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## Synthesizing the First 15 Years of the Basic Communication Course Annual: What Research Tells Us about Effective Pedagogy

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## **Synthesizing the First 15 Years of the *Basic Communication Course Annual*: What Research Tells Us about Effective Pedagogy**

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The first volume of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* was published in 1989. This initial issue of the journal contained several seminal essays including Gray's examination of the history of the basic course in communication. Based upon a review of relevant basic course literature, Gray (1989) concluded that many questions about what communication educators are doing in the course and why they are doing it remain unanswered. In the same volume, Seiler and McGukin (1989) argued that a careful review of extant basic course literature "reveals that instructors and directors do not have sufficient empirical support to design the course" (p. 35). The same scholars went on to exclaim that, "we do not know what is the most effective approach to organizing and teaching the basic course" (p. 35). Indeed, such concerns were central to the development of the *Annual* as communication educators searched to carve out a space to discuss the pedagogy of the course.

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After more than 15 years in publication, the *Annual* has presented those interested in the basic course with numerous essays on basic course pedagogy. However, questions still remain about the empirical support for the ways in which we teach the basic course. In a recent literature review, Clark and Jones (2001) argued that “the quantity of actual research...is surprisingly limited...most of what has been written is opinion pieces and how-to articles” (p. 110). In fact, based upon national reviews of basic course pedagogy (see Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999), the way the basic course is taught today looks very similar to the way it was taught at the inception of the *Annual*. For example, although the discipline has witnessed growth in the format for the basic course (e.g., interpersonal, public speaking, hybrid, etc.), the “beginning public speaking course has been and remains the most offered, the most taken, and the most popular basic course in communication” (Hugenberg, 1996, p. 11). Similarly, as a discipline, we still rely on similar methods of training instructors of the basic course, assessing student outcomes, and delivering content (Morreale et al., 1999).

Clearly, the popularity of the basic course in communication continues to grow, further entrenching it as a staple of the communication discipline. As Cutspec, McPherson, and Spiro (1999) note, in the last 20 years, more and more colleges and universities, in the United States, have been charged with the daunting task of establishing a basic course in communication as a central feature of general education curriculum.

Given the popularity of the course and increasing pressures on basic course directors to document the effectiveness of the course, a more careful review of the

research on basic course pedagogy is warranted. Initially, those interested in the basic course should examine the scholarship produced about the basic course periodically by scrutinizing the research. This type of review should allow scholars to reflect on what the research tells us about what works in the basic course, what does not work, and what still needs to be investigated. In short, we need to review what evidence is available regarding teaching strategies and design of the basic course to ensure that we are teaching the course effectively, and to modify pedagogy where necessary. Additionally, a careful review of the extant literature is an appropriate way to define and clarify an area of study, and to develop areas for future scholarship. As noted by Staton-Spicer and Wulff (1984), “it is reasonable to state *a priori* what a given area of research ought to do, or ought to investigate, but an actual assessment of the research must be made *a posteriori*” (p. 377).

This type of review has been conducted in instructional communication (Staton-Spicer & Wulff, 1984), and Goulden (2002) has examined the research regarding public speaking pedagogy; however, scholars have not focused holistically on the research produced in the *Basic Communication Course Annual*. A closer look at the research published in this journal is critical given that, as editor Scott Titsworth noted in the 2004 edition, “the *Annual* is the only national communication journal devoted to research and scholarship pertaining to the basic communication course” (p. iv).

## PROCEDURES

For our review, we surveyed research published in the *Basic Communication Course Annual*. Although a number of other scholarly journals publish research related to the basic course, we choose to focus exclusively on the *Annual* as it is the only national journal dedicated to research in the basic course. To complete our review, we engaged in a multi-step process similar to that advocated by Staton-Spicer and Wulff (1984). This multi-step process for synthesizing and categorizing extant research involves the following: a) an examination of journals in order to select relevant research, b) development of consistent coding categories for the research, c) categorization of the research according to the coding categories, and d) a *post hoc* refinement of the categories. As Staton-Spicer and Wulff (1984) have noted, this method of synthesizing research is valuable in that it “allows for an examination of content and research development within an area and also enables scholars to chart the emerging trends and needed directions for research” (p. 376).

