

The Future of the Basic Course in Communication

A White Paper Sponsored by the First Vice President of the Eastern Communication Association and the Center for Democratic Deliberation, Penn State University

Introduction

On Friday, April 24, 2015, the First Vice President of the Eastern Communication Association (ECA), Kanan Sawyer, sponsored a special double session at the 106th Annual ECA Convention on “The Future of the Basic Course.” In the spirit of the convention’s theme, “Deliberation: Philadelphia,” Penn State’s Center for Democratic Deliberation (CDD) was invited to facilitate the event, which was open to all convention attendees. The session featured deliberations on a series of questions about the basic course in communication, and it attracted a diverse group of more than thirty communication scholars and teachers. The deliberations proceeded in two stages: first, participants worked through the questions in small groups with a facilitator and a recorder; second, each of the small groups reported out to the whole body of attendees, initiating a moderated town-hall-style deliberation on those questions and other issues.

The two-stage deliberative event revealed both areas of common concern and a diversity of opinion on some of the challenges facing the Basic Course. Some participants objected to the very label “Basic Course,” while others raised questions not originally posed to the groups. Nevertheless, all agreed that the process of bringing together a diverse group of communication scholars to discuss the topic was valuable and should be done on a regular basis. Beyond that shared conclusion—that the process itself was valuable—there were both areas of agreement and differences of opinion on the questions raised during event.

The Questions

1. What should be the mission of the Basic Course, and how, if at all, does such a course fit into the General Education curriculum?

The consensus that emerged out of our discussion was that there could be no “one size fits all” introduction to communication studies. With participants from a diversity of institutions (from community colleges to small liberal arts colleges to major research universities), some defined the Basic Course as public speaking, others as a hybrid of speaking and interpersonal or group communication, and still others as a theoretically grounded introduction to the discipline. In addition, some thought of the Basic Course in terms of Gen Ed requirements; others envisioned the course as an introduction to the communication major. At the same time, there was widespread agreement that a so-called Basic Course should promote core competencies that cut across the differing contexts emphasized in a diverse range of communication courses: presentational skills, communication ethics, audience adaptation, effective listening, message design, critical/analytical skills, and so on. Most agreed that, whatever the context, the Basic Course should help students answer the question: “What is Communication?”

2. Should the Basic Course in communication focus on public speaking and related skills, or should it introduce students to other areas of the discipline, such as interpersonal or small group communication, media and rhetorical criticism, or nonverbal or intercultural communication?

Again, our answer to this question was “it depends.” Reemphasizing the point that no “one size fits all,” our deliberation highlighted the need to adapt to local circumstances in order to meet the administrative and curricular requirements of particular institutions. Some colleges and universities have long-standing traditions or general education requirements that require their communication departments to offer multiple sections of public speaking; other schools allow for more flexibility in designing a Basic Course that is less skills-oriented or that more broadly introduces the discipline.

3. Can the Basic Course be taught in large lecture formats, or does the nature of the subject dictate small, independent sections?

There appeared to be a consensus among the participants in our deliberation that a skills-oriented public speaking course is best taught in small sections, with ample opportunity for students to speak and receive feedback from their instructor and classmates. More theoretically oriented courses on the “foundations” of the discipline, on the other hand, might well be taught effectively in large lecture formats. A few participants reported success with introductory communication courses that combined large lectures with smaller break-out sections for student speeches or small-group discussions.

4. How can the Basic Course, as currently conceptualized, be taught online, or must the nature of the course be fundamentally altered for online delivery?

There remains a lot of uncertainty and diversity of opinion about online teaching in the Basic Course. Some remain skeptical about the possibilities for replicating the experience of a public speaking class in an online environment, insisting that there is no substitute for feedback from a live audience. Others are resigned to the inevitability of online teaching and have found ways to adapt the Basic Course to this new environment, including hybrid courses that combine online instruction with face-to-face meetings for speeches and other oral presentations. Still others enthusiastically embrace the possibilities of new technologies and report great success with a variety of innovative approaches to online teaching. These technology enthusiasts noted the potential for students to rehearse, re-record, and even edit videotaped performances, thereby leading to more polished final products. They also pointed to the need to develop new skills in the Digital Age, including ethical and technical competencies associated with online conferencing and social media.

