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# Measuring College Learning in Communication

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*This contribution focuses on learning outcomes and assessment in the discipline of communication. Building on a history of the discipline, as well as some more recent efforts to articulate learning outcomes for students of communication, the authors describe a set of five essential concepts (social construction, relationality, strategy, symbolism, and*

*adaptability) and seven essential competencies (engage in communication inquiry; create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context; critically analyze messages; demonstrate self-efficacy; apply ethical communication principles and practices; utilize communication to embrace difference; and influence public discourse). Following a discussion of essential concepts and competencies, the authors present an overview of existing learning outcomes assessments in communication and articulates a vision for the future of assessment in the discipline.*

## Introduction

In November 1914, on an unseasonably warm Chicago day, seventeen speech teachers voted to formally sever ties with the National Council of Teachers of English and form their own association, the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking.[2] In so doing, these teachers declared that the study and teaching of communication was distinct from other disciplines, deserving of its own institutional and intellectual legitimacy as a discipline within the context of American higher education. Over the next century, this vision flourished; communication is now firmly established as a course of both undergraduate and graduate study in colleges and universities across the United States and around the world. At its foundation, communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry.

The academic study of communication dates back centuries. For the ancients, communication was the study of rhetoric—the art of persuading others through public speaking and oratory; they

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[2] After several interim name changes, the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking is now the National Communication Association.

believed that understanding rhetoric was critical for every citizen's education. As the ancient Greek rhetorician Isocrates wrote in his famous *Antidosis*, "Because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish." Throughout many centuries of rhetorical study as a liberal art, Isocrates's words have served as an enduring reminder of the power of communication, and the contemporary academic discipline of communication continues to promote its effective and ethical practice.

The classical study of rhetoric as a liberal art migrated to U.S. colleges and universities; Harvard University has long had an endowed chair in rhetoric and oratory (the Boylston Chair), for example, and one of the first professors in that position, John Quincy Adams, authored a two-volume collection of *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* in 1810. The development of the communication discipline in the United States owes much to this classical tradition. The mid-20th-century expansion and evolution of the discipline, furthermore, owes much to the emergent interest in the social sciences that flowered in the post–World War II period. Perplexed by the power of communication to move entire populations toward fascism and violence in Europe and Asia, communication scholars turned to social scientific methods as a means to understand audiences and message effects. As the research focus of some communication scholars shifted, so, too, did the curriculum in many communication departments. Joining the courses in public speaking, British and American public address, rhetorical theory, radio speaking, and the like were new offerings in interpersonal communication, mass communication effects, and persuasion and social influence. Along with studies of great orators and their rhetoric, graduate students began producing dissertations

that experimentally tested the power and reach of mass-mediated communication and that surveyed large audiences for their attitudes toward political communication, for example.

Amid all of these disciplinary and scholarly changes, communication scholars and teachers retained their appreciation for the role and influence of communication across all aspects of public and private life. They continue to embrace the ubiquity of communication and are mindful of the inherent value of communication to meaningful citizenship. Emerging from the democratic impulse embodied in 19th- and 20th-century progressivism, this is the pedagogical foundation of the discipline. Communication cuts across contexts and situations; it is the relational and collaborative force that strategically constructs the social world. Knowledge and understanding of communication and strong communication skills allow people to create and maintain interpersonal relationships; employers in all sectors seek employees with strong communication skills; and society needs effective communicators to support productive civic activity in communities.[3]

## Historical Perspectives on Learning Outcomes in Communication

Emerging as it did from programs in English literature and criticism, early efforts to articulate the discipline's agenda were often responsive to the prevailing disciplinary orthodoxies of the day from the parent discipline. Research efforts in the history and criticism of oratory (as a form of literature), studies of dramatic performance, and studies of speech composition and debate dominated the field,

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[3] This introductory section is excerpted from *The Role of the Communication Discipline on Campus and Beyond*, a publication of the National Communication Association's Learning Outcomes in Communication project (NCA Copyright © 2015 National Communication Association. All rights reserved.).

alongside work in speech pathology and vocal physiology (Woolbert 1920). Over the span of the 20th century, the domains of communication research shifted and expanded; research explored the full range of human communication—messages and texts, mass audiences and isolated individuals, public opinion and message effects, media technology and channels of interaction—across contexts broad and narrow in scope. Today, the National Communication Association (NCA) has nearly fifty interest groups defined by the substantive areas of focus of the scholars and teachers who affiliate with them. Typically, these groups reflect the delineation of the scope of the discipline's inquiry: the broad-ranging contexts, channels, media, and practices wherein human beings engage in the symbolic exchange of meaning. At the same time, communication scholars maintain a focus on the *core* of the discipline, or how people create and use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts.

Scholars of teaching and learning in communication have historically occupied a pivotal place in the discipline, reflective of its genesis in the skilled delivery of important content. "Our profession has a long tradition of valuing instruction as well as research," noted Ruth Anne Clark, one of communication's most dedicated scholars of teaching and learning, "and part of the obligation of being a good instructor is to consider carefully what the students are learning" (2002, 396). Clark argued that "we need to carefully scrutinize our instructional practices and rigorously assess the learning outcomes" (396).

