The Use of Application Essays as an Effective Tool for Assessing Instruction in the Basic Communication Course

Adam C. Jones, Cheri J. Simonds & Stephen K. Hunt
Published online: 19 Aug 2006.

To cite this article: Adam C. Jones, Cheri J. Simonds & Stephen K. Hunt (2005) The Use of Application Essays as an Effective Tool for Assessing Instruction in the Basic Communication Course, Communication Education, 54:2, 161-169, DOI: 10.1080/03634520500213181

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634520500213181

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://nca.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

The Use of Application Essays as an Effective Tool for Assessing Instruction in the Basic Communication Course

Adam C. Jones, Cheri J. Simonds, & Stephen K. Hunt

The assessment of student learning in general education courses is of critical importance in higher education. This study examined the utility of a particular writing assignment, application essays, as a course assessment tool in a basic communication course. Application essays are one page compositions asking students to describe a communication event and to use a single concept from class to analyze that experience. A content analysis of 369 application essays contained in 140 student portfolios coded (a) categories of communication events, (b) categories of course content, and (c) the quality of the linkages between them in the student writings. In general, students focused on mass media events, and utilized concepts developed early in the class. Seventy percent of the conceptual connections were appropriate. Results were used to subsequently modify the application essay assignment to encourage more diverse topical coverage.

Keywords: Course Assessment; Basic Communication Course; Writing in the Disciplines

Accurate assessment of student learning is an essential component of the instructional process. Recently, portfolio assessment has been used and evaluated in a wide range of disciplines including language arts (Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall, 1994; Crouse, 1994; Gill, 1993; Reyes, 1991; Voth & Moore, 1997), math and sciences (Barrow, 1994; Chapman, 1996; Slater, 1995), and education (Farris & Fuhler, 1996; Gipe & Richards, 1992; Patzer & Pettigrew, 1996; Vizyad, 1994). Their appeal lies, in large measure, in their capacity to capture a wide range of artifacts reflecting performance in multiple class assignments.

Adam C. Jones (MS, Illinois State University, 2002) is an Instructor in the Department of Communication Studies and Theatre at Missouri Western State College. Cheri J. Simonds (PhD, University of Oklahoma, 1995) and Stephen K. Hunt (PhD, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1998) are Associate Professors in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. Adam Jones can be contacted at acjones99@hotmail.com
Portfolio assessment began to capture our attention when we served as basic communication course administrators of a large (about 1,500 students per semester), multisection, general education course focused mainly on public speaking skills. For example, we examined whether or not the use of student portfolios in our course was an effective, authentic tool for assessment (Hunt, Simonds, & Hinchliffe, 2000). We concluded that student portfolios can be an effective mechanism for gathering data with respect to student accomplishment of course goals. The portfolios analyzed included speech materials (speech outlines, instructor evaluation forms, videotapes, etc.) and various written assignments.

Emerging from this initial portfolio research, as a subcomponent worthy of further examination as a course assessment tool, is the application essay. The application essay in our class required students to apply material they learn in the basic course to communication events they experienced in the “real world.” In this assignment, students wrote a highly structured one page paper describing a particular communication event, linking it to a communication concept from the course material, and analyzing how the event is related to the communication concept. During the course of a semester, students were instructed to complete a series (three to five) of these application essays, focusing on a variety of course concepts. In the current study, we will attempt to extend our initial assessment efforts to help identify both the strengths and limitations of the application essay as a tool for assessing student learning in the basic communication course.

Our initial investigation (Hunt et al., 2000) ultimately led to several conclusions regarding application essays and the use of these written assignments to provide evidence that students accomplished the basic communication course goals. The course goals stated that students should be able to:

1. apply the rhetorical principles informing effective formal communication;
2. accommodate rhetorical principles to different speech situations, both formal and informal;
3. conduct background research necessary to develop well-informed presentations;
4. evaluate the oral presentations of others according to these rhetorical principles;
5. apply rhetorical principles critical to effective communication in small group discussions;
6. demonstrate openness, intellectual tolerance, and civility in the exchange of ideas and the resolution of conflicts in small group settings.

Specifically, we found that the application essay did provide a method for gathering data about course goals five and six if students chose to write about small-group communication. Additional arguments support the notion that application essays can indeed provide an effective tool for assessing the basic course. For example, Huffman, Carson, and Simonds (2000) found that the application essay promoted student classroom participation by helping students apply concepts learned in the classroom to their own, personal experiences. They concluded that the application essays “allow teachers to assess each student’s level of critical thinking by judging the description of
the [application essay], the link to the specified concept, and the analysis of each communication concept” (p. 93). It is reasonable to assume that if the application essay can be used to assess student critical thinking, it may also serve as an effective measure of student learning.

As a result of these earlier trials of the application essay in the basic communication course, several key research questions emerged and guided our current assessment efforts.

RQ1: What communication events do students choose to write about in application essays?
RQ2: What communication concepts do students address within application essays?
RQ3: What is the nature of the connections students make in application essays between communication events occurring in their lives and concepts presented in their basic communication course?

