



The Basic Course: Informing Communication Pedagogy Through Teacher Training and Program Assessment

Cheri J. Simonds

In the most recent survey of the basic communication course, Morreale, Myers, Backlund, and Simonds (2016) defined the basic course as “that beginning or entry level communication course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates; that course which the department has, or would recommend, as a requirement for all or most undergraduates” (p. 341). As with previous surveys, these authors found that public speaking is the most used orientation of the course followed by the hybrid (or survey) orientation. Interestingly, the authors also found that 80% of the institutions responding noted that the basic course is included or required in their general education program. Beebe (2013) described the basic course as the “front porch” of the discipline as it welcomes both teachers and students to communication studies. As such, the basic course serves as a training ground for our future faculty as well as an introduction for students to the discipline. Additionally, through curriculum design and assessment, the basic course provides a context for practicing communication pedagogy and research within general education.

How Does the Basic Course Inform Communication Pedagogy?

In serving as a training ground for future communication educators, the basic course is uniquely placed to explore issues of communication pedagogy. Communication pedagogy is a domain of study that informs communication teachers of the best practices in teaching communication competencies. As a basic course director in the Department of Communication at Illinois State University, my role is to provide communication teachers with the tools they need to effectively teach our introductory communication course. To be effective in this role, it is important to research methods of teacher training and program assessment. In the remaining paragraphs, I will provide two examples of how my basic course scholarship has informed communication pedagogy in both teacher training and program assessment.

First, when I started preparing teachers to teach, my instructors had difficulty getting students to prepare for class. My curiosity about these student behaviors led me to begin a program of research on using certain instructional tools (e.g., reading objectives, extended comments, participation sheets) to motivate and prepare students to contribute to class discussions (Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2005). This research culminated in a training packet that all instructors could use to do the same. This packet includes a video on Leading Classroom Discussions as well as tools for authentic assessment of student preparation for participation in class (Simonds, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004).

I also have worked with colleagues on classroom management training (Meyer et al., 2008; Meyer et al., 2007) to help provide our instructors with the tools they need to foster a positive classroom climate conducive to learning. More recently, we have explored working with social support systems on campus to create and implement a behavior modification plan specific to the basic course. Additionally, as a course director, I (and my co-directors Steve Hunt and John Hooker) wondered about the fairness and consistency of how multiple instructors evaluate student speeches. This line of research resulted in several publications as well as a criterion-based training packet and a series of videos that we have shared with numerous other universities (Frey, Simonds, Hooker, Meyer, & Hunt, 2018; Reynolds, Hunt, Simonds, & Cutbirth, 2004; Simonds, Meyer, Hunt, & Simonds, 2009; Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003).

Second, the basic course is in a unique position to address many of the goals and outcomes of any general education program. In fact, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) championed the vital role of communication in liberal education in two of its four learning outcomes: *Intellectual and Practical Skills*, and *Personal and Social Responsibility*. To clarify this role, the National Communication Association adopted a resolution on the role of the basic course in general education by mapping and aligning communication knowledge and skills to these essential learning outcomes (Simonds, Buckrop, Redmond, & Hefferin, 2012). In terms of *Intellectual and Practical Skills*, the basic course is well-suited to address inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. The basic course may also address *Personal and Social Responsibility* through civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning. While the NCA Resolution aligns communication knowledge and skills to general education, it also advises course directors to examine the specific general education goals at their respective institutions to engage in a similar process.

Our ongoing assessment efforts to design and evaluate our pedagogy takes an outcomes-based approach (Wallace, 2015) as way to ensure relevancy in general education. These efforts involve mapping and aligning our basic course to general education outcomes, developing intentional and deliberate pedagogy to address those outcomes, developing standards and rubrics that map to those goals, assessing student learning, and making necessary modifications based on what we learned. For example, we have followed this approach to assess student written and oral communication (Frey et al., 2018; Simonds et al., 2009), student use of pre-emptive argumentation skills (Meyer, Kurtz, Hines, Simonds, & Hunt, 2010), and student political and civic engagement (Hunt, Meyer, Hooker, Simonds, & Lippert, 2016).

Conclusion

As the basic course is becoming increasingly central to general education programs, basic course scholarship has allowed us as course directors to sustain the relevancy of our course at our institution. This approach offers a way to inform disciplinary communication pedagogy through the development of teacher training programs and ongoing assessment efforts. The basic course provides the context for communication educators to not only practice, assess, and refine communication pedagogy, but also, in doing so, to enhance the stature of the discipline.

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