Clark's 21st-century commentary is consistent with the discipline's long-term commitment to teaching and learning and their enhancement. As a newly established discipline in the early 20th century, the primary concern for communication scholars and teachers was the institutional and academic credibility of the discipline's research and teaching. At the time, few institutions housed departments of speech or communication; most instruction in communication was limited to a public speaking course. The

first speech teachers, thus, sought to both understand the extent and nature of communication instruction in the United States and sketch out a preliminary sense of what the new major would entail. In 1916, MacLeod published a survey of forty colleges and universities that revealed just seventeen departments with majors in speech around the nation. At the same time, MacLeod's survey identified many speech teachers working in assorted departments to teach an increasing number of speech courses.

By 1932, while speech departments were growing nationwide, "comparatively few institutions so far require Speech courses for graduation," reported Weaver (1932, 611), based on his review of 356 college and university course catalogs. Fewer than half of the colleges and universities studied by Weaver offered a major in speech. Hargis (1950) surveyed 522 course catalogs and discovered that 272 colleges and universities offered a speech major. Students in those majors graduated with course work that was primarily focused on public address and oratory, speech science (or speech pathology), voice and diction, and drama/theater. Seifrit's (1961) duplication of Hargis's study found 303 speech majors across 564 colleges and universities. Courses for the major, according to Seifrit, typically clustered around public address, drama/theater, and speech science. A century after MacLeod conducted her original survey, there are 806 communication departments in colleges and universities around the United States that confer at minimum a bachelor's degree.[4]

Owing to the discipline's foundation in public speaking instruction, an ongoing dilemma for communication scholars of teaching and learning is the bifurcation of instruction between communication skills and communication knowledge/theory. Differentiation of public speaking instruction from other courses in the English

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[4] In addition, there are currently more than five hundred community colleges nationwide that offer courses and/or degrees in communication, journalism, or related programs.

curriculum required a sensibility about the course that conferred to it academic legitimacy—postsecondary instruction in speech also needed to be meaningfully different from nonacademic speech instruction available from elocutionists and others. As such, early speech teachers debated the proper role of *content* in the public speaking curriculum.

Offering a clear prescription for how to infuse substance into the public speaking curriculum, Hunt argued that "the problem of content . . . should be recognized and dealt with as an integral part of instruction in public speaking" (1922, 256). If the sole province of public speaking is oratorical form and rhetorical organization, Sandford suggested, "public speaking is indeed a provincial field" (1922, 364). Without such a focus on substance, he argued, the public speaking curriculum is bankrupt and students will indulge "the general triviality of speech subjects and the superficial treatment usually accorded to them" (371). James O'Neill, one of the discipline's founders and the first president of NCA, identified this discussion of form versus content as "vital" to the emerging discipline, because the answer to the question would determine "the very existence of courses and departments devoted to the instruction of public speaking" (1923, 26). O'Neill warned against going too far down the path of focusing exclusively on content when he concluded that "they would, apparently, give courses in public speaking for the primary purpose of teaching philosophy and economics—not public speaking" (30). The tension between public speaking as form and the content of public speeches, as it relates to effective teaching and curriculum design, lingers in discussions of learning outcomes in communication.

In 1936, O'Neill penned an article reflecting upon changing circumstances in higher education and the consequences of such changes for speech instruction. The most significant change facing higher education, he remarked, was the "change from emphasis on the dissemination of knowledge, to emphasis on the development of power, ability, attitudes, habits" (1936, 183). Acknowledging

this shift, O'Neill concluded, means "the acceptance of the essential philosophy of speech education for the last twenty years in the United States," or that "the great objective of education cannot rightly be expressed in terms of knowledge gained or truth learned, but only in terms of abilities perfected, of powers developed. Real education results not so much in a state of mind as in a habit of mind" (184).

O'Neill's celebration of the pragmatic value of higher education is reflected today in the attempt to articulate, across all disciplines, the essential concepts and competencies that define meaningful learning outcomes. O'Neill did not reject or minimize the importance of knowledge and truth in higher education. Instead, he suggested that knowledge and truth taught solely for their own sake are insufficient for a complete, 20th-century system of higher education. Students and society demand more: "It is not a status arrived at," O'Neill wrote, "but a force generated. Not the knowledge that is learned, but what one can do with knowledge is what counts" (1936, 184). For communication, as with other disciplines, this quest is an existential one; the discipline is defined, essentially, by the concepts and competencies learned by its students, and the discussion about learning outcomes for the communication curriculum has proceeded apace for decades. Clearly defined concepts and competencies for the discipline of communication allow scholars and teachers to articulate the value of the discipline for improving personal, professional, and civic life to a wide range of audiences, from students to parents and from employers to legislators.

One marker of academic and intellectual legitimacy, the early speech teachers believed, was the continued inclusion of speech in the core curriculum of college and universities, required of all students. Part of the rationale for such incorporation relied on an evolving sense of learning outcomes for an individual college graduate; a vision of this evolution was articulated by O'Neill when he suggested that higher education was experiencing "a change of focus from the subject to the student" (1936, 183). O'Neill placed

communication at the center of this shift: "Speech activities are the capstone of educational experiences in which activity replaces passivity on the part of the student. Speech activity, in public or in private, is the finished product, the final test of competence, in the use of knowledge" (186).