Method

Sample

Application essays (n = 369) were extracted from a previously collected data set of 140 portfolios (Hunt et al., 2000) and included in the present study. Each student was assigned a series of application essays to write throughout the course. Instructors could either assign particular concepts within each unit of the course or allow students complete freedom to choose what concepts to write about whenever course connections were made to real-life experiences. Our impression is that most students (when given the choice) waited until the end of the semester to turn in their application essays. Recall that the assignment asked students to describe a communication event, link it to a course concept, and analyze how the event was like the concept. Students were instructed to place all of their application essays in their portfolios.

The original portfolios were collected at the end of the first full year of the General Education program at Illinois State University during the spring of 1999. The portfolios represented a systematic sample of 10 percent of the population of students enrolled in the course during that semester (a list of all students was generated and every ninth student portfolio selected). Students signed informed consent waivers and were monetarily compensated for their materials.

Category Definitions

To answer the research questions, we designed a coding instrument to record communication events, concepts, and quality of connections between events and concepts. To develop the categories for communication events and concepts, we conducted a preliminary examination of all application essays collected. We then generated a list of all observed categories of communication events and concepts. For
example, communication events included mass-media encounters (television, radio, newspapers, magazines), engaging in public speaking, processing classroom examples, engaging in speech self-analysis, one-on-one encounters, and special events. Course concepts included, but were not limited to, communication process, ethical communication, nonverbal communication, audience analysis, support material, organization, delivery, visual aids, persuasion, conflict, cultural diversity, small-group processes, and critical thinking. For quality of connections between course concepts and life experiences, a binary coding of appropriate/inappropriate was devised. The criterion for determining appropriateness was whether students demonstrated an understanding of the concept through the link to, and analysis of, the communication event.

**Procedures**

We trained four coders (one male and three female), all of whom were graduate teaching assistants for the course. Coders then independently analyzed 10 percent of the sample to assess intercoder reliability for all three sets of variables. The unit of analysis was the application essay. That is, if a given concept or a given communication event occurred one or more times in the essay, it was simply coded as present in that essay. If an essay contained any analysis whatsoever that connected experience with course concepts that was correct, then the entire essay was rated as appropriate. Coders (all instructors of the course) were asked to make these determinations given their knowledge of course terms. The coders agreed that 39 of the 369 essays did not contain the necessary material required for analysis. For example, instructors may have changed the requirements of the assignment or provided an alternative exercise. Based on Holsti’s (1968) formula, reliabilities for the remaining essays were .85 for communication event, .75 for concept, and .79 for appropriate or inappropriate type of analysis. Upon completion of the coding for the entire sample, we calculated raw and relative frequencies for all coded variables.

**Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of a written assignment (application essay) as a formative assessment tool in our basic communication course. By using simple frequency distributions, we determined (a) the various communication events that students in this study wrote about in the application essays, (b) the concepts that students addressed, and (c) that students in this study typically, but not always, made appropriate connections when they wrote application essays.

The first research question queried about the communication events that students wrote about in their application essays. Specifically, we were interested in exploring the contexts/situations of communication events students tended to analyze for this assignment. The largest number of application essays \(n = 155, 42\%\) analyzed communication they observed in the mass media. This was followed by one-on-one encounters \(n = 61, 16.5\%\), public speakers observed \(n = 39, 10.6\%\), classroom
examples \( n = 35, \ 9.5\% \), the students’ own speeches \( n = 31, \ 8.4\% \), and live entertainment \( n = 9, \ 2.4\% \). The remaining application essays of this sample \( n = 39, \ 10.6\% \) did not include the essential material necessary for analysis.

The second research question addressed the concepts students wrote about in the application essays. In order to simplify this analysis, we collapsed student responses into the four major units of the course: immersion, message clarity, message responsiveness, and persuasion. A fifth and final unit on synthesis and self-evaluation was eliminated from this analysis, since the phasing of other class assignments discouraged students from writing application essays at that point. (The sample contained only two application essays relevant to the synthesis unit, or 0.6\% of the total essays analyzed.) This procedure allowed us to identify points in the semester where students wrote the majority of application essays. It should be noted that we could not determine whether some essays were written at specifically assigned times, or whether students had the choice of when to write each essay. Thus, results cannot be interpreted in light of when during the semester each essay was written, only in light of the order of presentation of the topic which each essay addressed. In fact, coders could not determine the specific unit the application essay should be assigned to for 58 of the application essays (15.2\%). The fact that coders had trouble assigning all of the essays to a specific unit is not surprising in light of the overlap of many of the course concepts (e.g., outlining is discussed in both the message clarity and persuasion units).

The immersion unit was designed to help students identify critical elements present in most communication situations and to establish criteria for recognizing communication competence. Some of the topics covered in this unit included the communication process (definition and models), critical thinking, perception, self-concept, and ethical communication. Students wrote 123 application essays (39.5\% of the total) addressing topics in this unit.

In the message-clarity unit, students practiced creating messages directed toward the functions of informing, describing, explaining, and problem solving. They also worked on developing skills in producing concise, well-formed, and listener-adapted messages. In addition, they practiced skills in listening to and clarifying the messages of others. Students wrote 121 application essays (38.9\% of the total) addressing topics in this unit.

