Consistency and Change: The (R)Evolution of the Basic Communication Course

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The basic communication course, with its roots in classical Greece and Rome, is frequently a required course in general education. The course often serves as our “front porch,” welcoming new students to the Communication discipline. This essay first outlines early traditions in oral communication instruction and their influence on future iterations of the course. In addition, because fundamental changes in higher education in more modern times affected emphases and delivery of the course, we focus on the relationship between general education and the basic course and the significant curricular changes to the course during the latter part of the 20th century. Finally, we discuss ramifications of the evolution of the basic course, as the discipline moves forward into the 21st century.

Keywords: Basic Communication Course; History of the Basic Course; Basic Course in Modern Times; Future of the Basic Communication Course

According to Steven Beebe, past president of the National Communication Association (NCA), because the basic communication course is often required in general education curricula, it effectively functions as the metaphorical “front porch” to communication departments and programs (Beebe, 2013). Beebe’s point is that potential communication majors, as well as students from other disciplines, take their first, and sometimes only, look at our discipline from the vantage point of the basic communication course. Given its prominence in the communication curriculum, a look back over time at the
basic course, our disciplinary “front porch,” is most appropriate in this, our association’s hundredth year.

The basic course, though not always referred to with this title, is perhaps the original and most enduring pedagogical element in the communication discipline. It is and has always been, after all, some version of training in oratory. This emphasis on public speaking and public address in education can be easily traced back to the curricula offered at Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum, as well as the training offered by Isocrates and the Sophists, and the heirs to those traditions, Cicero and Quintilian (Hauser, 2002). There are other classical rhetoricians and oratorical trainers we could note, but these few serve to illustrate the enduring role of oral communication in the *enkyklios paideia*, or rounded education, that was the precursor to the modern general education program. It is no surprise that with its Western roots, American higher education recognized this importance of communication to varying degrees throughout its history.

In this essay, we trace significant milestones in the history of oral communication instruction and demonstrate how the basic course, especially its contemporary manifestation, is indelibly linked to its role in general education. We begin by briefly outlining some of the early traditions in oral communication instruction that serve as the foundation for the inclusion of the basic course in many general education programs today—the “old school.” We next describe how fundamental changes in higher education influenced emphases and delivery of the basic communication course in more modern times—the “new school.” We then focus on how the symbiotic relationship between general education and the basic course played a role in structural, administrative, and curricular changes to the basic course during the latter part of the 20th century. Finally, we discuss the ramifications of this history for the basic communication course and for the discipline, as we go forward into our next 100 years.

**Old School: Traditions and Trends in Early Oral Communication Instruction**

There was no conception of universities or general education for the people of ancient Greece and Rome, but they held education, especially in oratory, of paramount importance. There were two primary ways to receive what passed for formal education during that time: hire a private tutor, or attend one of the few available schools. In Athens, the Sophists constituted the largest group of tutors and provided varying advice for proper speaking to their students. For example, Gorgias focused on training speakers in ornate delivery and style. This instruction ran counter to that provided in the more prominent schools, such as Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s Lyceum, and the school of Isocrates. Despite Plato’s inherent mistrust and dislike for rhetoric and oratory, he, like Aristotle and Isocrates, understood the power of speaking. Aristotle’s contributions to oral communication are some of the longest lasting and are still found in virtually every iteration of the basic communication course in some form. Isocrates, like Plato and Aristotle, stressed the importance of civic life and taught students a rudimentary version of what we now refer to as general education in contemporary universities: oratory, composition, history, citizenship, culture, and morality. The models
offered by these Greeks influenced what was then taught in the Roman Republic and Empire.