Echoing the sensibilities toward higher education articulated by O'Neill, the College Committee on Problems of Speech Education, formed by what was then called the National Association of Teachers of Speech (now NCA), sought to provide guidance for speech teachers as they planned curriculum and taught classes. As reported by Anderson (1943), speech programs ought to achieve certain learning outcomes: (a) teach students to think by teaching them to "face facts," organize thought, reason logically, and research facts thoroughly; (b) improve the social attitudes of students by provoking a sense of civic responsibility, by participating in local and civic events, and by achieving emotional balance; (c) broaden and intensify appreciation of speech as a social force and of the ethical dimensions of speech; (d) teach the rhetorical, psychological, and physiological theories of speech; and (e) direct the development of visible and audible techniques of speech through instruction in articulation, diction, and so on. These learning outcomes offer an initial foray by a core group of speech faculty to respond to the pressing demands of the time, to "help a teacher in any type of college face and think through the fundamental problems involved in providing the most effective Speech program" (354).

Noting that World War II "precipitated a veritable downpour of books and articles dealing with education," a Harvard University committee issued a 1945 report entitled "General Education in a Free Society." The report was widely circulated and contained a lengthy section highlighting the value and importance of communication for general education. The report identifies four main characteristics for effective general education: "to think effectively, to communicate thought, to make relevant judgments,

to discriminate among values" (Harvard Committee 1945, 65). Within older higher education curricula, the committee noted, "rhetoric was a normal part of the curriculum." "Rhetoric to us suggests oratory," the report continued, "and today we are suspicious of or at least indifferent to oratory. Yet the art of rhetoric meant the simple skill of making one's ideas clear and cogent; it did not necessarily mean high-flown speeches" (68). As if to resurrect communication and its place in general education, the committee concluded that "language needs to be neither high learning nor high literature in order to be communication. What we have in mind is the language of the businessman writing a plain and crisp letter, of a scientist making a report, of a citizen asking straight questions, of human beings arguing together on some matter of common interest" (69). Communication scholars took note of this set of learning outcomes for the discipline and offered analyses of the role of communication in general education in light of the Harvard report, concluding, as Hunt did, that the report offered "a new background for our demand for the good man skilled in speaking" (Hunt 1949, 276; see also Harrington 1952; Klapper et al.1949).

The midcentury focus on effective teaching and curricular design intensified as communication programs witnessed tremendous growth in the post–World War II years. Such growth accompanied the expansion of both higher education in general and the focus and purpose of the discipline's research. One initiative, introduced as a resolution at the 1957 Speech Association of America (now NCA) convention, called for a standardized curriculum to be accredited by the organization for all speech programs. Skinner (1961) reported that, based on a national survey, almost 70 percent of department chairs opposed such a standardized curriculum. Conferences about the nature and scope of the discipline, in rhetoric and the social sciences, respectively, which were held in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflected the concerns about a standardized curriculum. Both the Wingspread Conference about the prospects of rhetorical study (Bitzer and

Black 1971) and the New Orleans Conference (Kibler and Barker 1969) about the conceptual frontiers of social scientific study in Communication, though mostly focused on research and graduate education, argued for a broader, more inclusive vision for the discipline and for the courses and material that members of the discipline taught. More than a decade later, a more narrowly defined task force offered guidelines for curricula and program design for speech and theater teacher education programs. These guidelines also were articulated as what would now be called learning outcomes; the first guidelines urged that programs develop curricula to allow a student "to develop personal communication skills and theater performance competencies and attitudes in order to become a facilitator of learning" (Joint Task Force of the Speech Communication Association and American Theatre Association 1975, 354).

Discussions of curriculum and program design in communication and other disciplines throughout the mid-20th century culminated in the National Taxonomy Project, which sought to "provide a classification of educational subject matter that currently exists from pre-elementary through post-doctoral studies" (McBath and Jeffrey 1978, 182). This project, begun in 1975, was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics. By 2000, it culminated in the Department of Education's *Classification of Instructional Programs* (*CIP*). Communication Studies was defined in the *CIP* as "a program that focuses on the scientific, humanistic, and critical study of human communication in a variety of formats, media, and contexts" (U.S. Department of Education 2000, III–32).[5]

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[5] In contrast, Communications Technologies programs were defined as "[i]nstructional programs that prepare individuals to function as equipment operators, support technicians, and operations managers in the film/video, recording, and graphic communications industries" (U.S. Department of Education 2000, III-36).