Our review began by selecting empirical research published in the *Annual* including quantitative, qualitative and critical works. Given our interest in exploring the empirical support for basic course pedagogy, opinion pieces and how-to articles were excluded from this review. In order to divide the work and develop initial coding categories, two of the authors collected four years (the first and last two years) of studies published in the *Annual*. All authors then met to make final decisions for inclusion and to establish the final coding categories for

the research. Using our criterion for inclusion (i.e., published research in the *Annual*) and the emergent coding categories as guidelines, all of the authors examined all of the published articles from each year (1989-2004) of the *Annual*, selecting and categorizing relevant studies. When differences regarding the placement of research into a category occurred, all authors discussed the categories and came to agreement. The final step was to collapse and refine the categories in the most parsimonious and meaningful way. The result of this procedure was a collection of 61 articles classified into five categories.

## CATEGORIZATION AND SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH

### *Teaching Strategies*

Three major groups of research emerged to form the category of teaching strategies: studies exploring a) tools to increase the effectiveness of the basic course, b) strategies to reduce the effects of communication apprehension (CA), and c) strategies to incorporate feedback in basic course instruction. In addition, our review revealed a miscellaneous category.

*Tools to increase the effectiveness of the basic course.* Fourteen studies focused on strategies designed to make the basic course more effective. The first set of articles examined pedagogical strategies for improving students' public speaking skills. For example, Vicker (1992) posited that watching role model speeches (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) would increase students' abilities to prepare and present a classroom speech. This hypothesis was not supported, as independent raters observed

no statistically significant differences in the quality of one group (those who viewed the speeches) over the other (those who did not view the speeches).

Gring and Littlejohn (2000) explored the pedagogical benefits to students of a repeated speech assignment. In this study, students were assigned to present a speech twice, with the primary focus of evaluation on the second speech. The authors found that students overwhelmingly raised their speech grades with the second performance, and the majority of students felt the repeated speech assignment was beneficial.

Cronin (1994) examined the use of interactive video-disc instruction (IVI) for teaching organizational techniques in public speaking. Cronin (1994) found that students receiving IVI in constructing speaking outlines or developing key ideas achieved significantly higher recall and application test scores than did students in the control group.

Brann-Barrett and Rolls (2004) studied the benefits for students as a result of their participation as peer lab facilitators. These authors were able to determine that, based upon focus group data, peer facilitators experienced self-development in terms of their self-esteem, confidence, and respect for themselves and others, improved public speaking skills and better interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and external rewards in that they felt better prepared for post baccalaureate programs and to compete for employment.

The final two studies focusing on strategies to improve students' public speaking skills explored the use of a speech laboratory to extend instruction offered in the classroom. Initially, Hunt and Simonds (2002) found that students who utilize a speech laboratory earn

higher grades than students who do not utilize a speech laboratory, that students who utilize a speech laboratory indicate the speech laboratory provided a useful experience, and that if available, most instructors will require students to visit the speech laboratory as part of their basic communication course. Similarly, Jones, Hunt, Simonds, Comadena and Baldwin (2004) conducted several in-depth interviews with students and found that students find speech laboratories useful in the development of public speaking skills and the management of public speaking anxiety.

Another set of articles in this category examined programs to improve rater training. Goulden (1990) examined analytic and holistic methods of rater training. Analytic training involves the recording of separate scores for characteristics of a speech and those scores are summed to give the total. Holistic training involves giving a grade for the entire speech. Fifteen raters were trained to use both the analytic and holistic rating procedures. According to Goulden (1990), these methods produced acceptable levels of consistency and accuracy, resulting in more representative scores for speeches. In a similar vein, Turman and Barton (2003) determined that trained instructor assistants who utilize an evaluation criterion give consistent grades to students, regardless of speaking order. In a separate study, Turman and Barton (2004) found that speaker order may influence rater scoring, especially if raters are evaluating a large number of speeches of varying quality at one time.