During the Roman Empire, we find one educator whose writings significantly underscored the role and importance of communication in a student’s curriculum. Funded by the Emperor Domitian, Quintilian developed a school and wrote what is essentially a training manual for administering a proper education. In this book, *Institutio Oratoria*, he expounded on much of what his Greek predecessors taught, but he also established a progression for training that contemporary curricular models for oral communication and the basic course come close to mirroring (Quintilian, 1903). Essentially, Quintilian argued that children should learn grammar at an early age, and then, in their young adolescence, they should be trained in rhetoric, specifically invention, style, and arrangement. Today, these same emphases take place at roughly the same time in a student’s development—in high school or the freshman year in college.¹

Admittedly, there are countless other contributors to the development of oral communication instruction during this time period. We do not wish to minimize those contributors; however, those highlighted represent some of the more central contributions to what we now refer to as the basic communication course. Oral communication was a central, if not the central, focus of education for the Greeks and Romans. In fact, speech training took place at roughly the same time in a pupil’s education as it does today. In the centuries that followed, oral communication remained a key element of education, although some philosophical debates during that long period of time redefined the primary focus of oratorical training and eventually led to a cooptation of rhetoric and communication by other disciplines. In fact, by the time the modern university structure was up and running in the United States, English departments had taken on the responsibility of communication training in both written and oral forms. The prevalence of that combination of writing and speaking, however, would not last.

**New School: Oral Communication and the Basic Course in Modern Times**

By the turn of the 20th century, English departments largely subsumed oral communication and, although still taught, the nuances of logic, rhetorical theory, and persuasive argumentation had shifted to English, with some of these topoi located in literary criticism. Several key moments in the early 20th century, however, presented a correction of sorts to this shift and moved elements of communication from English back to their original discipline. In doing so, these events and ideas provided a strong rationale for the Communication discipline proper, and the teaching of the basic course by speech professionals (McCroskey & McCroskey, 2006).

One of the first important events for the discipline and the basic communication course occurred in 1914 when the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking (later the NCA) was founded. The organization arose from a dispute within the ranks of the National Council of Teachers of English, when 17 speech teachers broke away, due to what they perceived as the reduced importance of speech
instruction in English departments. The following year, the first conference for the
new association drew 60 members and subsequently grew at an exponential rate,
gathering as many as 700 members by 1920.

During the ensuing decades, universities and campuses across the country began to
see a proliferation of numerous academic departments, including speech communica-
tion. The notion of “departments” and concentrations of academic study, so prevalent
today, actually was made possible by reforms during this timeframe spearheaded by
Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell (Cohen, 1988; Thomas, 1962). Lowell also
created the modern structure for general education, which required students to
take foundational courses in the natural sciences and the humanities. It is within this
structure that oral communication and the basic course found its way back to a central
role in higher education curriculum alongside of, not overseen by, written English.
Campuses gradually emulated the reform movement at Harvard across the country.

Scholarship in speech helped enhance these efforts and further separated Commun-
ication from English departments. One writing in particular, by Herbert Wichelns (1925/
2001), provided a clear rationale for disciplinary differences between English and Speech
by arguing that the practice and criticism of oratory is distinct from that of literary
criticism. In fact, Wichelns differentiated between “the poetic” of literature and rhetoric,
or speech: “For poetry is always free to fulfill its own law, but the writer of rhetorical
discourse is, in a sense, perpetually in bondage to the occasion and the audience; and in
that fact we find the line of cleavage between rhetoric and poetic” (Wichelns, 1925/2001,
p. 25). This distinction and emphasis on the spoken word and its effect or influence on
audiences became a forceful tool for the creation of Communication departments. New
resources also were developed, including one of the first and longest enduring textbooks
for public speaking, *Principles and Types of Speech*, originally authored by Alan H.
Monroe in 1932. The practice and study of the spoken word had once again become
distinct from the art of literature and written composition, and the basic public speaking
course returned triumphantly to higher education.

In 1956, what amounted to the first attempt to systematically examine the state of
the basic course took place when Donald E. Hargis reported the results of the Speech
Association of America (now NCA) Committee on Problems in Undergraduate
Study. Hargis found that the basic communication course was primarily a course in
public speaking (Hargis, 1956). This state of affairs would change somewhat, as more
and more schools across the country responded to the general education reforms
at Harvard and began to use various models for teaching the core communication
elements required for all students and included in the basic course. Nevertheless, the
prevalence of instruction in oral communication within higher education rose.

