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Directing The Basic Communication Course

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Despite its history as a required course, despite the large numbers of students who are affected by it, and despite the people in the profession who have been associated with it, there is surprisingly little information available in the literature on directing the basic communication course. Concern has been indicated in the profession by the recent proliferation of Basic Course Directors' Conferences, but a person attending such a conference often does so after the experience of directing a basic course has begun.

By basic course is meant those public speaking, interpersonal, or communication courses that treat fundamental communication concepts, that are multi-section in nature, and that require a variety of faculty or teaching assistants for staffing. There are some basic problems which a director of such a course faces. Three important concerns of the basic communication course director will be discussed here: the development of course purposes, procedures for organizing the course, and administrative policies.


It is not the purpose of this article to suggest ways to handle the content of the basic course. Approaches for handling various kinds of content within the basic course have been explicated in such recent articles as Gary M. D'Angelo and Jody Nyquist, "Teaching Strategies for Large Lecture Courses: Use of Multimedia and Discussion Groups," Speech Teacher, 22 (Nov. 1973), 310-317; John Stewart, "An Interpersonal Approach to the Basic Course," Speech Teacher, 21 (Jan. 1972), 7-14; R. Samuel Mehrley and James G. Backes, "The First Course in Speech: A Call for Revolution," Speech Teacher, 21 (Sept. 1972), 205-211; J. W. Patterson, "The Activities Approach in the First Course," Speech Teacher, 18 (Sept. 1969), 223-229; and Richard L. Weaver, II, "The Use of Exercises and Games," Speech Teacher, 23 (Nov. 1974), 302-311.

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An Eastern Basic Speech Communication Course Conference was held at the University of Maryland—College Park, October 10-12, 1973. The Midwest Basic Course Director's Conference was held at the University of Missouri—Columbia, February 10-12, 1975. Central Michigan University hosted the SCA Workshop for Directors of the Basic Speech Course at Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, February 26-March 1, 1975. Northern Illinois University hosted another Midwest Basic Course Director's Conference at DeKalb on February 6-7, 1976. Dr. Stacy C. Myers of Millikin University conducted a Workshop for Basic Course Directors at the Central States Speech Association Annual Convention on April 1, 1976. Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, has already begun to plan for a Midwest Basic Course Director's Conference to be held during the spring of 1977.
director, although the concerns are crucial to the total success of any basic communication program.

**Purposes of the Course**

The first concern of the director is to establish or define course purposes. Whether the director takes an interpersonal, small-group, public speaking, communication process, or "hybrid" approach, the nature of the course will affect decisions on objectives. Although sample, general goals can be attained by examining the syllabi of basic courses currently being taught around the nation, one may find that a more personal, specifically-tailored set of goals can be attained through private brainstorming. Drawing from one's own background and experience is often a useful beginning point for discovering general goals.

If an opportunity is provided, the director could solicit suggestions from the instructional staff involved in the course. The staff's perspectives, expectations, and frames of reference often can offer guidelines for the new director. One should be cautious of soliciting suggestions from other members of a department, however, for certain faculty may want a basic course for reasons that may not be educationally sound. For example, some may want a showcase for all other department courses; some may want a preparatory course for giving students basic information in voice and diction for theatre majors, in radio and television skills for mass communication majors, or even a basic introduction to anatomy or to the phonetic alphabet for speech pathology and audiology majors. Maintaining a basic perspective of what would be appropriate for an arts and sciences, business, or education major at an undergraduate level and providing communication concepts that cross disciplines will help the director to hold a realistic, balanced point of view.\(^5\)

Other departments also may be concerned with the course if students from their discipline must take it, or if they feel that a basic communication course might have potential usefulness for their students. The extent to which the basic course functions as a "service course" to other disciplines is important when decisions about its nature are made. For example, a college of education may require such a course because of the experience education majors may receive in giving public speeches or in using visual aids. These interests may increase the demands made upon the director and may significantly affect the nature of the course or the degree of change that might take place, regardless of the innovative director's intentions. Concerns such as these often create a framework that will affect the development of specific course purposes.