Communication researchers have also examined practices for evaluating teaching assistants (TAs). Burekel-Rothfuss (1999) interviewed 46 basic course directors from a variety of academic disciplines in order to

determine how basic course directors evaluated TAs. The author investigated the frequency of basic course director TA evaluations, the sources of data for evaluations, and the terms directors use to evaluate their TAs. Burekel-Rothfuss (1999) discovered that few directors directly observe TA's each semester, and most rely on occasional observations, student opinion survey forms, and student complaints/complements to evaluate TA teaching quality. Second, most directors indicated that they consider student opinion survey responses, student complaints/complements, and direct observations as teaching evaluations, with the majority of directors indicating they most frequently rely on student survey responses to evaluate TA's. Finally, most basic course directors were found to evaluate TAs using a simple bipolar set of semantic differentials (e.g., good/bad, organized/disorganized, etc.).

Beyond the context of the beginning public speaking course, scholars have examined teaching strategies for the introductory interpersonal course. Morreale, Hackman, and Neer (1998) investigated the use of interactive laboratories to foster self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and communication competence within a basic interpersonal communication course. They discovered that, in conjunction with entrance and exit interviews, the use of an interactive laboratory improved students' perceived levels of communication self-esteem, willingness to communicate and behavioral communication competence, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity.

The last set of articles in this category represented the critical paradigm of scholarship. For example, Prividera (2004) utilized a liberal feminist perspective to explore issues related to the implementation of criti-

cal discussions of gender in the basic course. Warren (2003) applied critical performative pedagogy to examine at-risk students in the basic communication course. Finally, Treinen and Warren (2001) used critical scholarship to develop a rationale for antiracist pedagogy for the basic course.

*Strategies to reduce CA.* Five studies explored techniques instructors can use to help students reduce the effects of CA. In one study, Neer and Kircher (1991) found that students report lower anxiety levels when the basic course is structured for less evaluation, smaller audience sizes, and difficulty and ambiguity reduction. The authors also found that high CA respondents reported higher levels of CA than their low CA counterparts when each of the aforementioned conditions were increased (e.g., larger audiences, increased evaluation, and higher levels of difficulty and ambiguity).

Newburger and Hemphill (1992) explored the use of video modeling techniques for addressing students' CA. Specifically, 225 participants were divided into four conditions with either "no video modeling," "successful video modeling," "unsuccessful video modeling," or "both." The "no video" and the "both" conditions were significantly different. The results were mixed for using videos to reduce CA. Dwyer (1995) found that designated sections of the basic course for high CA students can offer an effective way to help students cope with CA. Sellnow and Golish (2000) discovered no difference in the levels of anxiety reported by males and females regarding a self-disclosure speech, although males and females did vary significantly in both topic selection and evidence usage. Finally, Dwyer, Carlson, and Kahre

(2002) discovered that a lab-supported public speaking course was an effective strategy for managing CA and helping students earn higher grades on speeches delivered in the classroom.

*Feedback in the basic course.* There were five studies exploring the use of feedback on assignments in the basic course. The first two studies in this category examined the use of technology to facilitate feedback. Russell (1993) found that students who received computer-generated feedback improved their vocal quality skills, gesturing, and organization. In addition, students who received feedback before viewing their speech on video improved in the areas of style, organization, and speech development. Similarly, Sims (2003) found that students appreciate the opportunity to view their streamed speeches on the Internet as it offers a convenient and effective medium for feedback.

In an examination of the type of feedback provided by instructors, Jenson and Lamoureaux (1997) found that instructors typically provide more positive comments than negative comments in their written evaluation of student speeches. Interestingly, the authors note that students typically prefer to receive more negative comments so they can improve for the next speech. Furthermore, the authors discovered that instructors typically provide more comments concerning the content of the speech than the delivery of the speech (again, they argue that students prefer more comments about delivery).

In a similar study, Reynolds, Hunt, Simonds, and Cutbirth (2004) investigated written performance feedback, by examining it through the lens of politeness theory. In two separate studies, the authors found that in-

structors use an overabundance of positive politeness messages and virtually no negative politeness messages. Students who received a higher grade were more likely to receive fewer face threats and more positive politeness messages than those students' who received a lower grade. The results also suggest that instructors are more willing to threaten a students' negative face than positive face. Interestingly, the results also indicated that students desire a balance between their grade and the number of positive politeness comments they receive as well as more comments that threaten their face.

