

Measuring College Learning in Public Speaking

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The MCL in Public Speaking faculty panel

This report was authored with the support of an expert panel of eight scholars with expertise on teaching, learning, and assessment in the introductory course in Public Speaking

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The introductory communication skills course that meets a general education requirement on many campuses, often referred to within the discipline as the Basic Course, has long been a core element of most communication programs and the subject of many national surveys. In 1968, a team of faculty conducted the first national survey of the introductory communication course (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970), and a new national survey has been conducted approximately every five years since then. The surveys are used to describe the practices, trends, and changes over time in how college and university educators teach the introductory course. The most recent national survey found that the two most popular forms of the introductory communication course at colleges and universities that responded to the survey were public speaking (61%) and hybrid communication courses that include interpersonal, group, and public speaking skills (27%), which has been the case for the past 40 years (Morreale, Myers, Bucklund, & Simonds, 2015). We acknowledge that there are many types of courses taught as the introductory communication skills course, and many of the concepts, competencies, and outcomes shared here are also relevant to other introductory communication courses. Our charge here is to explicate the core concepts, competencies, and outcomes that should be included in any public speaking course to help develop a next generation of assessment tools that can be useful across public speaking programs.

This set of concepts, competencies, and learning outcomes for public speaking was developed as part of the Measuring College Learning (MCL) project at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). The MCL Public Speaking faculty panel included Melissa Broeckelman-Post (co-chair, George Mason University), Kristina Ruiz-Mesa (co-chair, California State University, Los Angeles), Rebecca Curnalia (Youngstown State University), Angela Hosek (Ohio University), Trevor Parry-Giles (National Communication Association), Cheri Simonds (Illinois State University), Michelle Violanti (The University of Tennessee, Knoxville), and Joshua Westwick (South Dakota State University). Our work was preceded by the work of many other committees and task forces, and as a team, we worked to synthesize and integrate the work of several previous teams when compiling the Public Speaking Framework shared here.

In 1998, Sherwyn Morreale, Rebecca B. Rubin, and Elizabeth Jones compiled and edited a report for the National Communication Association titled *Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students*. This report reviewed several efforts to identify essential speaking and listening competencies as well as to identify assessment tools for measuring those competencies dating back to 1970. It worked to synthesize the efforts of more than half a dozen projects and includes several tables with communication competencies that all college graduates should possess: (1) Expected Student Outcomes for Speaking and Listening: Basic Communication Courses and General Education (Quianthy, 1990); (2) Essential Communication Skills (Jones, 1994); (3) Basic Skills for Persuading, Informing, and Relating (Rubin, 1995; Rubin & Morreale, 1996); and (4) Advanced Communication Skills (Morreale & Rubin, 1997).

More than a decade later, there was renewed debate within the discipline about whether it might be valuable to have a consistent set of learning outcomes shared across introductory communication courses, which resulted in several NCA-sponsored task forces and reports that were working concurrently to establish what those outcomes might be. In 2011, a team of five

(later six) faculty created the Core Competencies Group that sought to answer the question, “Is there a set of core communication competencies that constitute the basis for introductory communication courses within and across a variety of contexts?” (Ward, et al., 2014, p. 3). This group became the NCA Core Competencies Task Force in 2013, and after an iterative process lasting more than two years, this task force identified seven core competencies that should be achieved in any introductory communication course, regardless of the course content.

The seven outcomes identified by the NCA Core Competencies Task Force in 2013 include:

1. Monitoring and Presenting Your Self
2. Practicing Communication Ethics
3. Adapting to Others
4. Practicing Effective Listening
5. Expressing Messages
6. Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes
7. Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies

Shortly afterward, other faculty teams engaged in articulating a set of learning outcomes for communication as an academic discipline. With the support of a grant from the Lumina Foundation, NCA began the Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC) project. This process involved more than 30 Communication faculty from a diverse range of institutions and relied on a “tuning” process that involved feedback from numerous stakeholders (National Communication Association, 2015).

The nine outcomes identified by the LOC team include the following:

1. Describe the Communication discipline and its central questions
2. Employ Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts
3. Engage in Communication inquiry
4. Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context
5. Critically analyze messages
6. Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy)
7. Apply ethical communication principles and practices
8. Utilize communication to embrace difference
9. Influence public discourse

Around the same time, the SSRC’s MCL project had built a panel of communication faculty to create a set of concepts essential for a communication graduate to know and understand, and a collection of competencies essential for a communication graduate to be able to do. Many of the members of this committee were also involved in the LOC project, so not surprisingly there is significant overlap between the competencies and outcomes identified by each group, as shown in Table 1. A more detailed explanation of the concepts and competencies identified by this team can be found in Kidd, Parry-Giles, Beebe, & Mello (2016).