Undergraduate student suggestions and comments should also be utilized. Although students will be the most affected by these decisions, seldom are they consulted. If the course deals with general principles, it is useful to understand student perceptions, preconceptions, and stereotypes if for no other reason than to better focus and define the director's thinking. To ask students to respond to a question like, "What are the factors that characterize effective speech communication?" might allow the director to gain some otherwise unavailable insights. Soliciting such ideas from freshmen at one university revealed that

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their primary concerns were with listening, organization, preparation, honesty, mutual understanding, audience analysis, and clear, interesting expression—ideas similar to those one might discover through private brainstorming or contact with other faculty. If nothing else, receiving comments from students will better assure the director that his or her ideas are well-founded and that the defined goals will be perceived as relevant and important.

In addition to these sources of input for course purposes, the director might also wish to look at the trends: what has been happening in the basic speech course at United States colleges and universities? This will provide a broad framework, a general perspective, even a point of departure. For the new course director it might offer some security in knowing that he or she is not deviating too far from the national norm.

**PROCEDURES FOR ORGANIZING THE COURSE**

Having decided which goals are most appropriate for the basic communication course desired, the next stage in the basic course director's planning involves the development of an overall structure or syllabus. A general outline must be determined before decisions for specific exercises, games, and activities are made. Activities can be provided sequentially to reach specific objectives after a general outline is established. Often a detailed development of a syllabus is justified because the basic course has multiple sections and needs consistency between sections. In addition, specific planning should be undertaken because it aids the director in developing complementary exercises and activities, helps students know what is expected of them, and aids both students and instructional staff in planning ahead. The overall structure must also provide some flexibility and freedom so that beginning and experienced teachers have an opportunity to develop and fully express their own teaching style.

Where consistency of objectives and content is desired among the various sections of the basic course, the syllabus needs to be complete—each day, perhaps, scheduled with an activity. Changes in the activities utilized from term to term can increase the resource pool of instructors and add variety so that staff members do not tire of using the same teaching methodologies. There should be few limits on the amount of change that can be made through the adoption of new exercises, games, or activities from one quarter or semester to the next. A handout for the instructors of the course such as "Meeting Reminders" might be coordinated with the syllabus and might provide suggestions for those who wish to utilize alternative strategies on any given class day.

At each developmental stage in the determination of procedures, the course director should consider the specific objectives desired. Instructional strategies, i.e., exercises, games, and activities, should be chosen to assist students in achieving these objectives. Each instructional strategy, with its specific goal, should support, clarify or further develop the broader course goals. These broad goals, then, provide the theoretical structure into which exercises, games, and activities are placed.

Although the purpose of instructional strategies may be clear, i.e., "to assist students in developing specified competencies in fulfilling cognitive and affective objectives consistent with conclusions of research into human communication behavior," problems do occur.


8 See Richard L. Weaver, II, "The Use of Exercises and Games," 303.

9 From "Reports From 1974 Eastern Basic
when the director begins to search for and implement the specific exercises, games, and activities appropriate to studying given concepts. For example, the director needs to know the intended outcomes of exercises, games, and activities, and their relationship to communication objectives. The director needs to know how such strategies can be evaluated. When certain strategies fail, there is a need for alternative methodologies. There is also the important need to discover ways to insure that students are aware of communication-content relationships of activities, rather than having students just learn to "play games." It is important for the director to provide points and issues for discussion of exercises and games, as well as ways in which activities may be related to the reading material for the course. Perhaps, the greatest problem with using an experiential approach to learning is the application and discussion of the results. It is not unusual to find that students are unable to determine the purpose of an exercise being used by their instructor. It is the director's responsibility to help instructors know how to answer the important question when using exercises, games, and activities: "So what?"

Another concern of directors with respect to the choice of exercises, games, and activities must be with their ease of implementation. If all course instructors are expected to use the same strategies, the director must be concerned about differences in instructors' abilities to implement strategies. Some staff members find it difficult to adapt to the experiential approach itself as well as to specific activities. This does not mean that complicated or complex strategies must be eliminated, but that they may require extensive development and explanation before class implementation. The director must plan to provide complete materials that can be used if success is to be assured, supervise activities of the instructors, and visit classrooms when exercises are being used.

