Defining (v.) Talk, Defining (adj.) Talk, and the Basic Course
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Josh Compton
Institute for Writing and Rhetoric
Dartmouth College

Fifty-seven years ago, my grandparents gave my dad a dictionary. He was nine. My grandparents paid 35 cents for his New Handy Webster Dictionary, according to the faint writing on the first page. My dad scribbled his name across the first page, too, with a red pencil.

Three years ago, the widow of one of my academic mentors, Bob Derryberry, gave me his dictionary. I knew this book well. Bob shelved it near his office desk for more than thirty years. I saw him reach for it many times, for understanding, for precision in his speech and writing.

I’ve been thinking a lot about these two dictionaries lately, because I’ve been thinking about words and their definitions, about how people come to different meanings and understandings upon hearing the same word. Take, for example, how we answer the inevitable follow-up question after others find out that we are teachers:

Oh? What do you teach?

I teach speech. That’s my usual response when asked. Because the courses I teach at Dartmouth have the prefix, Speech. Because my title there is Senior Lecturer in Speech.

I could answer, instead, “I teach rhetoric,” with as much justification. The program I’m in at Dartmouth is called the Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, and what I teach there is understood—in our program and on our campus—as the rhetoric part.

I teach speech. I teach rhetoric. Perhaps you can already see some areas of potential confusion for my conversational partners. Rhetoric is more than speech, and to be even more confusing, speech is more than speech—at least in the way I’m trying to use the term.

I teach speech. I teach rhetoric. Neither answer, alone, is enough. Both answers, together, can be confusing. More questions follow during these conversations, as we grapple with understandings of “speech” and “rhetoric,” and the talk that follows defines and redefines speech, rhetoric, talk, communication. It is defining talk that is defining talk.
Perhaps you have similar experiences when you answer, “I teach the basic communication course.” Sherwyn Morreale and colleagues\(^1\) studied what we mean by that phrase, “basic communication course,” and they found that we use “basic communication course” to mean a public speaking course, or a hybrid course, or an interpersonal group course, or a fundamentals course. And we could each add our own response, couldn’t we? Each response has many possible definitions, too. If only we had some sort of a book that defined words...

But of course, the dictionaries of my father or my mentor wouldn’t help very much. Even if we had dictionaries in hand when we talked with others about what we teach, we would still need to do a lot of talking. I not only accept this need for more talk, I welcome it. I encourage it. Because it’s the talk, this defining talk, where the interesting stuff happens. It’s the talk, this defining talk, that helps us advocate for the basic communication course in particular, and our communication courses in general. It’s this talk, this defining talk, that teaches me, that inspires me, that pushes me toward more interesting thinking and theorizing about what it means to communicate with one another. About what it means to do what we do when we teach what we teach.

The definitions in dictionaries are static, and what we’re trying to define—speech, rhetoric, communication—is dynamic. So we need dynamic explanations. We need what these books can’t offer.

We need you, conversations, and defining talk.

This defining talk is important talk. So how can we best define what we teach and why? What words should we use, and which words might need more explanation?

My responses to such questions are guided by a few premises. Communication professors should not just have discourse about the basic course, we should celebrate discourse about the basic course. We need speech at its best to describe how we’re helping our students to achieve speech at its best, communication at its best. We need talk that defines better than a dictionary. We need talk that not only answers the questions about what we teach, but also, talk that inspires more questions about what we teach. We need talk about our courses that leaves everyone more excited about our speech courses—other faculty, our administrators, our students, and us.

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I wrote a piece a few years ago for *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, “Speaking with the Disciplines.” In that essay, I explored ideas of collaborative speech, of speech at its best reflected in those moments when lines that separate speaker and listener are blurred, when communicators are working together to understand each other, when things look a lot like dialogue, even when the format—say, a public speech—looks a lot like monologue. The main point I tried to share in that piece was that speaking of speech with faculty across the disciplines is a vital part of a speech program’s vibrancy, helping to define what we’re doing in our courses, and speaking of speech with the disciplines should come before—and continue during—any speech across the disciplines efforts.