By century's end, scholars of teaching and learning in communication focused primarily on conceptualizing effective learning outcomes in two realms: the introductory, general education course in communication and the development of "communication competency" among communication majors. A 2015 survey found that the vast majority of colleges and universities across the United States require some form of the introductory course in communication (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, and Simonds). That translates into an estimated 1.3 million students in the United States taking one of these courses each year (Beebe 2013). Over the span of several decades, via various conferences, task forces, and seminars, communication scholars and teachers articulated and delineated a series of skill-based competencies for college and university students, often in conjunction with national educational assessment efforts. Most of the skills derived from these efforts found delivery to college students via the introductory communication course, whereas some other skills, labeled as "advanced," are taught to students in the communication major, usually in advanced public speaking courses or in courses on small group communication, discussion and debate, interviewing, or conflict resolution. These initiatives and the skill-based competencies they generated are detailed in an NCA publication, *Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students* (Morreale, Rubin, and Jones 1998). The growth and refinement of the introductory course prompted the formation of a task force in 2013 charged with delineating the core competencies expected as learning outcomes from the course (Engleberg, Disbrow, Katt, Myers, O'Keefe, and Ward 2013). The Engleberg et al. work was an extension of the efforts from the late 20th and early 21st centuries to demarcate a clear sense of learning outcomes for the general education communication course.

The other domain of contemporary discussions of learning outcomes in communication focuses on the development of

"communication competency" in students, particularly at the upper levels of communication course work and within the communication major. Drawn primarily from the work of Spitzberg (1983, 2000, 2006), communication competence is based on a learner's possession of three things: knowledge, motivation, and skill. These three components of competent communication mirror the three domains of learning: cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. For communication to be "competent" in each of the three learning domains, it should be effective, appropriate, satisfying, and efficient; evidence verisimilitude (fidelity or accurate understanding); and achieve the intended task.

Alongside the focus on the communication major and the development of communication competence, the 2000 Hope College Conference released a report on the preferred curriculum for the communication major. This report delineated eight competencies to emerge from the communication major: (a) understanding of multiple theoretical perspectives and diverse intellectual underpinnings in communication as reflected in its philosophy or history; (b) competency in effective communication with diverse others; (c) competency in presentation, preferably in more than one format; (d) competency in analysis and interpretation of contemporary media; (e) competency in reflective construction and analysis of arguments and discourse intended to influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices; (f) competency in systematic inquiry (the process of asking questions and systematically attempting to answer them, and understanding the limitations of the conclusions reached); (g) competency in analysis and practice of ethical communication; and (h) competency in human relational interaction (Report of the Hope College Conference 2000).

The NCA's 2015 Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC) project, funded by Lumina Foundation, was driven by a team of

thirty faculty members[6] from diverse institutions around the country who were charged with answering the question, "What should a student with a communication degree know, understand, and be able to do?" using "Tuning." Tuning "is a process by which faculty in different fields of study determine discipline-specific desired learning outcomes for their subject area through consultations with one another, colleagues on other campuses, students, alumni, and employers" (Institute for Evidence-Based Change 2015). Tuning involves a set of iterative steps including identifying essential learning outcomes, mapping career pathways, consulting stakeholders, honing core competencies and learning outcomes, and implementing locally (Lumina Foundation 2015b). It is an open process,

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[6] The following group has worked together on this project from 2013 to the present: Betsy Bach, University of Montana; Philip Backlund, Central Washington University; Timothy Ball, James Madison University; Kristen Berkos, Bryant University; David Bodary, Sinclair Community College; Jonathan Bowman, University of San Diego; Leila Brammer, Gustavus Adolphus College; Timothy J. Brown, West Chester University; Kerry Byrnes, Collin College; Theresa Castor, University of Wisconsin–Parkside; Melissa Chastain, Spalding University; Rebecca Curnalia, Youngstown State University; Deanna Dannels, North Carolina State University; Lynn Disbrow, Huntingdon College; Qingwen Dong, University of the Pacific; John Frederick, University of North Carolina–Charlotte; Elizabeth Goering, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis; Kandace Harris, Clark Atlanta University; Patricia Hernandez, California Baptist University; Brad Love, University of Texas at Austin; Jimmie Manning, Northern Illinois University; Chad McBride, Creighton University; W. Bradford Mello, Saint Xavier University; Claire Procopio, Southeastern Louisiana University; Armeda Reitzel, Humboldt State University; Mary Toale, State University of New York–Oswego; Shawn Wahl, Missouri State University; Sara Weintraub, Regis College; Cindy White, University of Colorado–Boulder; and Kesha Morant Williams, The Pennsylvania State University–Berks. David Marshall, Associate Director, Tuning USA at the Institute for Evidence-Based Change, expertly facilitated this process.

driven by interaction with and among stakeholders, which broadens discussions while preserving faculty control over the end results. It started in Europe in 2000 and has been used around the world since then. First introduced in the United States in 2009, American Tuning projects thus far have mostly been state based, with only the American Historical Association and NCA engaging in national disciplinary efforts (Lumina Foundation 2015a).

The LOC work is not about accreditation or standards; it is not about administrators or teaching evaluations; and it is not about achieving specific results. It is a faculty-driven effort that is about deep reflection on teaching and learning, with a focus on students. It is designed to prompt thoughtful conversations about curriculum and course development in ways that make sense on individual campuses, with respect both to the discipline itself and to how communication fits into general education. There is no one-size-fits-all implementation strategy for a Tuned discipline. Tuning allows for the clear articulation of what a graduate knows, understands, and is able to do with a degree in a particular discipline to a wide range of stakeholders including students, parents, employers, and campus administrators, among others.