The message responsiveness unit emphasized the related functions of perspective-taking, empathy, seeking and providing comfort and social support, managing conflict, and moving competently through the various group roles that facilitate the decision-making process. The major topic areas in this unit included group communication, cultural diversity, listening, and managing conflict. Students wrote 35 application essays (11.3\% of the total) addressing topics in this unit.

The persuasion unit was designed to help students understand the persuasive process, both as speakers who wish to influence others and as listeners who wish to resist persuasive attempts when necessary. Emphasis was placed on understanding and evaluating the positions and messages of others. The foundation of this unit was based on traditional rhetorical theories, as well as modern views and research in
persuasion. Students wrote 32 application essays (10.3% of the total) addressing topics in this unit.

The final research question examined whether students were making appropriate connections in their application essays. In other words, did students accurately analyze the communication event with a course concept? The data indicate that students in this study typically, but not always, made appropriate connections between the communication event and course concept. However, we found that some students in this study established no clear link in 25.2% \((n=84)\) of the application essays. More importantly, students advanced an incorrect/inappropriate link between the communication event and course concept 7.2% \((n=24)\) of the time. The frequencies of the appropriateness of the connections students made by course unit are presented in Table 1. As the data indicate, students are more likely to make inappropriate links or provide no direct link at all early in the semester (i.e., the immersion and message clarity units of the course).

**Discussion**

**Implications for Course Management**

We were able to determine the various communication events that students in this study wrote about in the application essays, the concepts that students addressed, and that students typically, but not always, made appropriate connections when they wrote application essays.

Although students wrote about a wide range of communication events, the plurality of them addressed mass media. This finding is not surprising given the pervasiveness and accessibility of the mass media. Although this finding is not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course unit</th>
<th>Appropriate</th>
<th>Inappropriate</th>
<th>No direct link</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immersion</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Clarity</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Responsiveness</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to Determine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67.6%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
inherently problematic, it does raise a level of concern in terms of contextual richness. In other words, we feel that students should grow to develop an analytical stance toward a wider range of communication contexts. On the other hand, we were encouraged to find that students did often critically reflect on their mass media experiences.

Application essays can provide evidence for student learning in any of the course topics, depending on what class content students choose to write about. The students in this sample focused the bulk of their attention on the first two units of the course (immersion and message clarity) and provided relatively little information about their uptake of the subsequent units. This finding is troubling for several reasons. For example, fewer than 10% of the application essays dealt with the concepts presented in the message responsiveness unit. The fact that fewer students wrote application essays on these topics does not necessarily mean that they failed to develop an appreciation for these topics; however, it does suggest that many students may be missing a valuable opportunity to extend the learning occurring in the classroom.

The fact that so many application essays were concentrated at the start of the semester may suggest that our instructors were not doing enough to reinforce to students that they should be writing application essays. Instructors may focus on the importance of this assignment early in the semester and then neglect it as they turn their attention to other course assignments such as the group and persuasive speeches. This finding suggests a need to better train instructors in terms of having the students write application essays on all of the major units of the course.

The fact that approximately 25% of the students failed to make an appropriate direct link between application essays and course concepts (and an additional 5% made incorrect linkages) was also troubling. Results indicated that the preponderance of missing or incorrect linkage between concepts and personal experiences occurred when students wrote about the first two topics of the semester. The number of conceptually weak application essays, and the frequency with which these weak essays were written about the earliest topics in the semester, is not likely due to the particular difficulty of these specific topics. Rather, this incidence of conceptually weak essays may have been due to lack of clarity and consistency in the assignment-essay instructions. To rectify this problem, we subsequently made significant changes to the instructions for the application essay. First, students were provided a detailed description and model examples of an application essay for them to reference while completing their own assignments. Additionally, we trained instructors to describe the assignment in a thorough and consistent manner and to make explicit reference to possible application essays throughout the semester.

The present study is not without limitations. We have been able to demonstrate that students are writing about the six course goals and that the majority of them are able to make accurate connections between course material and the communication events they are exposed to outside of the classroom. However, our analysis of these application essays stops short of describing details of student learning. It could be that students make these connections without deeply understanding the course
material. Also, it may be that students have different “gestation” periods for fully realizing the applicability of the communication concepts they are exposed to in the basic course. In fact, we often have students come back to us, in some cases several semesters after taking the course, to express that they finally understand how useful the application essay assignment was in helping them see the relevance of the communication theories and principles discussed in the basic course. This pattern suggests that we as basic course directors should employ a multimethod, multitool and longitudinal approach to the assessment of course goals. A comprehensive assessment plan should include psychometric measures as well as more authentic indicators of student performance like student portfolios. By analyzing all of these data holistically, we can begin to capture a better image of student performance. Clearly, the application-essay assignment discussed here can serve as one part of the overall assessment picture, and it should prove applicable across a wide range of general education classes.

References


Received: October 10, 2003
Accepted: January 6, 2005