



Our “Front Porch”

By *Steven A. Beebe*

The 100-year-old white, ramshackle farmhouse, where I grew up in rural Missouri, has a spacious and breezy front porch. That porch was the first place people visited when being welcomed to our home. My parents, who still live on the same farm (and are working on their 72nd year of marriage), would sometimes serve lemonade on the porch or make hand-cranked ice cream on muggy Missouri summer days for our guests.

The Most Important Room in the House

Our nearly 100-year-old association, our academic home, also has a front porch—our basic communication course. Consider these observations:

- The Basic Course is usually the first course to welcome students to the study of communication.
- Ninety-nine years ago, the Basic Course was the focal point for the development of what is now NCA, reflecting the belief of our founders that oral communication has unique instructional methods and academic content.
- The Basic Course is the largest single comprehensive instructional source of information about human communication in the world.
- The Basic Course is the primary source of communication majors in many departments, as well as a significant generator of credit hours.
- The Basic Course is a major source of employment for master's and doctoral students working on their degrees; the health of the Basic Course, where most of us learned how to be university communication teachers, is vital to our graduate programs.

Strengthening the Basic Course

Each year, approximately 1.3 million students take an introductory communication course, commonly known as the Basic Course, at U.S. colleges and universities. According to the latest national survey of U. S. Basic Courses published in *Communication Education*, about 50 percent of our Basic Course students take public speaking; a growing number (36 percent) take a “hybrid” course that typically includes units in interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking; and the remaining 14 percent take a course that focuses on communication theory or a single communication context such as interpersonal or group communication. As former

NCA President Rich West noted in one of his *Spectra* columns last year, we don't all agree on what constitutes basic core content. So we really don't have a single Basic Course; we have multiple Basic Courses.

Because of the importance of the Basic Course to our discipline, our departments, and our association's mission to advance the study of communication, I've selected “strengthening the Basic Course” as my NCA presidential initiative for this year. I'm focusing on the Basic Course not only because of its prominence in our curriculum, but also because, on some campuses, our colleagues are being asked to justify its inclusion in general education programs. As some state legislatures are pronouncing a shorter time to degree completion by trimming general education credits, the Basic Course finds itself on the defensive at many institutions.

Goals, Questions, and Strategies

The primary goal of this initiative is to strengthen the Basic Course and, via the Basic Course, to enhance the profile of the communication discipline on our campuses. Questions we might ponder include:

- Should we move toward a more unified Basic Course?
- What core communication learning outcomes should be included in a Basic Course, regardless of which contexts, methods, or skills are emphasized?
- What are valid and reliable strategies for assessing the Basic Course?
- What are the best practices for teaching the Basic Course online?
- How does the advent of new media influence essential communication competencies that could or should be taught in the Basic Course?
- How do we ensure that the Basic Course reflects our contemporary scholarship and builds a bridge to upper-level courses?

I've appointed two NCA task forces to investigate these questions. One group that has been at work for some time, chaired by former NCA President Isa Engleberg, is seeking to identify common core competencies inherent in all Basic Communication courses. A second task force, chaired by Cheri Simonds from Illinois State, is charged with identifying specific ways

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NATIONAL
COMMUNICATION
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NCA INTRODUCES NEW LOGO

The eve of our centennial is an opportune moment to update the association's image in a way that is authentic to our history and sensitive to our future, and we are pleased to introduce NCA's new logo. There is not one iconic image that embodies the whole of what we do. As such, this logo incorporates several design elements that reflect components of our discipline and our professional lives as scholars, teachers, and members of a community.

Fundamentally, this logo reflects the transactional model of communication—that of collaborative and ongoing message

exchange between or among individuals with the goal of understanding one another. The circle is the symbol of perfection and harmony. The white area in the center created by two overlapping circles implies that effective communication creates understanding and illumination. Multiple colors in the logo reflect our diversity across many dimensions, including race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and gender; as well as across geographies, areas of disciplinary interest, and types of institutions, among other things.

From a practical perspective, this logo is highly versatile and can be adapted for different contexts, including our centennial.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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NCA can strengthen the Basic Course.

When I visited with Basic Course directors at their annual conference in January, the number one suggestion they had was that the NCA website should have a link to consolidate NCA resources and information about the Basic Course. Done.

Concerns

Although I've touted the virtues of the Basic Course, I realize that not everyone may be enamored with a brighter bulb illuminating our front porch. I've heard concerns about that light shining too brightly. For example, the communication discipline

offers much more than the introductory communication principles skills taught in our Basic Courses.

The Basic Course doesn't adequately represent the full spectrum of our inquiry. Some have suggested that we divorce our Basic Course from the larger communication curriculum. Perhaps you work in a university where your Rhetoric and Composition colleagues in English have established a separate department, distinct from the English literature curriculum. I believe, however, that curricular estrangement is not the answer to strengthening our Basic Course. The communication disciplinary community loses power when we become fragmented and isolated from one another.

A Brightly Burning Porch Light

A strong Basic Course—one that is perceived as relevant and of high-quality and that is confirmed through assessment results to offer valued skills—will reflect positively on our individual efforts as educators and on our collective credibility as an association. Our "front porch" course not only should add curb appeal to our discipline, but also should be a place where all are invited to learn vital communication principles and skills that provide lifelong benefits. Join me to make sure our "front porch" light is burning brightly to welcome others home.

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