## Essential Learning Outcomes for the Communication Major

### Process

The communication strand of the Measuring College Learning (MCL) project was carried out concurrently with the complementary LOC Tuning project. The LOC project sought to address the question: What should a student with a communication degree know, understand, and be able to do? The MCL project focused on differentiating between concepts (know and understand) and competencies (do), with an eye toward translating learning outcomes into a measurement and assessment strategy. Like the LOC project, MCL was faculty-driven, but

with a smaller team and a less formal process. As the respective conversations converged, it seemed sensible for this white paper to provide an integrated view drawing from the work of both groups of faculty members. To provide an integrated list of essential concepts and competencies for this paper, we mapped the results of both efforts onto each other. The majority of the LOC project's learning outcomes were competencies, and the competencies identified by the MCL faculty panel easily mapped onto the LOC competencies, though the ways they were articulated differed slightly.

The concepts and competencies described in this paper are based on the combined discussions of the LOC and MCL teams. The language is in large part drawn directly from the LOC document; however, it is not identical, and ideas from the MCL faculty panel are fully incorporated. It is important to note that this list is not meant to be fixed or prescriptive. It is meant to prompt thoughtful consideration, with an expectation of revision as appropriate over time and place. This is a starting point for curricular design and, eventually, for measurement.

As articulated, communication scholars and teachers have been carefully considering appropriate learning outcomes for the major since the inception of the discipline. Although this question has certainly led to debate about which specific outcomes best reflect the core of the discipline, there seems to be consensus that, fundamentally, communication is about how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts. With that assumption in mind, a graduate should know, understand, and be able to do the following upon completion of a communication degree.

## Concepts: What Should a Communication Graduate Know and 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 on 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. A fundamental concept, then, of communication is relationality, or how and why relationships form and are developed among communicating individuals, groups, and audiences.

### Strategy

Communication is primarily an intentional activity. The communication graduate knows and understands that competent communication requires strategy and intention. 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

While all disciplines use and involve language and other symbols, symbolism as a concept occupies a core place in communication. Communication graduates 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. Symbolism infuses every aspect of the communication transaction.

### Adaptability

Immutable truths and certain knowledge do not constitute a palpable dimension of communication study. One concept, though, is

immutable—that communication and communicators are adaptable. The knowledge that communication behaviors must change, and the theories that explain such adaptation (e.g., in different contexts, cultures, and communities), are fundamental to the communication discipline.

## Competencies: What Should a Communication Graduate Be Able to Do?

### Engage in Communication Inquiry

Communication graduates should be able to interpret, evaluate, and apply communication scholarship. They should be able to formulate questions appropriate for communication scholarship and engage in communication scholarship using the research traditions of the discipline. In addition, communication graduates should be able to differentiate between various approaches to the study of communication and contribute to scholarly conversations appropriate to the purpose of inquiry. For example, a communication graduate ought to be able to formulate a communication-based research problem about the impact of social media on the development of family relationships, review the scholarly literature about social media and family relationship formation, explore and select relevant theories and concepts that explain the connections between social media and family dynamics, and offer specific, fully theorized means to study and explain how family communication is influenced by social media use.

### Create Messages Appropriate to the Audience, Purpose, and Context

Communication graduates should be able to locate and use information relevant to their audiences, purposes, and contexts, and to select and present messages in creative and appropriate modalities and technologies to accomplish communicative goals. In addition, graduates should be able to adapt messages to the diverse needs of different audiences, adjust messages while in the process of

communicating, and critically reflect on their own messages after communication events. For example, a communication graduate ought to be able to examine the particularities of a specific political or social activist campaign, audit preexisting campaign messages, and craft new, adapted, relevant campaign messages that are strategically important for the campaign's success.

**Critically Analyze Messages**

Communication graduates should be able to identify meanings that are embedded in messages, articulate characteristics of mediated and nonmediated messages, recognize the influence of messages, engage in active listening, and enact mindful responses to messages. For example, when communication graduates encounter a commercial advertisement for a new pharmaceutical, they should be able to explain the verbal and visual content of the ad, recognize the argumentative attempts at persuasion that emerge from the ad, actively and critically engage with both the verbal and visual aspects of the ad, and arrive at a considered, mindful response to the ad that is fully and critically informed.

**Demonstrate Self-efficacy**

Communication graduates should be able to identify barriers that impede communication self-efficacy and perform verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that illustrate self-efficacy. Graduates should be able to articulate personal beliefs about abilities to accomplish communication goals and evaluate personal communication strengths and weaknesses. For example, when entering into a new interpersonal friendship, a communication graduate should be able to reflectively examine his or her individualized goals and expected outcomes from the friendship, and to enact communication behaviors that will achieve those goals and outcomes. As the friendship proceeds, deepens, or ends, the communication graduate should be able to explore the

communication-based reasons for his or her particular behaviors and attitudes toward the friendship.

**Apply Ethical Communication Principles and Practices**

Communication graduates should be able to identify ethical perspectives, explain the relevance of those perspectives, and articulate the ethical dimensions of communication situations. Graduates should choose to communicate with ethical intention, propose solutions for (un)ethical communication, and evaluate the ethical elements of a communication situation. For example, a communication graduate confronting a hostile workplace environment should be able to assess his or her own and others' communication behaviors within the context of relevant ethical perspectives. From that assessment, the communication graduate should be able to suggest clear and purposeful communication strategies to resolve or mitigate the ethical dilemmas presented in the workplace environment.