Twentieth Century: General Education and the Basic Communication Course

1960s: Organizing the Contemporary Basic Course

By the 1960s, changes to the discipline and general education resulted in a need
to examine the state of the basic course and also provide organization for its
implementation. Indeed, this decade saw the basic communication course receive a great deal of attention.

The dawn of the 1960s brought systematic investigation of the status of the basic course in the United States. The primary questions focused on the content and the activities of the course, as it was delivered at colleges and universities (Dedmon & Frandsen, 1964; Jones, 1955; London, 1963). Though public speaking was the dominant approach, basic courses took a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Instructors used at least 84 different textbooks, and the courses were required of all students as part of general education programs at numerous schools. Dedmon (1965), one of the leaders of the effort to examine the basic course across the country, suggested that the course could make a greater contribution to general education if it was “designed as a course in oral communication in which we combine the better features of traditional types of required first courses” (p. 121). His suggestion was that, to be a valuable general education requirement, the basic course should be a combination of communication theory and skills practice. Specifically, he called for an oral communication course in general education to require students to speak to a group, speak as a member of a group so as to learn how to “agree to disagree” (Dedmon, 1965, p. 123) emphasize training in delivery, and also incorporate communication theory.

Dedmon’s (1965) proposal for course content, specifically the importance of the basic course and its role in general education did not go unheeded. The data gathered in the 1960s suggest a diversity of types of basic courses across the United States, representing a subtle shift from the public speaking focus that had been maintained from the time of the Greeks. Although still the most popular form of the basic course, public speaking encountered competition from courses designed to teach communication theory, as well as those that taught a combination of “multiple” areas of communication. The communication theory courses accounted for a very small percentage of the total, while the public speaking category dominated at over 50% of colleges and universities (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970). Courses labeled “multiple” or “combination” more or less evolved into what is now commonly referred to as “hybrid” or “blend” classes. Much of this curricular innovation was done in an effort to include oral communication instruction in general education, as Dedmon had hoped. Dedmon’s systematic approach to surveying the state of the basic course continues to this day and the periodic study is now in its eighth iteration (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010).

Dedmon’s efforts at tracking the basic course through scholarly inquiry were not the only enduring advance made in terms of the basic course during the 1960s. In an attempt to develop and coordinate the basic course, the Directors of the Basic Speech Course at Midwestern Universities (later the Midwest Basic Course Directors) met for the first time in 1962 (Munger et al., 2011). The first conference, held at the University of Kansas, was chaired by the well-known debate coach, E. C. Buehler. Now taking on a national presence as the Basic Course Directors’ Conference, this group has met every year since 1962, and has substantially influenced the shape and direction of the basic course through its research and training activities. The efforts of both Dedmon and the basic course directors during the 1960s illustrate how
effectively the discipline organized efforts to build and maintain the basic course, in part by strengthening its ties to general education. On the surface, such a presence provided significant benefits, but as would soon become apparent, it carried risks and challenges as well.

1970s to the 1990s: Maintaining the Basic Course in a “Disaster Area”

The general education approach, first forwarded at Harvard University by Abbott Lowell decades earlier, had taken on many forms and stretched into countless academic domains. It had become so unwieldy that, in 1977, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching referred to general education as a “disaster area.” The Carnegie Report (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1977) stimulated a good deal of surface level reform activity in the ensuing years, but the result was essentially additional courses added to the labyrinth of options students tried to navigate. With its inclusion in general education, the basic communication course, like other courses, often became just another class for students “to get out of the way” in their effort to learn more relevant information in their major.

