizing assessment outcomes. Can the assessment in one course be generalized to predict performance in other courses or in future communication situations? Can measurements be provided which meet the testing requirements of validity and reliability, or must these requirements be problematized? In effect, the kinds of alternative assessment appropriate for speaking and listening within an across the curriculum venue no doubt require more systematic legitimization.

(2) A second challenge is the task of putting the results of human judgments of human activities into a form of information which may be employed productively for pedagogical, institutional or, for that matter, political purposes. Some people want to be able to make comparisons in order to determine achievement and growth with respect to oral communication. Numerical tabulation may be misleading or inappropriate; verbal accounts are difficult to summarize and review.

(3) A further important reservation would be the limited professional resources of experise in oral communication

incorporated into programs at a given institution (Palmerton). Speaking and listening are complex intellectual and social phenomena. Substantial accumulations of scholarship have now been developed and academic researchers are devoting lifetimes to its study; naive and superficial approaches to communication performace are no longer either necessary or acceoptable.

In sum, speaking across the curriculum programs are a readily accessible venue for the assessment of oral communication competence and in some instances are already being used for such purposes. Much further exploration of procedures, instrumentation, validation, and reporting of results would seem to be desirable. "Currently, most developers of the new alternatiuves (with the exception of writing assessment) are at the design and prototype stages, some distance from having validated assessments" (Herman. 76). The door is open for systematic efforts in this direction.

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