At the end of that essay, I talked about some things I’d like to do better with this type of talk with my colleagues—including better explanations of what I mean by “speech” and similar terms when I use them to describe what I teach. How we’re defining what we do in our communication classrooms is particularly important to the basic communication course. On many of our campuses, this is the class that people think of when they think of a communication or speech program. On many of our campuses, this is the first—and maybe even only—exposure students have to our discipline. So these conversations aren’t limited to talk with the disciplines—the focus of my earlier essay. These are essential conversations with everyone—with our administrators, with our students, yes, our colleagues, but more broadly, with everyone we talk with about what we do in a speech or communication classroom. Let’s broaden the scope of the conversation from talk with the disciplines to talk with everyone, and in the process, let’s take an even closer look at how we are explaining key words.

And what better key words to consider, during an occasion to think carefully about the basic communication course, than basic, communication, and course. Each word needs to be understood by our conversational partners. Each word benefits from our further consideration. So let’s start at the end of the phrase, with course. Our talk about what we teach should include what we mean by a course, what we mean by teaching.

I won’t go to these books for definitions of teaching, but when I think about these dictionaries, I can’t help but recall the teachings of my dad and of Bob.

My dad taught me how to drive behind the wheel of a 1974 Ford pick-up. I was five, and I sat on a phone book. It took us three tries to find a phone book that worked, one that lifted me above the dashboard but still let me reach the pedals.

My dad taught me how to throw a baseball.

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2 Compton, J. (2010). Speaking of speech with the disciplines: Collaborative discussions about collaborative speech. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education, 9*(2), 243-255.
He taught me how to swing on the large grapevines that hung out over the creek near where we cut firewood each fall, how to tug on the grapevine before committing to it, how to earn confidence before taking that running leap off the creek bank.

Lessons from my father were active. We were doing stuff. He taught me to drive by driving, to throw by throwing, to swing by swinging.

Bob Derryberry was my first college teacher. He introduced me to the literature of the discipline, to great speeches, to ancient theorizing. Bob taught me the history of this discipline, expanding my view to see that it reached back into the lectures of Aristotle, continued through the writings of Hugh Blair and up through William Norwood Brigance and James Winans and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Sonya and Karen Foss and so many others.

Lessons from Bob were academic. I read and I learned.

My dad and Bob taught me so many things, and I’m tempted to emphasize, in so many different ways. But I want to push back against this separation between how my dad taught and how Bob taught.

Because the line isn’t as bright as I’ve made it out to be. Because in teaching me how to do, dad was teaching me how to think—when the grapevine snapped and I fell, to consider why and try again. Because in teaching me how to think, Bob was teaching me how to do. Bob believed that students learned speech by speaking, and so we were up on our feet during most class sessions, interacting with an audience, doing what we were reading, thinking, learning.

Neither my dad nor Bob used this term, but they were both teaching through principles of active learning. They were teaching practice and theory--often, at the same time. In an early book on active learning, David Johnson, Roger Johnson and Karl Smith put it this way:

Learning is a social process that occurs through interpersonal interaction within a cooperative context. Individuals, working together, construct shared understandings and knowledge.

I don’t need to see your syllabi to know that your communication classrooms are places of activity, of interpersonal interactions, of cooperative contexts, of shared understandings. Of thinking and doing.

Most of us in this discipline, and I would argue, particularly those who teach the basic communication course, promote active learning. Communication professors have been doing, modeling, and refining active learning before active learning was cool. How many times have our students told us how much they appreciate the

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chance to speak up in our communication classes? How our students marvel at how close they get to one another in a communication class, how the communication classroom becomes a forum for relationships, for interpersonal connections through collaboration, peer engagement, active reflection, dialogue?