5. What are the challenges of textbook selection in the Basic Course? Is a textbook even necessary in the Basic Course? If so, what kinds of textbook work best, and is the quality or affordability of availability textbooks an issue?

Like online learning, textbooks are rapidly evolving, and opinions about e-books and other online course materials are mixed. Some like the flexibility, currency, and potentially lower cost of e-books, while others argue that students still prefer traditional textbooks and are less inclined to complete reading assignments online. Everybody seems to agree, however, that our textbooks need to do a better job accommodating increasingly diverse student bodies, and that the cost of textbooks has become a serious issue, especially for students on need-based assistance. Most also seemed to agree that, no less than introductory courses in sociology or biology, the Basic Course in communication should be taught with substantive textbooks that reflect the best current scholarship in the field.

6. How do we make the case for the Basic Course to colleagues in other fields and to college administrators?

Participants in the event agreed on the importance of protecting the status of communication courses in the general education curriculum and of assuring that communication scholars teach those courses. They also seemed to agree that it was important to communicate that the Basic Course covers important theoretical principles and concepts, so as to counter misperceptions of the course as merely a “skills” course unworthy of inclusion in a serious liberal arts curriculum. Participants reported on a variety of useful strategies for communicating the value of the Basic Course, including soliciting testimony from students and employers and cultivating supportive colleagues in other disciplines. Some argued that the best strategy for defending the status of the Basic Course was to emphasize its connections to civic literacy and engaged citizenship.

7. In general, what are the biggest challenges facing the Basic Course in communication in the twenty-first century? How will the Basic Course be different ten or twenty years from now?

There was considerable agreement about the two greatest challenges to the Basic Course in the twenty-first century: rapid technological change and the growing diversity of the student population. Technological change, of course, is implicated in a number of issues already discussed in this White Paper, from the need to take account of new modes of public speaking (like videoconferencing and TED Talks) to the promise and perils of teaching the Basic Course online. Diversity issues likewise are implicated in a number of the challenges facing the Basic Course, from differing cultural norms in the public speaking classroom to the role of the Basic Course in promoting a more global perspective on political and social issues. In an era of rapid technological and cultural change, the participants agreed that there are both challenges and opportunities ahead for the Basic Course.

Conclusion

As suggested in the Introduction to this White Paper, the communication scholars who gathered to deliberate over questions about the Basic Course at the 2015 Eastern Communication Association Convention represented a diverse array of institutions, from community colleges to major research universities. Not surprisingly, then, they brought a wide range of experiences and perspectives to the conversation, and they did not agree about everything. That diversity was manifested in differing responses to questions about the nature and format of the Basic Course in communication, as well as more specific questions about online teaching, textbooks, and other pedagogical concerns. At first glance, it might appear that the only consensus to emerge out of the deliberation was that there could *be* no consensus about the nature and purposes of the Basic Course. Indeed, the term Basic Course itself was a point of contention, and it seemed that the only thing we could all agree on was that there could be no “one size fits all” approach.

Yet that, in itself, is an important point of consensus, and upon reflection we sense other points of agreement as well. First, we all seemed to agree that it is important that we both face up to the challenges and to seize new opportunities relating to the Basic Course. At many institutions, we are called upon to defend the Basic Course’s place in the general education or liberal arts curriculum, and we must rise to that challenge. At the same time, those very challenges give us the opportunity to demonstrate the value of the Basic Course to university administrators, colleagues in other disciplines, students, and the public at large. The participants in the ECA deliberation seemed confident in our ability to “make the case” for the Basic Course. Thus, we might view recent challenges not so much as a threat but as an opportunity to demonstrate how the Basic Course can help students become better prepared for both the workplace and citizenship in the twenty-first century.

Second, a strong consensus seemed to emerge toward the end of our deliberation that the process of deliberating about the Basic Course was itself valuable—and that the conversation should continue. In an era of rapid social and technological change, participants spoke to the need for communication scholars to continuously reflect upon—and communicate about—the nature and purposes of the Basic Course. As the ECA deliberation drew to a close, a number of participants expressed their hope that this would be the start, not the end, of the conversation. Others urged us to take what we learned from our deliberations to broader audiences, including not only the membership of the ECA and others in the field but also educational administrators and colleagues at our home institutions. We offer this White Paper as an aide in that effort. It may not have all the answers, but we hope that it helps clarify the questions and provide a framework for further discussion.