Continuing efforts to monitor the basic course provide a window into how the course fared in the wake of the Carnegie Report. In tracing studies on the state of the basic course, we see some distinct trends, such as the continuing prevalence of public speaking versions of the course. Ongoing audits of the basic course (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985), with the exception of one aberration in 1974 that was likely due to a labeling error (Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974), show a consistent majority of courses delivering a public speaking version of the basic course. Data from studies became a bit clearer after this period, showing the continued dominance of the public speaking course through the 1980s, but also a stronger presence of the blend course on the national scene (Gibson et al., 1980, 1985). The top textbooks of the period, Monroe and Ehninger (1967), Samovar and Mills (1972), and Walter and Scott (1973) provide additional evidence that the emphasis of the course at the majority of institutions remained public speaking, while interest in Scheidel’s (1972) Speech Communication and Human Interaction indicated an increasing popularity of the blend, or “hybrid,” course.

Whereas the 1970s and early 1980s saw an increase in the hybrid approach to the basic course, the late 1980s and early 1990s ushered in significant efforts to strengthen the communication network and research efforts of course instructors, and especially, directors of the basic course. These efforts included the 1989 (Wallace, 1989) proposal at the Midwest Basic Course Directors’ conference for what would become the Basic Communication Course Annual (BCCA), the only journal in the field devoted to the basic course. Now in Volume 26, the BCCA remains a centerpiece for research on pedagogy and administration of the basic course. In that same year, the Basic Course Interest Group of the Central States Communication Association was formed. Just a few years later in 1993, the Midwest Basic Course Directors’ group instituted the “Basic Course Listserv” as a means of sharing information and encouraging informal
Two campus-level movements also heightened attention to the instruction of oral communication within general education during the 1990s. Several campuses across the country began to infuse “communication across the curriculum” into their delivery of general education. These programs sought to embed communication assignments, practice, and instruction in courses outside the communication discipline that students would take after being introduced to oral communication principles in the basic communication course. Additionally, “communication centers” began to sprout up at colleges and universities around the country. These centers, now represented by their own national organization, the National Association of Communication Centers, provide training and assistance for students in the basic course, students preparing presentations for different courses, help with interviewing skills, and even workshops for faculty on instructional communication skills for their classrooms.

Despite these advances for the discipline and the basic course, general education and, by extension, the basic communication course encountered headwinds at this time as well. In 1994, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U; 1994), issued a report that echoed the Carnegie Report criticism of general education requirements at member institutions. The AAC&U report identified three significant concerns with the way general education was administered. First, the “menu” approach to general education curricula contained no organizing philosophy that students could understand. Second, there was often very little philosophical or other substantive connection among the required courses. Third, these two issues combined to create confusion for students and reduced their motivation to learn foundational ideas and concepts in general education. Upon hearing such a critique, for the second time in 17 years, higher education began to respond slowly in ways that continue to impact the structure and implementation of the basic course in general education at many institutions.

1990s to the Present: Shifting Ground for the Basic Communication Course

Any changes to general education have occurred more glacially than rapidly, and have largely resulted in the calls for reform such as those proffered by the AAC&U. Since the 1994 report, the AAC&U has strongly endorsed an outcome-based model for general education. This model calls for replacing the “menu of courses” approach with one that requires students, instead of taking specific courses, to effectively demonstrate the achievement of core competencies (Valenzano & Wallace, in press). Further, NCA asserted the importance of oral communication and the basic course with its Policy Platform Statement on the Role of Communication Courses in General Education (National Communication Association, 1996). That statement sought to encourage disciplinary recognition of the importance of communication education as well as the inclusion of communication knowledge and skills in a college education, as called for by businesses across the country (Darling & Dannels, 2003; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997). However, even though accrediting agencies like the Southern
Association of Colleges and Schools require oral communication competence for its member institutions (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 1997), Bok (2006) reported that instruction in oral communication is mandatory in less than half of all undergraduate institutions.

Whether communication continued in general education as a specific course, or as an outcome produced through a variety of possible courses, remained an open question, as institutions sought to adapt to the shifts in higher education. Wehlburg (2010) reported that regional accrediting agencies in the United States began moving toward requiring achievement and outcome-based models, rather than a list of specific courses students should be required to take. The idea of communication skills as one of these outcomes remains central to this approach, with both employers and the AAC&U calling for communication as a university outcome of general education. This demonstrated that, far from a lack of interest in the communication education of students, members of a broad array of disciplines within higher education were concerned with the development of student communication skills. This approach, due in large part to its move away from course-specific prescriptions for general education, called into question the traditional public speaking model and the newer “hybrid” approach by emphasizing specific communicative outcomes not necessarily tied to the content traditionally taught in those courses. This move placed several communication departments’ basic courses in jeopardy, as communication departments have been somewhat resistant to the change in approach (Wehlburg, 2010).