We are active in our courses, but if your experiences are similar to mine, we don’t always highlight this level of activity when we talk with others about our courses, and I suppose that’s because we often think it goes without saying. We’re used to it—this level of activity. But the only place that this level of activity goes without saying is away—away from our conversations and away from the ideas others have about our courses.

Everyone benefits when we include the “course” part in our talk with others. We benefit when our administrators get a better sense of the rigor of communication classrooms. We benefit when our students have a clearer understanding of how our classroom activities move us toward our learning objectives, how research of learning is reflected in what we’re doing in the basic communication course. And we benefit as we learn from others during these discussions about teaching and learning.

Of course, we also need to include the what part of what we teach—the speech, or rhetoric, or communication part of the “basic communication course”. When we talk about the communication part, we get a chance to showcase our favorite words to define communication.

Evidence suggests that my dad and Bob had their favorite words, too. When my dad was a kid, he underlined a few words in his New Handy Webster Dictionary, using that same red pencil that he used to sign his name on the first page. He underlined sauerkraut, tune, mule, hippopotamus, glossary. Bob marked his dictionary, too: burnish, cataclysm, generous, epistemology.

What favorite words should we mark in our conversations with administrators, colleagues, and students about what we do when we do what we do in our communication courses? To use one of my dad’s words, what glossary should we co-creating? To use one of Bob’s, how are we enacting, through our talk, a communication or speech course epistemology?

One of my favorite words to use in such discussions is empathy. Isn’t that part of what we’re teaching when we teach perspective sharing, when we teach listening, when we teach dialogue? A recent article in Forbes argues that empathy training should receive an urgent focus in education, including attention to listening and

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dialogue, and isn’t that what we’ve been doing since the first basic communication course?

Theory is part of my response to what I mean by the communication, or rhetoric, or speech part of what I teach. As I mentioned in my “Speaking with the Disciplines Essay,” I’ll often draw on ancient rhetorical theory for discussions about the canons of rhetoric, or Aristotelian modes of proof, or classic rhetorical strategies, like epanorthosis. Do you know about that one, epanorthosis? I only recently learned of it, and I’m underlining it in my dictionary. Epanorthosis is purposeful self-correction for emphasis. It’s a good word, no, it’s a great word, no, it’s the best word to introduce in a discussion of the what part of what we teach.

What I didn’t mention in my previous essay was how many other theories make their way into my discussions about speech courses. I draw on my work with inoculation theory and other social scientific ways of understanding. I draw on interpersonal, intercultural, mass media, and other conceptual models. I highlight the interdisciplinary dimensions of what we do, while also celebrating our discipline’s unique contributions to knowledge, to understanding, to inquiry.

As we continue to consider our favorite words to include in our discussions, let’s also take a cue from Bob’s dictionary and include words of assessment and inquiry. Rubric was one of the words he marked. We should, too. Part of our talk should reflect the evidence we have for student success. “Using a theory-informed grading tool, I’m able to identify and then trace how students become better communicators during my course.” Or: “I have students complete self-evaluations throughout the term, and it’s inspiring to learn that as their communication improves, their awareness of how and why also improves.” Mentions of assessment like these help us to underscore that we have systematic approaches to measuring student success.

By the way, explaining our assessment during our talk about our classes also helps to push back against the impression—one that, at least in my experience, is all too common—that our classes are limited to simple skills-training, that our primary responsibility is to tell students to take their hands out of their pockets during public speeches, or that our teaching means keeping a running count of verbal stumbles. Talking about our assessment measures, in a way that’s interesting and theory-informed, is one way to show how our metrics, and our courses, are much more interesting than that.

We should reference research, too, like Karen Dwyer and her colleagues’ finding that basic communication courses with speech labs reduce communication apprehension and boost grades5. These are metrics of success worth talking about,

and these are parts of our definitions of what we are doing in the basic course that can resonate on our campuses and with our administrators and with our students.