One area directly tied to the development of instructional strategies is the creation of appropriate evaluation procedures for student efforts. It is one thing to devise an elaborate, well-planned, dyadic encounter which involves students meeting each other five different times in five different locations and quite another thing to devise an effective means of evaluating the students' performance in the exercise. Following a determination of what the director wants the course to do for the student, he or she should then operationalize these goals in terms of desirable behaviors. For example, in an in-depth, dyadic encounter, the expectation might be for students to: (1) engage in self-disclosure, (2) demonstrate effective listening habits, and (3) reveal characteristics of clear expression. Different behaviors would be listed for each activity in the course.

The next step is to devise measurement procedures which will provide an

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10 From "Reports," p. 2.
11 See Richard L. Weaver, II, "The Use of Exercises and Games," 309-311, for further comments on evaluating interpersonal exercises and games.
objective way of determining when and whether desirable behaviors occur and when and whether undesirable behaviors are reduced, disappear, or can at least be identified. The final step is the administration of both the activities and the measurement procedures and an interpretation of the data.

One of the primary considerations for the director should be evaluation, for without it, how is it possible to decide what is useless, worthless, or, perhaps, a frivolous activity? The "chief obstacle to useful and meaningful evaluation," states Edward McGlone, a writer on educational measurement, "is an unwillingness to make a serious attempt at it." Directors may feel that what is being taught cannot be measured or that the results of any kind of measurement may reveal weaknesses in directorship or teaching. Rather than take such a stance, the director should build upon Robert Ebel's hypothesis: "Every important outcome of education can be measured."

The director should seek out devices for facilitating, extending, and refining observations of student achievement. The director should remember, too, that measurement is valuable to those who teach in the program. Not using educational measurement will deny teachers important information about what they have done in the classroom.

Because of the breadth of a basic communication course and the potential number of activities and exercises that could be used, each with various, specific purposes, it is not feasible to suggest specific means of evaluation. It should be clear, however, that measurement and evaluation procedures should be in line with the communication principles taught.

Directors will soon be held accountable for the educational outcomes expected of the students enrolled in their courses. It will be the director, in many cases, who will have to demonstrate what students have learned as a result of instruction. This requires precise identification of goals and objectives before beginning the instructional program and reliable measurement of the effectiveness of the instruction used to implement the goals devised. The major plea is for the director to reveal a concern for a systematic educational approach.

Finally, with regard to organizational procedures, the director must be concerned with the development of an instrument for student evaluation of the course and of the instructor. If the

16 McGlone, 245.
director takes part in the course, such as providing the lectures, evaluation of his effort should also be included. Open letters can be attached to a structured, objective evaluation form that allows the basic course staff to rate the director’s teaching, administration and guidance. The best evaluation instrument is the one that is geared most specifically to the course being evaluated. To find out if a textbook is considered useful by the students, ask them to rate it. To find out how students react to televised lectures or to a specific activity created for and used in the course, ask them for a rating. Each aspect and segment of the course should be covered, from the broad decision about what was included in the course (subject-matter), to the specific activities (daily procedures), from the assignments and textbooks, to the overall demands made upon students’ time. Also useful are questions that allow students to compare the course or teacher with others they have had and with their total university experience thus far. It is also interesting to find out how the course rates with respect to what the student considers to be an “ideal” basic-communication course.

In one course, a five-point scale is used from agree to disagree. “A” on the scale represents “agree” and “E” represents disagree. Using “strongly” in front of either word tends to encourage students to spread their responses through “B” and “D”. Thus, with a large number of students responding, significant agreement or disagreement on any item is difficult to discern. On the agree-disagree scale, the student records his or her response to a statement like “This course should be dropped as a university course” on a computer answer sheet that allows answers A, B, C, D, and E. The computer program provides an item-by-item breakdown of responses indicating how many students selected each response. Areas that need work, require clarification, or should be deleted, can be readily identified. This type of evaluation can become a guide for identifying future needs with respect to course purposes and organizational procedures.

POLICIES FOR COURSE ADMINISTRATION

With clearly-defined course purposes, and well-constructed procedures, the final concern of the basic-course director is with administrative policies. The basic-course director must determine the responsibilities and authority assigned to the position. This is likely to differ in individual cases, but in every case the director should be evaluated on the basis of the responsibilities outlined, demonstrated student learning, and achievement of the instructional staff. Authority is important when problems arise with recalcitrant staff members or students, or when changes in purposes or procedures are necessary. Determining the channels of command helps the director determine to whom he or she is responsible and how one fits into the

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20 This question, responded to by 885 students in a basic communication course at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, received the strongest disagreement of any question on a forty-question course-evaluation form.
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department hierarchy. Does the director report to the chairman when problems arise? How does he initiate changes?