Although students have indicated a need for constructive comments about their work, basic course researchers have found that they also desire praise. Titsworth (2000) found that praise has several positive implications for the classroom environment. Initially, students rate instructors who praise performance on a test more motivating and likable than instructors who fail to praise performance. In addition, students who hear an instructor praise other students attribute more positive characteristics to the instructor than students who are not exposed to praise.

*Miscellaneous research on teaching strategies.* Our review revealed one study that failed to fit any of the previously mentioned categories. Heisler, Bissett, and Buerkel-Rothfuss (2000) explored the effects of a basic course on students' communication preferences. The authors of this study contend that basic communication courses emphasize primarily "female" communication behaviors, specifically with regard to listening, empathy, self-disclosure, and relational closeness. The authors discovered, after completing a basic communi-

cation course, many males still expressed a preference for traditionally male communication behaviors, which is possibly explained by differing preferences reported by males and females with regard to intimacy behaviors.

The vast majority of the articles in the teaching strategies category explore specific pedagogical tools designed to increase the overall effectiveness of basic course instruction. However, extant scholarship has also examined important strategies to reduce students' CA as well as techniques for providing feedback to students.

### ***Teacher and Student Characteristics***

Three groups of studies emerged that focus on teacher and student characteristics and the resulting implications for instruction in the basic course: a) studies focusing on specific teacher characteristics, b) studies focusing on specific student characteristics, and c) studies focusing on the match or mismatch of teacher and student characteristics.

*Teacher characteristics.* There were four studies related to teacher characteristics. Gray, Murray, and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1993) found that TAs place a great deal of importance on the perceived credibility and competence of their basic course directors. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Fink (1993) explored students' perceptions of the credibility of TAs and tenure-track faculty, and discovered that students with a higher overall GPA preferred tenure-track faculty to TAs (professionalism played a large role in students' perceptions of TAs). In a similar study of students' perceptions of TAs, Willer (1993)

found that most TAs are perceived positively on interpersonal and task dimensions by their students.

Anderson and Jensen (2002) sought to determine if instructors' level of experience affects the overall grades students earn on a speech. This experiment utilized evaluators with low, medium, and high levels of experience evaluating speeches that met "A" and "C" criteria. Anderson and Jensen (2002) found that inexperienced raters gave significantly higher grades, despite the level of the speech. Additionally, experienced evaluators were found to offer more comments than moderate or inexperienced evaluators. The researchers also discovered evaluators with medium and high levels of experience had no preference for evaluation forms with directions, but evaluators with low levels of experience preferred evaluation forms with specific directions.

*Student characteristics.* We identified nine studies that focused on specific student characteristics. Two of the studies examined the instructional implications of students' learning styles. Bourhis and Berquist (1990) found that CA is correlated with a number of different learning styles. Lubbers and Seiler (1998) found that learning style has little effect on academic achievement, and that basic course instructors should not feel compelled to alter their teaching style to match multiple learning styles.

Two of the studies in this category focused on student culture and the basic course. Yook and Seiler (1990) found that Asian students are particularly anxious about the basic course, because of their accent and a general lack of understanding regarding assignment parameters. Through interviews and focus groups, Yook (1997) identified three "handicaps" Malaysian students

identified in a basic communication course: the language barrier, cultural differences with regard to speaking volume and gestures, and a lack of previous opportunities to express themselves orally.

Other studies in this category focused on the role of students' CA in the basic course. Lubbers and Gorcyca (1992) found that GPA, grade in school, and public CA were correlated with students' final grades in the course. Dwyer and Fus (1999) explored relationships between CA, self-efficacy (S-E), and grades in the basic communication course. The authors determined that there is a significant inverse relationship between both trait CA and CA contexts and S-E throughout the semester. In addition, the authors found that while high CA typically has a negative effect on final grades, high S-E had the opposite effect. Dwyer, Carlson, and Dalbey (2003) compared basic communication course students' levels of public speaking experience to their level of CA, finding that students who reported experience with public speaking in high school also reported lower initial levels of CA.