**Utilize Communication to Embrace Difference**

Communication graduates should be able to articulate the connection between communication and culture, recognize and appreciate individual and cultural similarities and differences, and respect diverse perspectives and the ways they influence communication. Graduates should be able to articulate their own cultural standpoints and how they affect communication and worldviews and to demonstrate the ability to be culturally self-aware and adapt their communication in diverse cultural contexts. For example, if a communication graduate were to volunteer as a host for an international exchange student, he or she would be particularly sensitive to the specific cultural similarities and differences that the host student may experience in the United States. As a host, the communication graduate should embrace and communicate about the value of difference in both verbal and nonverbal ways.

This sensitivity would derive from an understanding of the power of communication for intercultural competence.

**Influence Public Discourse**

Communication graduates should be able to explain the importance of communication in civic life and identify the challenges facing communities and the role of communication in resolving those challenges. Graduates should be able to frame and evaluate local, national, and global issues from a communication perspective and utilize communication to respond to such issues and advocate for courses of action. Communication graduates should be able to empower individuals to promote human rights, dignity, and freedom. For example, when asked to participate in a public meeting about new zoning requirements for the local community, a communication graduate should be able to use his or her educational background to critically assess and evaluate the message and advocacies that are shared at the public meeting and formulate clear, reasonable arguments reflective of his or her own position on the question at hand.

**Relationship between Learning Outcomes for the Major and the Introductory Course**

The essential competencies and concepts enumerated for the major echo the core that has been articulated for the introductory course, though typically assessment for the introductory course is more heavily focused on competencies than concepts. The *National Communication Association Core Competencies Task Force Report* (Engleberg et al. 2013) articulated seven core competencies for the introductory course: (a) monitor and present your self; (b) communicate ethically; (c) adapt to others; (d) practice effective listening; (e) express messages; (f) explain communication processes; and (g) create and analyze message strategies. Of course, the level of expectation for successful learning is lower for

the completion of the introductory course than it is for the completion of the major.

### Relationship between Learning Outcomes for Communication and Other Disciplines/General Education

It is noteworthy that communication is often invoked as a generalized skill that is critical to the success of general education and even to successful student learning in other disciplines. Examples of this abound. In the 1994 *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, signed into law by President Clinton (H.R. 1804), one of the eight National Education Goals (Sec. 102) is "adult literacy and lifelong learning." Among the six objectives under that goal is to increase the "ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems." The Association of American Colleges and Universities' Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative is organized around twelve essential learning outcomes that "are best developed by a contemporary liberal education." Written and oral communication is one of those learning outcomes (Rhodes 2010).

Among the five other disciplines working on the MCL project, several implicitly or explicitly include communication as part of their essential learning outcomes. Specifically, the authors of the MCL in economics paper include "ability to communicate economic ideas in diverse collaborations" as an essential learning outcome (Allgood and Bayer 2016) while the others include communication skills as relevant to the achievement of a top level competency. Lumina Foundation's Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), furthermore, provides reference points for what a graduate should know, understand, and be able to do with associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees, irrespective of the chosen major. The DQP includes five "essential areas of learning," one of which is "intellectual skills." The intellectual skills category is broken down into six subcategories, one of which is "communicative fluency." Lumina Foundation says "the crosscutting intellectual skills define proficiencies that transcend the boundaries of particular fields of

study. They overlap, interact with and enable the other major areas of learning described in the DQP" (Lumina Foundation 2014).

We know of no other discipline that is routinely invoked as a generic skill. In addition to the many important and commonly understood reasons to identify and clearly articulate learning outcomes for any discipline, there seems to be an additional imperative for the discipline of communication. Articulation of student learning outcomes is one way to present the broader picture of the communication discipline and its full range of concepts and competencies. It may be productive to have conversations on campuses and among higher education policymakers about how to align the unidimensional "communication competency" with the broader picture of the discipline. It is critical to ensure that there is an understanding of and appreciation for the theoretical basis and essential concepts of the communication discipline, as well as the skills-based dimensions of communication. In addition, the discipline's competencies are far more multidimensional than what is conveyed with a single "communication competency." With a well-articulated, publicly shared articulation of student learning outcomes in communication, we can ensure robust incorporation of communication into the general education curriculum.[7]

## Assessment of Student Learning in Communication

The discipline of communication has a long history of thoughtful consideration about what communication graduates should learn. There is a shorter, but still substantial, history of considering how to assess student learning outcomes in communication that

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[7] This section is adapted from Nancy Kidd, "Reflecting on Experience: The Heart of NCA's Learning Outcomes in Communication Project," *Spectra* 51, November. Copyright © 2015 National Communication Association. All rights reserved.

began in earnest in the 1970s and continues to this day. These efforts were initially formalized at the institutional level with the creation of the NCA Task Force on Assessment and Testing, which ultimately became the NCA Communication Assessment Division (Backlund, Detwiler, Arneson, and Danielson 2010). Since the 1970s, there have been several conferences on communication assessment, and a series of publications have emerged in part from those conferences.