Survey results in the 1990s and 2000s continued to indicate the dominance of the public speaking design in the basic course (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999; Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Morreale et al., 2010). In addition, Alan Monroe’s (1932) Principles and Types of Speech was replaced by Stephen Lucas’s (2011) The Art of Public Speaking textbook at many schools, and the hybrid class design remained as a stable second option to public speaking in the surveys. However, both the public speaking and the hybrid designs appear to be losing some ground recently to a rise in courses categorized as “other.” This movement began in 2004 and rose to 14.1% of course designs in the 2010 survey of the basic communication course (Morreale et al., 2010). The “other” courses on the rise are those that have departed from the traditional forms of the course, but the survey did not offer information on what content was emphasized by courses within the “other” category. To be sure, the decades from 1990 to 2010 continued the tradition of the basic course as a primary component in general education, if not in terms of a specific course, then at least with communication skills as a desired outcome.

Our Next 100 Years: Looking Back and Looking Forward

Looking back over our disciplinary history, training in oral communication has been a central focus in education from Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Quintilian to today. The startup in 1914 of a national association devoted to oral communication provided impetus and opportunities for scholarship and exchange of information related to the basic course. The proliferation of Communication departments, systematic study of
basic course pedagogy, and research studies on the status of the basic course soon followed. Finally, the formulation of a national Basic Course Directors’ Conference and a peer-reviewed journal devoted to the course continued to provide direction and focus for research, development, and training, helping to maintain the centrality of oral communication in general education across higher education.

Today, there is no doubt there are deep ties that bind the basic communication course to the discipline and to general education. In fact, some communication departments depend upon the course’s inclusion in general education, so much so that former NCA President Frank E. X. Dance (2002) called the course the discipline’s “bread and butter” (p. 355). Businesses and organizations like the AAC&U now identify communication knowledge and skills as essential tools college graduates must have (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013). Additionally, in today’s hyper-mediated environment, such skills are even more vital to personal and professional success, but they are changing to accommodate technology. In fact, numerous scholars and teachers of the basic course have explored, to varying degrees of success, an online delivery system for the basic communication course (Goodnight & Wallace, 2005; Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007).

The influence of the basic course on our discipline is not restricted to the classroom. Many basic course programs use significant numbers of graduate students as instructors. While this is sometimes viewed as a weakness (Bok, 2006), there is also a substantial “upside” in that the benefits of the course typically reach beyond the students taking the class. Over the years, many faculty members in communication departments found their instructional start in the basic course, and learned to hone their pedagogy there before moving on to teach upper-division courses and seminars. The course also serves as a laboratory for new instructional practices, and as one of the primary locales for the study of instructional communication. Some of the seminal emphases in instructional communication research such as communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977), teacher immediacy (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; Smythe & Hess, 2005), and strategies for handling behavioral issues in the classroom (Bingham, Carlson, Dwyer, & Prisbell, 2009) were studied using the basic course as a place to gather subjects and explore these important questions.

Given our disciplinary history and traditions, and our longstanding connections to general education, basic course instructors, researchers, administrators, and the discipline at large are well advised to pay attention to the basic communication course in terms of content, delivery, assessment, and research opportunities. To ignore the course and its role in general education is to invite peril for the foundation of our departments and discipline. Our “front porch” must be tended to with care, so we can continue to serve the needs of our students, colleagues, and communities, well into the next century.

Note

[1] Chronologically, Quintilian had children begin education slightly earlier than students today, so the chronology of the point at which today’s students receive training in rhetoric is mid-late adolescence. This time period reflects roughly the junior or senior level of high school to the
freshman or sophomore level of college—a time when most students take the basic communication course today.

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