Two studies in this category investigated students' motivation to succeed in the basic course. Initially, Dawson and Yoder (1991) investigated the factors that comprise a person's "motivation construct." Participants were given the PRCA-24, WTC (Willingness to Communicate), and ICM (Interpersonal Communication Motives). Factor analyses were run on the data and four factors were identified. The first factor was "negative feedback," second, "public speaking anxiety," third, "positive learning outcomes" and fourth, "positive audience feedback." In another study exploring motivation, Foster, Smilwitz, Foster, and Phelps (1990) examined

how grades on speeches affect motivation on future speeches. The authors argue that higher grades are not more motivating for students and often, student perceptions of grades run counter to instructor intentions.

*Teacher and student characteristics.* The studies in this category explored the interaction of teacher and student characteristics in the basic course. Smilowitz and Phelps (1989) had students self-report their learning style and social style, and teachers report their social style. The responses were correlated with course grade and course evaluation. Some significant correlations were found, but ultimately, minimal support for teacher/student “aliveness” of style was found. Wallace and Morlan (1989) measured student and instructor involvement in the course and attempted to find connections between involvement and other variables such as teacher evaluation, course evaluation, and teacher credibility. Few significant differences were found, and the authors concluded that “more research into style or personality characteristics of both students and instructors is needed” (p. 147).

Utilizing an ethnomethodological approach, Fassett (2003) sought to determine what students felt constituted academic success and failure, in an effort to determine what students their instructors perceive to be at-risk for educational failure. We placed Fassett’s (2003) study in this category because she explored the ways in which students’ and GTAs’ espousal of educational rituals intersect to create and sustain educational risk.

Studies in the teacher and student characteristics category examine important variables in the teaching-learning process. Initially, it is clear that students pay a

great deal of attention to perceptions of teacher characteristics like credibility and level of experience. In addition, several student characteristics, such as learning style, culture, and motivation to succeed, have been explored in the context of the basic communication course. Finally, scholars have examined the interaction of teacher and student characteristics to explore how they mutually influence each other in the classroom.

### ***Status of the Basic Course***

Two groups of studies emerged that focused on the status of instruction in the basic communication course: a) studies exploring current practices in the basic course, and b) empirical examinations of different formats for the course.

*Current practice in the basic course.* Two of the studies in this category represent an ongoing line of research concerning the basic communication course. According to Morreale et al. (1999), this project began in 1968 with a study conducted by members of the Undergraduate Speech Instruction Interest Group of the Speech Association of America. Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990) note how rapidly enrollment in the basic course is proliferating, causing teachers to work with more students. They also claim that most courses are taught by junior faculty and graduate students, and are performance based. Similarly, Morreale et al. (1999) surveyed the responses from 292 basic course directors in an effort to determine the status of the basic communication course on a national level. The report contains detailed information about basic course pedagogy, including balance of theory and performance within the

basic course, delivery systems of information, number and type of performance assignment evaluations, student exemptions from basic communication courses, topics presented in the basic communication course, textbooks used, the use of interactive media, and innovations individual schools have incorporated into the basic communication course. The study also examined enrollment descriptions of basic communication courses and administration concerns of basic course directors. Results indicate that the basic communication course is thriving nationally, with concerns of basic course directors primarily focused on faculty burnout, consistency of instruction across multiple sections of the basic communication course, optimal class size, and instructional staffing.

In a similar survey of current practices in the basic course, Trank and Lewis (1991) administered an overview survey of the basic course and solicited responses from 421 institutions. This survey serves as a type of capstone for the previous descriptions of the different types of basic courses.

Troester and McGukin (1993) employed a 48-item survey designed to better understand the status of interpersonally-based communication courses across the nation. The overall conclusion was that interpersonal courses are alive and well, are generally taken by first year students, and are taught by full-time faculty members. The classes are generally theory-oriented and use one of five popular texts.

The last study in this category examined the basic course in organizational communication. Treadwell and Applbaum (1995) mailed surveys to 720 colleges and universities in North America, in order to examine the

position of the basic organizational communication course. The study described school and department information, faculty information, course information, textbooks and instructional methods. Some interesting findings include that the basic course in organizational communication is more likely to be found at larger schools and at 68% of institutions overall. Also, the authors report significant dissatisfaction/neutrality with the textbooks available for the basic course in organizational communication.