The public speaking course, often seen as the “front porch” of the discipline (Beebe, 2013), serves as the introduction inviting students to further explore the communication discipline through an academic major or minor, or often the only formal communication course students take. Necessarily, a significant amount of overlap exists between the competencies expected in a public speaking course and the competencies expected for a communication major, though the depth of skill building and achievement differ between the two. Due to the significant overlap between these competencies (Table 1), and because the colleagues who worked to develop these materials used very thorough iterative processes that allowed for the input of many others, our team chose to use the previous work done by the Core Competencies Task Force, the Learning Outcomes Project, and the SSRC MCL Communication faculty panel as a starting point to further develop and clarify a set of concepts, competencies, and learning outcomes for Public Speaking (see Tables 2 and 3). Of the seven essential competencies identified by the previous MCL Communication faculty panel, we believe six should be addressed in a public speaking course. As a general education course on many campuses, public speaking courses serve a broad student base with an array of majors; thus while the higher-order competency of communication inquiry is essential for a communication major, it is best achieved within upper-division Communication courses, and is not included in the list of competencies for public speaking.

Several principles should guide assessment tools development to measure student achievement of the learning outcomes identified in Table 3. First, a comprehensive set of assessment tools should include: (1) quantitative self-report and/or knowledge-based measures that can be included in student pre/post surveys, (2) rubric-based assessments of student performances, and (3) qualitative assessments of student achievement of communication goals. Second, assessment tools need to be flexible enough that faculty can select a subset or the entire set of assessment tools to meet their program’s, student population’s and campus’ needs. Third, assessment tools should be capable of deploying either at a single institution or across multiple institutions. Fourth, benchmarks should be established for each assessment tool so departments and programs can compare their own programmatic assessment results to a set of standards that indicate expected levels of performance or growth.

Quality assessment practices should be useful to public speaking programs, individual instructors, and public speaking students. For programs, assessment data should facilitate comprehensive evaluation of a program and identify ways to improve the course or program. Additionally, program assessment practices should identify specific programmatic strengths, not just identify how many students meet a set of standards. For faculty, assessment results should be useful for making changes to curriculum, instruction, and assignments to improve overall student learning in the course. Assessment tools should be developmental and provide immediate progress reports for students to help them understand their speaking strengths and areas of improvement, as well as provide links to resources that will help them hone those specific skills. We recommend that assessment tools be interactive and utilize technology that can facilitate self and peer feedback.

| Table 1. | | |
|---|---|--|
| Competencies and Outcomes from Previous Projects | | |
| Core Competencies for the Basic Course (Ward et al., 2014) | Learning Outcomes for Communication (National Communication Association, 2015) | MCL Competencies for Communication (Kidd et al., 2016) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in Communication inquiry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage in Communication Inquiry |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapting to Others Expressing Messages Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create Messages Appropriate for the Audience, Purpose, and Context |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practicing Effective Listening Creating and Analyzing Message Strategies* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critically analyze messages | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critically Analyze Messages |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitoring and Presenting Your Self | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate Self-Efficacy |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practicing Communication Ethics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply ethical communication principles and practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply Ethical Communication Principles and Practices |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize communication to embrace difference | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize Communication to Embrace Difference |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influence public discourse | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influence Public Discourse |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and Explaining Fundamental Communication Processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe the Communication discipline and its central questions | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employ Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts | |
| <p>*This outcome is listed twice because it encompasses skills identified as separate outcomes by the other projects.</p> | | |

Table 2.**Concepts and Competencies for Public Speaking***(Derived from the MCL Concepts and Competencies for Communication)***Essential Concepts**

Public speaking students should understand...

Social Construction: Communication, as a discipline, is predicated on the theory of knowledge that attends to jointly constructed understandings of the world. This theory holds that understanding and meaning emerge in coordination with other human beings and is dependent upon language as a fundamental system for the construction of meaningful reality.

Relationality: Communication is inherently transactional and collaborative; as a human behavior, to communicate is to engage with others, share meaning, make arguments, speak and listen, and transact together in a state of consubstantiality.

Strategy: Communication is a primarily intentional activity. It involves the capacity to read and interpret contexts and situations to readily tailor and develop messages. For centuries, scholars and teachers have theorized strategies for effective, intentional communication, and knowledge of those theories and concepts is essential.

Symbolism: Communication students study and understand the theories behind the semiotic formation of meaning; they explore the capacity of symbols to socially construct reality, form relationships, and express strategic intention.

Adaptability: Communication and communicators are adaptable. The knowledge that communication behaviors must change and the theories that explain such adaptation are fundamental to the

Essential Competencies

Public speaking students should be able to...

Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context: Locate and use information relevant to their audiences, purposes, and contexts, and select and present messages in creative and appropriate modalities and technologies to accomplish communicative goals.

Critically analyze messages: Identify meanings that are embedded in messages, articulate characteristics of mediated and non-mediated messages, recognize the influence of messages, engage in active listening, and enact mindful responses to messages.

Demonstrate self-efficacy: Articulate personal beliefs about abilities to accomplish communication goals and evaluate personal communication strengths and weaknesses.

