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Communication and the Common Core: Disciplinary Opportunities

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Communication and the Common Core: Disciplinary Opportunities

Abstract

The subject of how to strengthen primary and secondary education in the United States is widely discussed in news and popular media. While an extensive range of opinions have been expressed, the common thread is that these issues are normally situated in the domain of politicians and K-12 teachers. Primary and secondary education are rarely addressed by scholars who publish in *Communication Education*.

This divide between Communication researchers in higher education and K-12 practitioners reflects generally weak connections between the two domains. As seems fitting for our changing times, that situation is also ripe for change. In tandem with the rapid evolution of higher education, primary and secondary education are undergoing a transformation of their own. One of the more significant events in recent years is the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by many states. This new set of standards has the potential to significantly impact our discipline either positively or negatively, depending on how we respond during this implementation phase. At present, it appears that few scholars are paying careful attention.

Disciplines

Communication | Education | Education Policy | Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration | Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

This document is the author's contribution to the discussion "Forum: The Common Core," published in the journal *Communication Education*.

Use the DOI provided to access the full forum featuring the viewpoints of this author as well as those of scholars and professionals Jon A. Hess, Bob Taft, Susan R. Bodary, and Steven A. Beebe.

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Common Core Contributions to Communication

In this inaugural Forum within *Communication Education* Susan Bodary concludes her essay on the connection between communication and the Common Core by stating the K-12 reform program represents “one of the most significant opportunities to boost the communication discipline in decades.” After reading former Ohio Governor Robert Taft’s explanation of the impetus for the Common Core I find it hard to disagree with Bodary’s assessment. The Common Core, as politically charged and even potentially flawed as it may be, heralds a momentous development for our discipline and the education system as a whole. That development comes replete with the opportunity that Bodary claims, but also serves as a clarion call reminding our discipline of the responsibility we hold to our students and society.

Universities are not supposed to exist separate from the communities in which they work; in point of fact, professors who teach and research there have a responsibility to share their work and knowledge with their students and the world in the hopes of helping enhance life for everyone. Unfortunately, over time many in academia receded from this engagement, resulting in the derisive “ivory tower” perception by many in the public. It also has resulted in other damage as well, such as the lack of a cohesive educational experience for students who move from K-12 into college. As Taft noted, many of our students require remedial assistance when they get to college. Rather than waste time apportioning blame, we should focus on efforts to fix the problems, and that begins with a renewed engagement between universities and the K-12 systems that provide their students.

Common Core presents just such an opportunity to renew and reinvigorate the ties that bind K-12 to higher education, specifically with regard to those of us in Communication departments. Rather than belabor the persuasive case made by Bodary or the adroit concise history provided by Gov. Taft, I will rather focus my efforts on broadening the case for why engagement with the Common Core can be an effective and productive exercise for communication faculty across the country. I will do so by using the three primary categories by which our work is typically measured: teaching, research and service. Not all universities are created equal, and so some faculty are required to attend to one of these categories more than another. That is actually a good thing, for what I am doing is providing a menu of choices for how faculty can leverage the Common Core as a topic area within any of the categories—not requiring all of us to do so within all three.

Teaching: Curriculum Collaboration

Ever since the proliferation of academic department during the twentieth century different units on college campuses have become more and more insular, seeking to protect or even expand their own “turf.” As others and I have written, the general education model of the last forty years has done little to curb this trend; however, as our accreditors have pushed in recent years, outcome-based education is coming and with it an emphasis on inter-departmental collaboration (Valenzano & Wallace, 2014; Valenzano, Wallace & Morreale, 2014; Wallace 2014). This collaboration provides several prospects for communication departments.

First, as Bodary notes, future teachers need training in communication skills, knowledge and assessment that is often unavailable to them. In fact, as our own studies have shown (Morreale, Worley & Hugenberg, 2010) the basic communication course is all too often the only exposure non-majors receive to communication and it is predominantly focused on students learning how to deliver speeches. As a discipline whose content area is now infused through K-12 education thanks to Common Core, we owe it to the Schools of Education on our campuses to either develop ourselves or co-develop advanced courses in topics such as teaching communication and communication assessment. Often, communication departments with master’s programs already have a seminar of this type for graduate students, but creating an undergraduate version today to help better prepare the teachers of tomorrow will only benefit us in the long run. It is time to break out of our silos and work with other units to create a curriculum that better serves the needs of our students and our communities.