*Basic course format.* The research in this category is concerned with different formats for the basic communication course. For example, Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Thomas (1989) used a quantitative pre/post test survey method to measure the differences of students who received PSI (Personalized System of Instruction) versus self-contained formats of instruction on a number of variables including communication apprehension (PRCA), perceived influence of the course (PICA), perceived communication abilities (SPCA), and feelings of inadequacy. The authors conclude that PSI-based instruction is generally more effective.

Hunt, Ekachai, Garard, and Rust (2001) sought to determine if university and community college students differed with regard to perceived usefulness and relevance of communication skills taught in basic public speaking courses and basic interpersonal courses. The results of their research revealed that both university and community college students reported high levels of both usefulness and relevance of communication skills taught in both formats. Importantly, perceived relevance of skills increased as the semester progressed. Furthermore, students enrolled in a basic interpersonal

course report a higher level of relevance than students enrolled in a basic public speaking course, indicating that students may perceive interpersonal skills to be more important than public speaking skills.

In the final study in this category, Cox and Todd (2001) examined differences in student motivation, instructor credibility, verbal immediacy, and nonverbal immediacy in self-contained and mass-lecture classes. The authors found that while all variables were positively correlated in both class formats, verbal immediacy, student motivation, and instructor credibility were statistically higher in self-contained classes, indicating that instructor immediacy is higher in smaller classes.

Studies in the status of the basic course category represent attempts by communication researchers to better understand current practices in the basic course and formats for delivering course content.

### ***Analyses of Texts for the Basic Course***

Our review revealed six studies exploring topics covered in texts and one study regarding students' perceptions of basic course texts.

*Topics covered in texts.* Initially, Hess and Pearson (1992) employed content analysis to determine the most popular topics in 12 of the most used basic course texts. The authors formed a list of popular topics and a "supracategories" list. The top five most popular topics were persuasive speaking, language, informative speaking, audience, and getting information. The "supracategories" included speech preparation, taxonomy of public speaking, activities and elements, speech delivery, and message theory.

Whitecap (1992) content analyzed the number of pages and types of issues covered regarding introductions in 11 textbooks. The author found that all books cover introductions, but vary widely in their content. In a similar study, Greenberg (1989) conducted a rhetorical analysis of basic communication course materials (texts, in-house publications, etc.) to examine the ethics and morals that are taught in basic course classes.

Isserlis (1992) surveyed 27 texts regarding humor in the basic public speaking course. The study identified the following categories of information regarding how humor is treated in basic course texts: theories of humor, rationale for humor, guidelines, sources, use of humor to gain attention, techniques, injunctions, who should use humor, self-deprecating humor, delivery, and humorous speaking. Three texts contained no references to humor.

Janusik and Wolvin (2002) analyzed the treatment of listening in the 17 most widely used basic communication course textbooks. Although the authors did find that the majority of texts devoted at least one chapter to listening, they concluded that the treatment was largely superficial, atheoretical, and lacked grounding in substantive listening scholarship.

Hugenberg and Moyer's (1998) study sought to determine if what is being taught in basic communication courses (introductory public speaking courses) is supported by scholarly research. Specifically regarding the areas of persuasive speaking, informative speaking, and audience analysis and adaptation, Hugenberg and Moyer discovered many basic course textbooks feature unsupported claims. The authors advanced the following conclusions: these unsupported claims should be

presented as unsupported, rather than implied as fact; basic communication texts should offer proven strategies to improve as communicators, rather than traditional, often unsupported advice; communication educators are setting a bad precedent by allowing unsupported claims in a textbook, when they would likely not allow a student to present an unsupported claim in a speech or written assignment; the lack of support for many of these claims illustrates a research gap for communication scholars; and many of these claims would not be difficult to prove or disprove.

*Student perceptions of texts.* Yoder and Davilla's (1997) study explored student and instructor impressions and preferences for textbooks. While there are a few points on which students and instructors agree, many basic course students and instructors disagree about the utility of a variety of factors regarding basic communication course textbooks, including chapter exercises, chapter objectives, chapter outlines, indices and case studies. As a result, the authors suggest that student editions of basic course textbooks either eliminate pedagogical tools or provide better contexts for these tools to enable students to take advantage of them. Further, the study revealed that many students in basic communication courses perceive the textbooks as easy to read, enjoyable, and less theoretical than other introductory textbooks.