In addition to determining authority, the basic course director should determine to what degree the course is given high departmental priority in areas such as staffing, financial support, and physical facilities.21 Is the course under the direction of a full-time faculty member, and is policy regarding the course formulated by the faculty member, by the faculty as a whole, or by a basic course committee elected by the faculty? Is it then left to the basic course director simply to implement policy? What is the priority of the basic course with respect to the administrators of the college? Because of the size of the course and because it is often a requirement, deans, provosts, and sometimes presidents take special interest in it.

The director should also develop a policy whereby potential instructors in the program—faculty and graduate students—are screened. Screening might reveal interest in the program as well as strengths and weaknesses in academic backgrounds and preparation for teaching. Screening might indicate and eliminate potential problems at an early stage. Conflicts, biases, and predispositions can be determined and confronted directly in these screening sessions.

The director must develop a policy, too, regarding the development and presentation of comprehensive instructional aids and material. A teacher's manual that provides ideas, approaches, alternatives, exercises, and evaluation forms for each unit of the course is one method of presenting such strategies. The director or must offer comprehensive training workshops at which the materials in the teacher's manual can be discussed and developed.22 Weekly meetings for the discussion of evaluation criteria, approaches to critiquing, and alternative exercises can be scheduled. Training workshops for faculty would serve as in-service programs to update information in areas important to basic communication problems and procedures. These programs could be conducted while the academic year is in progress and could be open to all interested faculty. Important in all these meetings, workshops, and programs must be the development of an environment of cooperation between director and teaching staff.

In addition to the experienced faculty involved, the basic communication course is often a training ground for new instructors. A policy must be established for the evaluation of the staff members in the program. Visitations to the classrooms while instructors are teaching allow the director a method of monitoring and supervising teaching in the program.23 In-class visitations by the director, or by competent teachers, should be conducted for the purpose of (1) following up observations regarding the effective implementation of ideas and approaches to critiquing, and alternative exercises can be scheduled. Training workshops for faculty would serve as in-service programs to update information in areas important to basic communication problems and procedures. These programs could be conducted while the academic year is in progress and could be open to all interested faculty. Important in all these meetings, workshops, and programs must be the development of an environment of cooperation between director and teaching staff.

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21 From "Reports," p. 4.


23 An explanation of one such visitation program and a visitation-response form is provided in Richard L. Weaver, II, "The Quest for Quality Teaching: In-Class Visitations," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1976.
tivities, (2) evaluating teaching skills, (3) providing guidelines for improvement, and (4) letting graduate assistants know that effective teaching is important. Written and oral comments from the director, or from the qualified evaluators, should follow each visitation. These reports should include some reaction to each of the following items:

1. Has command of the subject, presents material in an analytic way, contrasts various points of view, discusses current developments, and relates topics to other areas of knowledge;

2. Makes self clear, states objectives, summarizes major points, presents material in an organized manner, and provides emphasis;

3. Is sensitive to the response of the class, encourages student participation, and welcomes questions and discussion;

4. Is available to and friendly towards students, is interested in students as individuals, is respected as a person, and is valued for advice not directly related to the course;

5. Enjoys teaching, is enthusiastic about the subject, makes the course exciting, and has self-confidence. Through these evaluations, instruction can be improved, student learning can be realistically assessed, insight can be gained into student responses to course structure and content, and instructional methods can be improved.

The director of the basic communication course should fulfill minimum qualifications of the position such as: having a speech communication content background appropriate for the nature of the course for which he or she is responsible; having knowledge of learning development, educational psychology and measurement; having continuing interest in research in communication education; and having a continuing interest in the development of instructional strategies and methods. Given the qualities, one is still faced with posing questions that are most appropriate for the task at hand and with resolving commonly encountered problems. By being prepared to face the kinds of questions and problems presented here, the director of the basic course can go about the task of developing purposes, procedures and policies more systematically.


26 From "Reports," p. 5.