The second prospect is more internal in nature, but emanates from what will be a group of K-12 students who come to our campuses better prepared in terms of communication skills than we have ever experienced. This has significant implications for the basic communication course, what former National Communication Association President Frank X. Dance has called “the bread and butter” of our discipline. A brief examination of the standards for speaking and listening in the Common Core combined with employer desires for a more well-rounded notion of communication skills than what is currently in the basic course, illustrates a need to reconstruct the basic course so that is more in line with what students have been trained to do in terms of communication through their Common Core experience. Not only can we assist on the front end (which I will discuss in the service section), but we must change on the back end to better reflect the level of student we will receive as a first-year student. This likely will result in basic courses that focus less on the mechanics of speech-making and more on transcendent skills that apply across contexts. By “across contexts” I mean to say communication skills that are useful when speaking in formal situations to large audiences, smaller group settings, interpersonal situations and even through digital media like Skype. Certain communication skills apply in all of those contexts, and thus should be the basis for a general education communication course.

Research: An Education Agenda

Most departments require a degree of scholarship and research of their faculty, although some require more than others. That said, the advent of Common Core presents unique opportunities for the discipline in terms of scholarly activity in addition to the teaching prospects it offers. Again, here I will note two that may, and perhaps should, be of interest to communication faculty.

The scholarship of teaching and learning is one of the most practical and impactful areas of research to conduct. The results can be seen in classrooms across the country, impacting far more people in positive ways than most research in our discipline—and it also helps us become better teachers of our students. Now that communication skills are set to be integrated into the K-12 curriculum there is no group in better position to assess the development of communication skills on a longitudinal basis than communication professionals. By engaging local K-12 schools communication researchers can examine how Common Core impacts student development of speaking and listening skills and provide useful feedback to improve the curriculum based on their findings. Other projects are possible as well, and it bears noting that such research is likely to find significant opportunities for grant funding because the federal and state governments are heavily invested in making Common Core work. In the end, this is necessary work—work that heretofore has neither been possible in this degree, nor completed—and we are well-positioned to undertake it.

A second opportunity is tied to the research of student skills as related to Common Core. As a discipline we are frightfully short on strong scholarship in the intersection of teaching, learning and communication. Yes, we have the pages of *Communication Education*, *Communication Teacher*, and the *Basic Communication Course Annual* in which to publish such work, but as Steve Beebe notes in his essay within this Forum section, there exists a substantial need to more fully invest the discipline in this work. Additionally, this research has tremendous promise for exportation to other disciplines as they all use communication methods to impart their content areas, and would see a need for using this type of scholarship in their own work as teachers. We also lack enough doctoral programs focused on, or at least engaged in, this type of work. With Common Core comes an untapped mine of opportunity for this work which would benefit greatly from more communication faculty trained in its exploration.

Service: Sharing Our Expertise

Often service for faculty entails sitting on committees or reviewing essays for conferences or journals. This work is valuable to be sure, however Common Core presents the discipline with a rare opportunity to serve our colleagues, students and communities in a far more potent way than the typical service enterprises with which we engage. Here are a few examples.

In addition to the fact undergraduate education majors need training in communication skills so they can teach their students appropriately, there are still the thousands of teachers already on the job who need such training as well in order to make Common Core work. Communication faculty are uniquely qualified to work with their local K-12 educators to develop summer classes, institutes or continuing education courses on communication skills, principles and assessment practices for K-12 instructors already on the job. This work would be both personally rewarding and of huge benefit to teachers and students. It also would help re-engage the communities in which our universities and colleges reside in ways that add value.

Other ways to serve that Common Core creates involve working with colleagues and state boards on curricular revisions that help integrate communication across the curriculum at our own institutions in ways that reflect the knowledge of the discipline and not the will of politicians or other departments. By working with K-12 to impact the speaking and listening instruction of students who will eventually reach our classrooms, we create stronger arguments for directing the communication elements of the curriculum at our own institutions. In short, we help strengthen and defend our discipline from those who might believe “anyone can do communication.”

Conclusion: The Common Core Communication Opportunity

The Common Core is rife with promise for the communication discipline, its teachers and its scholars. As exciting as this is, the brief examples of engagement and scholarship I discussed in this essay are no small feat and will require effort and commitment by everyone involved. We cannot, however, miss the chance Common Core provides us and our students because, as Thomas Edison once quipped, “it comes dressed in overalls and looks like hard work.” We must roll up our sleeves, educate ourselves on the Common Core and help other stakeholders in its success understand how we, as communication professionals, are uniquely qualified and willing to assist in ensuring the speaking and listening standards, at least, are implemented in a way that reflects the collective knowledge of the communication discipline. In this way we will share our work and knowledge in a way that truly enhances the education of those in our communities.

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