The research contained in this category provides an excellent overview of the key topics covered (or not covered) in current basic course texts including ethics, humor, and listening. Research in the category also examines the lack of a contemporary theoretical and empirical base for many of the claims advanced in popular

basic course texts. Finally, scholars explore students' perceptions of the utility of introductory communication texts.

### ***Assessment of the Basic Course***

There were five studies that dealt explicitly with assessing student outcomes in the basic course. For example, Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) surveyed current and former students and instructors of the basic course regarding their attitudes toward writing skills, speech communication skills, speech delivery styles, desired emphasis in the basic course, and preferences for instruction. The authors determined that the basic course (at the University of Iowa) met the communication needs of the students and was important to successful academic and professional performance. In a similar vein, Zabava-Ford and Wolvin (1992) administered a pretest/posttest design in a hybrid basic course. The results indicate that the basic course had a positive impact on students' perception of their communication skills and their comfort in communicating.

Morreale, Hackman, and Neer (1995) examined the uses of assessment data in the basic course and explored the use of assessment tools to respond to assessment challenges and provide an example of the results that can be generated using these tools. A total of 128 students responded to a survey that included the PRCA, a behavioral competence component and a self-esteem component. The authors conclude that the results of the present study suggest that students demonstrated positive changes in relation to behavioral and affective domains.

Huffman, Carson, and Simonds (2000) provide a comprehensive definition of critical thinking as applicable to a basic communication course, and advance a method for assessing critical thinking. Using two written assignments, a communication artifact and end-of-term synthesis paper, this study found that students utilize both manifest and latent critical thinking skills in a basic communication course. The authors imply that these assignments could be used to assess the levels of critical thinking used in any basic communication course.

Cutspec et al. (1999) describe the ways they use triangulated results, derived from their Oral Communication Assessment Program, to make curricular decisions for students. Based on student self-reports of CA, parent reports and observations of orientation leaders, students are placed into one of five communication courses, which are intended to be more specialized in order to meet individual student needs.

Research in the assessment category highlights the potential positive impact of the basic course on key student outcomes. In particular, surveys of basic course alumni indicate that they learned communication skills that benefit them substantially in their careers. Similarly, researchers have demonstrated that basic course directors can use pretest/posttest designs and triangulation to demonstrate positive change in students. In fact, the research provides evidence for the claim that the basic course positively influences change in behavioral and affective domains, as well as critical thinking.

## DISCUSSION

As a starting point, it is important to recognize that what, why, and how we teach are serious questions that demand the full engagement of communication educators. This review and categorization of basic course literature is an important step in the direction of addressing these questions. We began this review by referencing calls made over 15 years ago by scholars like Gray (1989), and Seiler and McGukin (1989) who posited that, at that time, basic course directors had very little empirical evidence upon which to make important decisions about the design and pedagogy of the basic course. Indeed, these concerns were largely responsible for the creation of the *Basic Communication Course Annual*.

On a positive note, our review reveals that a number of scholars are producing research that addresses teaching strategies employed in the basic course. This research examines such topics as specific tools to increase the effectiveness of basic course pedagogy, strategies to reduce student CA, as well as the effective use of teacher feedback. In addition, researchers have populated the *Annual* with articles exploring critical teacher and student characteristics related to learning (e.g., learning styles, perceived instructor credibility, instructor involvement). Additionally, members of the discipline have turned their attention to the status of the basic course, examining such critical issues as current practices in the course and exploring different formats for delivering instruction. Communication researchers have also scrutinized texts used in the basic course, in-

cluding examinations of topics covered (or excluded) in current texts and students' perceptions of introductory communication texts. Finally, researchers have examined assessment issues related to basic course instruction focusing on the impact of the course on key student outcomes.

Scholars have obviously utilized the *Annual* as a mechanism for communicating effective basic course pedagogy. In this sense, basic course researchers have taken great strides in developing pedagogical content knowledge by evaluating the intersection of knowledge of the content of communication with pedagogical strategies that most effectively help students become better communicators (see Book, 1989). Although the research published in *Annual* has done much to answer open questions about the basic course, additional work remains.