Apply ethical communication principles and practices: Identify ethical perspectives, explain the relevance of those perspectives, and articulate the ethical dimensions of communication situations. Students should choose to communicate with ethical intention, propose solutions for (un)ethical communication, and evaluate the ethical elements of a communication situation.

Utilize communication to embrace difference: Articulate the connection between communication and culture and respect diverse perspectives and the ways they influence communication.

Table 2. (cont.)

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>Influence public discourse: Frame and evaluate local, national, and/or global issues from a communication perspective and utilize communication to respond to such issues and advocate for courses of action.</p> |
|--|---|

Note: These concepts and competencies are identical to the ones for Communication, except that Communication Inquiry was removed as a competency because it is a higher-order skill that should be addressed in advanced courses within the major.

| Table 3. Competencies, Learning Outcomes, and Objectives for Public Speaking | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Essential Competencies Public speaking students should be able to... | Essential Learning Outcomes | Enabling Objectives Students who complete a public speaking course should be able to... |
| Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context (30%) | Analyze the speaking situation (10%) | Select a presentation topic that is appropriate for the context in which the speech will be given |
| | | Analyze the audience and situation and be able to adapt speech to the specific cultural and social context in which it will be delivered |
| | Locate and use information (10%) | Find a variety of quality sources of information when conducting research to support ideas and arguments |
| | | Evaluate the credibility and appropriateness of supporting materials for a speech |
| | | Create presentations aids that complement the message and enhance the audience's understanding of the message |
| | Present messages (10%) | Prepare speaking outlines that include appropriate organization, well-supported claims, reasoned arguments, and sensitivity to the speaking situation |
| | | Use effective verbal and nonverbal delivery techniques when delivering a presentation using the mode of delivery that is most appropriate for that context |
| | | Utilize appropriate technologies and modalities to present a message |

Table 3. (cont.)

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| Critically analyze messages (20%) | Critically analyze others' messages (10%) | Demonstrate active listening skills | | |
| | | Respond appropriately and mindfully to speakers, both verbally and nonverbally | | |
| | | Provide quality, constructive feedback | | |
| | | Evaluate the quality of evidence and reasoning used in an argument | | |
| | | Identify and evaluate the use of logic, emotion, and credibility (rhetorical strategies) in a message | | |
| | | Identify logical fallacies in an argument | | |
| | | Identify the multiple ways that culture/experiences/identities can impact a message's interpretation | | |
| | Critically analyze one's own message before, during, and after speaking (10%) | Reflect on one's own messages communicated in one's presentation | | |
| | | Evaluate the quality of evidence and reasoning used in an argument | | |
| | | Identify and evaluate the use of logic, emotion, and credibility (rhetorical strategies) in a message | | |
| | | Identify logical fallacies in an argument | | |
| | | Identify the multiple ways that culture/experiences/identities can impact a message's interpretation | | |
| | | Apply ethical communication principles and practices (15%) | Communicate with ethical intention (10%) | Complete thorough research in order to fully understand a subject before speaking |
| | | | | Utilize credible, competent sources and support materials |
| Provide appropriate source citations for evidence | | | | |
| Present information fully and truthfully rather than relying on partial information, deception, or manipulation | | | | |
| Understand how ethical frameworks guide public speaking decisions (5%) | Identify ethical frameworks (perspectives) | | | |
| | Evaluate the ethical elements of a communication situation | | | |
| | Recognize that any issue has multiple perspectives and dimensions | | | |
| | | Critically assess the sources, outlets, sponsors, citation of sources, and framing of data and information to determine quality, accuracy, and bias of information | | |

| Table 3. (cont.) | | |
|--|---|---|
| Utilize communication to embrace difference (15%) | Demonstrate a commitment to diversity and inclusivity (10%) | Show consideration for diverse perspectives and demonstrate rhetorical sensitivity |
| | | Use inclusive language that shows respect for all people |
| | | Adapt messages to increase accessibility for members of the audience |
| | | Frame messages to align with the goals of the context |
| | Understand the connection between communication and culture (5%) | Adapt messages for an audience's diversity of identities and experiences |
| | | Understand communication processes and the ways that culture, identity, and diverse experiences affect messages and their interpretations |
| Demonstrate self-efficacy (10%) | Articulate personal beliefs about abilities to accomplish public speaking goals (10%) | Evaluate how assumptions and norms privilege certain perspectives and experiences |
| | | Establish public speaking goals and develop strategies for improving one's own presentation skills |
| | | Manage communication anxiety and increase confidence in one's own presentation skills |
| Influence public discourse (10%) | Analyze messages about local, national, and/or global issues (5%) | Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of one's own presentation skills |
| | | Identify socially relevant issues that are appropriate topics for a particular speaking context |
| | Use communication to respond to and advocate for courses of action (5%) | Recognize the influence of messages |
| | | Explain complex ideas to non-expert audiences using a variety of explanatory strategies and examples |
| | | Craft arguments that use credible evidence and sound reasoning |
| | | Create persuasive appeals that advocate for important causes |
| Use communication to become civically engaged | | |

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