But it’s not just the words we use, of course, that defines the what part, the communication part, of the basic communication course. It’s powerful, what happens when we’re talking about talk with our administrators, our colleagues, our friends, our students. We begin to define, through the content, yes, but also the tone of our talk, through the collaborative dimensions of dialogue, what we attempt to do in our classrooms. Some of my favorite moments in the classroom are when my students struggle, along with me, to make sense of something challenging or confusing or frustrating about communication, and as we talk, we not only learn from each other, but learn from how we learn from each other, and sometimes, and even often, there’s that moment when a student puts into words an idea that she’s been mulling, and she speaks an idea with clarity, and style, and thoughtfulness, and we all benefit. Those moments define communication, define what we’re trying to teach in the basic course, better than even our best handbooks and textbooks and, yes, our best dictionaries.

I’m sometimes asked, when people learn that I teach speech, what are the models that I use in my classroom? Oh—do you teach using the writings of ________ - insert favorite communicator here, and if I’m on the campus of Dartmouth, it’s usually Daniel Webster, or Dr. Seuss, two of our alums. And I tell them when I’m asked this, that the models I use most often in the classroom are my students—that through their speeches, writings, and classroom comments, they create the data that we study. When my students ask for models to emulate, I tell them to turn to their left, turn to their right, and turn to a mirror, and then transfer what’s best about their communication practices, and consider ways of improving what isn’t. These are the texts they’ll bring with them well beyond the walls of the classroom. These are the texts that endure. The talk and conversation and dialogue and speaking in our classrooms define the what of what we do, and we should take that talk and conversation and dialogue out of the classroom and into our conversations with others so that they can know, too.

Our defining talk about the basic communication course should cover the course part, how we’re teaching, and the communication part, what we’re teaching. What about that term basic? How do we best define that?

I have to admit, I’ve struggled at times with the term “basic” when used to describe a “basic communication course.” My most recent struggle, incidentally, was just last week when a friend of mine, upon learning that I’d be speaking for the Basic Course Conference of the Eastern Communication Association, said, joking, I hope: “Oh? Basic? Well, maybe one day you’ll be asked to speak about something more advanced.”

More advanced? When I think about what we’re doing in the basic course, I think of meaning-making and collaboration, I think of the opportunities for explanation and
persuasion. We're teaching logic, reasoning, ethics. We're teaching issues of the heart and mind, of image and issues. We're teaching voice. We're teaching identity. We're teaching an art, a science, a mystery.

And as I told my friend, I can’t help but ask, when I reflect on all that we’re doing in the basic course, “What is basic about any of this?”

Then again, what would be better? We teach the Complicated Communication Course?

So, ultimately, I think “basic” is a word we can embrace, with the clarifying effects of dialogue. “Basic” often needs some explanation, some definition and, perhaps, as we talk, some re-definition. The basic communication course is basic like air, water, shelter are basic. Something like that. I recently told a colleague, “The basic communication course is the most complicated course I’ve taught.” Whatever we choose, whatever we include in our conversations, we need to develop in our conversations a way of thinking about basic that is more nuanced than what we might find in a dictionary.

Another word that I use, like basic, but only with more explanation, is talk. Or, conversation. Or, dialogue. I use terms like these because they're familiar, because they communicate, because my conversational partners can relate to them, but I use them with some caution because it makes it easier to dismiss what we’re teaching in the communication course. It is talk, speech, conversation, dialogue, in the literal, familiar sense, in some ways, but not only in the literal, familiar sense. What’s going on in the communication course is also conversation in the way that academics are in constant conversation with one another through research, writings, theorizing. It’s talk in the sense of scientific talk that leads to new discoveries, it’s dialogue among economists as they interpret data and make predictions. It’s the conversation between a musician and his audience, between a doctor and her patients—or her research, or her diagnoses. So I use the term talk, and others like it, with clarifications, with a broadening of the term. When we say, defining talk, we mean defining as a verb and an adjective.

Defining talk is defining talk.