Written in 1979, *Standards for Effective Oral Communication Programs* was an early call for specific assessment approaches including, for example, the use of multiple sources of data and instruments (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and Speech Communication Association 1979). A subsequent effort led to *Criteria for Evaluating Instruments and Procedures for Assessing Speaking and Listening* in 1986. Among the criteria articulated are the need to focus on demonstrated skill, avoid cultural bias, use familiar situations for test questions, use questions with a range of acceptable responses, be sensitive to time and cost, and ensure reliability and validity. The participants at a 1987 conference built upon this work and advocated for assessing speaking skills through the content of oral speaking performances and student speaking competencies. They further considered strategies for assessment of student learning for listening, and they discussed issues related to training assessors. At the 1988 Flagstaff Conference, participants called for more proactive efforts to develop standardized assessment tools because past efforts had been problematic in a variety of ways, ranging from poor reliability to poor feasibility to cultural bias (Morreale, Moore, Surges-Tatum, and Webster 2007).

Participants at the 1990 NCA-sponsored National Conference on Assessment listed twenty-five recommended criteria for assessing oral communication related to the content, instruments, procedures, frequency, and use of results. For example, assessment of oral communication should include evaluation of knowledge, skills, and attitudes; verbal and nonverbal communication; and competence

in more than one communication setting. Instruments for assessing oral communication should describe degrees of competence. There was agreement that no single assessment instrument would likely meet all of the criteria (Morreale et al. 2007).

Over the last several decades, many assessment tools have been developed, but no single tool comprehensively addresses student learning for the communication major. Most are specialized by context and focused exclusively on assessing performance of competencies. A few illustrative examples follow.

Perhaps the most attention has been paid to evaluation of oral communication skills or public speaking competence. The *Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form (CSSEF)* is a valid and reliable standardized instrument for assessing this at the higher education level. Developed in 1990 by a subcommittee of what was then called the NCA Committee on Assessment and Testing (now the Communication Assessment Division), composed of faculty members from twelve campuses, it was the first assessment of its kind. The *CSSEF* articulates eight public speaking competencies, half of which are about preparation and half of which focus on delivery. Three levels of performance are stipulated for each competency for which criteria are specified. Although the authors recognize that knowledge and understanding of concepts might be inferred by the results of the demonstrated behavior, this assessment tool is designed to measure only what one is able to *do*, and only in the context of public speaking.

A more recent effort to assess oral communication skill was undertaken by the Association of American Colleges and Universities through the LEAP initiative. Part of the initiative was the creation of sixteen Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics that align with the LEAP essential learning outcomes. Among them is oral communication,[8] which

[8] Also included is written communication, but that is addressed from a disciplinary perspective more closely aligned with English.

focuses on public presentation. Developed by a team of faculty and tested on campuses, the oral communication rubric focuses on five categories for evaluation of a public presentation, including organization, language, delivery, supporting material, and central message. A four-point evaluation scale is used to describe how each level of achievement should appear to evaluators (Rhodes 2010).

First introduced by Spitzberg and Hurt in 1987, the *Conversation Skills Rating Scale (CSRS)* is used to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication in the context of interpersonal conversation. This scale uses twenty-five behavioral and five general impression items and has demonstrated validity and reliability. There are five levels of performance, but "it is the philosophy of the assessment approach . . . that competence be considered an inherently socially anchored, evolutionary, and subjective phenomenon" (Spitzberg 2007, 4). Hence, specific performance criteria are not articulated.

An assessment tool for participation in task-oriented small group discussions has also been developed. Beebe, Barge, and McCormick's (1995) *Competent Group Communicator* is an assessment tool that rates student problem-oriented, solution-oriented, discussion-management, and relational competencies in group communication. Criteria for assessing performance of each of ten competencies are provided, with specified expectations for excellent, adequate, inadequate, or not used.

In addition to tools that are designed to assess communication skills in specific contexts, effort has also been made to assess communication apprehension and willingness to communicate. The primary tools to assess each of these were developed by McCroskey. They are written self-reports that have been tested for reliability and validity. Both tests have total scores and context-specific subscores. The *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24* focuses on assessing one's fear of communicating with a twenty-four-item test, and *Willingness to Communicate* uses a twenty-item test, twelve of which are scored (McCroskey 2005; Morreale 2007).

More limited measures of communication knowledge have also been developed. These have tended to be more localized. For example, at the University of Minnesota–Crookston, a 100-item multiple-choice WebCT test is completed as a pretest and posttest in the required speech course, and at George Mason University five questions are used across different courses to measure student understanding of communication concepts (Hay and Garland 2010).

A more integrated approach is Spitzberg's (2011) *Interactive Media Package for Assessment of Communication and Critical Thinking (IMPACCT©)*, which is an online survey of communication skills designed for self- and peer-reporting. It combines several assessments, most of which were designed for this purpose, including the Conversational Skills Rating Scale, interpersonal competence, computer-mediated communication competence, group and leadership competence, public speaking competence, and communication quality. This assumes that motivation, knowledge, and skill are relevant to an integrated view of communication competence across contexts. Spitzberg indicates that new competencies can be integrated into IMPACCT© in the future, which seems worthy of consideration as we think through ways to measure the essential learning outcomes described in this white paper.

Although Spitzberg's recent work begins to take a more comprehensive view, this brief illustrative summary of existing assessment tools reveals that we need to think more broadly and systematically about measurement to holistically assess student learning in the communication major. Building on what has been done before, the MCL Communication faculty panel recommends extending efforts to the full range of essential concepts and competencies articulated in this paper and considering these learning outcomes across multiple contexts.

That does not imply that a single instrument should be developed for assessing student learning in the major. To the contrary, such an instrument would be unlikely to lend itself well

to assessment of the communication major, given the breadth of disciplinary contexts. Instead of a single test, we recommend a pluralistic approach, with complementary measures that together serve to assess student learning in an integrated fashion. Some of the assessment tools could be standardized and others nonstandardized. The value of having some standardization is the ability to compare results over time and place. The MCL project in particular advocates for the development of psychometrically rigorous and high-quality standardized assessment measures that would be designed to move beyond multiple-choice testing of content knowledge. Rather, students would be assessed with a range of items, including open-ended questions that require students to demonstrate mastery of concepts and competencies in practice. These standardized assessments would be voluntarily adopted and used in conjunction with other indicators of student learning outcomes.

Starting with the concepts and competencies articulated earlier in this paper, a logical next step is to focus on measurement of learning outcomes. This effort would involve surveying existing assessment strategies, identifying gaps vis-à-vis the list of learning outcomes and relevant contexts, and creating new tools to fill those gaps. The goal of this work would be to develop multiple measures for each learning outcome, and multiple tools across the endeavor that can be used nationally.

For such a national effort to be successful, the same values used for the Tuning project would need to be applied. This effort, for example, would need to be faculty driven and based on an assumption that implementation would ultimately be flexible enough for adaptation to particular campus contexts. A similar process would also need to be used. For example, an iterative model that incorporates stakeholder feedback would be productive. Assessment is fundamentally about the improvement of teaching and learning, but other stakeholders such as employers and parents also have an interest in student learning in communication. Gathering and

understanding their feedback as part of the development of an assessment strategy for the major would help ensure that selected measures are easy to understand and useful for those external parties. Sensitivity to multiple audiences for the results of these assessments would allow us to serve as better advocates for the discipline while improving teaching and learning. A highly publicized, national effort in which measures and measurement tools are identified, developed, and integrated would undoubtedly enhance the assessment of student learning in the major across the country and increase the likelihood of evaluating learning across schools and over time.

There is a nascent measurement effort that is reflective of a desire to measure learning outcomes and also demonstrates one additional measurement approach that can be usefully pursued as part of this broader effort, among others. Spearheaded by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), communication faculty members are developing classroom-based assignments for assessment purposes. NILOA has begun sponsoring assignment workshops, or charrettes, involving intensive evaluation by groups of faculty of assignments designed to address specific learning outcomes. Suggestions for improving the assignments are provided to those who designed them. NILOA argues that there are several important reasons to use assignments for assessment purposes, including the fact that assessment is embedded in the classroom, faculty are the assessors, and students are more likely to take seriously assignments rather than external assessments. The idea is to develop assignments that link the central task to specific desired learning outcomes, explicitly state how results of the task should be communicated, and provide clear direction regarding the level of evidence required for an effective response. NILOA suggests using rubrics to evaluate the design (Hutchings, Jankowski, and Ewell 2014). Assignment design is just one potentially fruitful avenue for filling in some of the gaps currently facing the communication discipline with respect to assessing student learning for the major.

NCA is currently collecting examples of the use of learning outcomes on different campuses. Short of, or in conjunction with, a national assessment review, NCA can also collect measurement efforts on specific campuses to facilitate a more comprehensive accounting of the approaches currently in use. Those approaches that render positive programmatic outcomes could be offered as exemplars.

## Conclusion

"An important means of ensuring that our efforts supporting instructional improvement are moving in the right direction," noted Ruth Anne Clark, "is the careful assessment of what students are learning" (2002, 403). In support of Clark's admonition, and mindful of the communication discipline's long-standing commitment to the enhancement of teaching and learning, this white paper has sought to locate contemporary learning outcomes and assessment initiatives within the long trajectory of the discipline. From that foundation, we have articulated a set of essential concepts and competencies emergent from hours of faculty discussion and careful work in both the LOC and MCL projects. We ultimately suggest that the communication discipline must embrace the vision of multiple assessment avenues to effectively assess student learning in the communication major and in the individual communication classroom.

It is important for all members of the discipline to think about what they can do as individual faculty to facilitate support for, and development of, robust assessment efforts. It is no less important for departments to collectively consider these issues. At present, there are pressing external and internal imperatives for assessment. Accreditors, higher education administrators, legislators, and parents, for example, all want evidence of student learning in the communication discipline. Although this can be perceived

as top-down imposition, it may be more productive to think of it as providing an opportunity to reinforce the value of a communication degree. Assessing student learning in communication is, however, fundamentally for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.

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