Now, granted, if we include everything we’ve considered up to this point, our brief chat with our colleagues, administrators, and students becomes a very long conversation. That’s not always practical or useful.

In my “Speaking with the Disciplines” essay, I wrote about my “stock answer” (p. 243) to define speech or rhetoric or communication. But lately, I’ve moved away from a stock answer toward something more like a stock question. When I’m asked, “What do you teach?” I’ve started answering with asking, something like this:

What was your last, best conversation?
Do you remember speaking clearly, maybe passionately, about something? Do you remember the signs that your partner was understanding, maybe not agreeing, but understanding? Do you remember the way you effortlessly shifted from speaking to listening?

I don’t know your memory, what you’re thinking about when you recall that best conversation. I don’t know whether your conversation reflected more hope or more discouragement. More smiles or tears. I don’t know whether that conversation had more present, past, or future verb tenses. Whether you were dreaming or remembering, looking forward or looking back or looking around. I don’t know whether your conversation had more you or her. Or him. Or them.

I don’t know much about your conversation, that best conversation you’re recalling. But I do know that it kind of ended, and that it kind of didn’t.

It kind of ended. And then you said goodbye. Or then he slammed the phone receiver down. Or then someone came to the door and you turned away. Or then the storm came. Or then the bus drove off. Or then he fell asleep. Or then she died. Or then you shook hands. Or then you kissed.

So many different possibilities, such a range of topics, of sequences, of beginnings, of endings, or, perhaps a kind of endings.

Because in every instance, I’d argue, in some way, that best conversation only kind of ended, because it also kind of didn’t, because you kept thinking about it, and you keep thinking about it, and you keep returning to it in ways explicit and implicit, in ways conscious and not. Didn’t that conversation linger long after the last word was spoken? Didn’t you find yourself returning to it? Your last, best conversation became part of a relationship with someone, it became part of the transcript of that relationship, and it became, in some ways, I’m guessing, part of your definition of speech, communication, rhetoric.

And as you think about it more, that best conversation, maybe you’re remembering what it was about that conversation that lifted it to the importance of memory, competing with everything else that has happened between then and now. And you can remember some of the things that made it work, and some of the things that didn’t quite work, and maybe a good deal of that best conversation is still a mystery, and that’s part of why you remember it, and that’s part of why you keep trying to figure out how to have more conversations like that.

So when people want to know what we do in my communication classroom, I want to ask, “What was your last, best conversation?” And then say: “That.” That’s what we do in the communication class. We teach our students how to have more best conversations. And not just conversations in the conventional sense. Conversation as something broader, as something bigger. We teach our students what goes into
shared understanding, perspectives, clarity, inspiration, meaning-making, dialogue, analysis, knowledge, logic, affect, learning.

That’s what we do in the basic communication course.

I’m sure you have your own answers when asked, What do you teach?, and perhaps some of the things we’ve considered today give you some more ideas about what to add to your answer, or what to ask.

Let’s continue these conversations. Speak publicly about your communication courses. Chat with others about our communication courses. Write about our courses. Research our courses—research learning, teaching, understanding in the communication course. Scholars like Deanna Dannels at North Carolina State and Christiane Donahue at Dartmouth are vocal advocates for research-informed, theory-informed scholarship, when it comes to what we teach and why, in fields of communication, and that’s a powerful way for us to talk about our courses. Bring back to your campuses what you learn here at this conference—the theory, the research, the ideas, the questions, the conversations.

In any forum, add your voice. We need it. Not just to persuade others of our relevance, not just to convince others of the critical need for what we teach on our campuses, but also, to help us to better understand what we’re doing and why in our communication classes.

This is how we celebrate discourse about the basic course: By speaking well of speech. By speaking of speech well.

I can think of no dictionary more dynamic, more accurate, more inspiring, more critical to our discipline than the dictionary that emerges through our talk with others. This defining talk is defining talk in ways interesting and accurate. Let’s continue the conversation. Let’s not only have, but celebrate, discourse about the basic course.