Clearly, the basic communication course is a vital and increasingly important component of communication department curriculum and general education requirements of colleges and universities. Unfortunately, our review of the research reveals that many studies of basic course pedagogy have typically proceeded in the fashion of one-shot studies, and have failed to develop systematic research programs. In other words, much of the research that has been published in the *Annual* merely provides a brief snapshot of life inside the basic course, failing to address systematically a single issue in depth. Friedrich (2002) echoed this concern when he stated that "our contributions have been much more systematic and thorough when focusing on the communication dimensions of teaching in general (instructional communication) than they have been in addressing the

issues of teaching communication specifically (communication education)” (p. 373).

The *Annual* is the ideal platform for facilitating and discussing a new wave of pedagogical research that is desperately needed. Too often, however, the empirical studies written under the guise of basic course research have, while being important and insightful, actually been focused on instructional communication concerns, rather than issues related directly to basic course instruction. Future issues of the *Annual* should encourage and foster empirical studies that are designed to improve the basic course itself, and not simply accept studies that use data collected from students enrolled in the basic course. In other words, scholars should be encouraged to develop research agendas that allow for the further development of pedagogy unique to the basic course. In order to carve out a niche within the general education program of institutions of higher learning, and to create pedagogy of our own, basic course researchers must move away from discussions of the business of the basic course and develop a vision for the future.

### ***Lines of Future Research***

Our review highlights several potentially profitable lines of research for the future. First, pedagogical research in the basic course should examine the big picture. The texts and curriculum for the basic course would benefit from the contributions of a critical perspective. Additional research from the critical perspective would be beneficial in identifying areas for change in current pedagogy and in developing strategies for

teaching students about the relationship between communication and power. As Sprague (1993) has argued, “a student who has effectively learned about communication and learned how to communicate will know how communication creates and serves existing power arrangements, how to resist certain forms of power, how to get power, how to use it responsibly, and how to give it away or share it by empowering others” (p. 118). Textbooks and curriculum must change with the times. A growing gap exists between the real world skills that students must acquire in order to communicate effectively in an increasingly diverse, technological, and interactive marketplace, and the traditional, linear methods of teaching public speaking.

In addition, future studies should examine and analyze the fit between basic course curricula and students’ diverse learning needs. For example, scholars might examine how students’ cognitive style match or mismatch the instructional methods in the basic course. Similarly, the inclusion of students with learning disabilities uniquely impacts the basic course. Issues related to cultural diversity, such as how to best teach the basic course to students who speak English as a second language, also warrant further attention. The needs and concerns of these students is rarely addressed in extant literature. Scholars like Fassett (2003) have articulated a clear need for communication educators generally, and basic course directors specifically, to start paying more attention to the ways in which current pedagogy may place particular student populations at-risk for educational failure in the classroom.

Another area worthy of investigation relates to the incorporation of learning communities and the creation

of career tracks for students enrolled in the basic course. Often, students enrolled in learning communities live in the same residence halls, take many classes together, and are engaged in extracurricular orientation programs with faculty and other students (Jaffee, 2004). Learning community programs are designed to create coherence in the curriculum, help students transition from high school to college, encourage intellectual interaction with faculty, and facilitate student retention (Howser, 1998; Matthews & Smith, 1996). These pedagogical tools offer the opportunity to specialize instruction and better target the vocational needs and interests of our students by more closely linking students' career interests and general education curricula. Certainly, no one curriculum is best for all students enrolled in the basic course.

### ***Logistical and Administrative Issues***

Several other logistical and administrative issues warrant future research in the basic course. First, at the core of basic course pedagogy is the desire to facilitate student participation in the classroom. A variety of strategies are employed by basic course instructors to encourage student participation, including the practice of grading participation. Future research should examine the necessity and effectiveness of these instructional tactics. Given extant research on CA and the very public nature of basic course units, further attention should be devoted to participation strategies. Second, methods of discouraging, checking, and enforcing against plagiarism of student speeches in the basic course are crucial. Third, the delivery mechanisms for

the basic course create staffing concerns, which often result in the use of GTAs and international GTAs to fill numerous sections. Training programs aimed at preparing these instructors for what often is their first teaching experience vary greatly from institution to institution. If the basic course is a truly vital cog in the education of college students, then students deserve to receive the best instruction possible. While GTAs are quite capable of providing that instruction, they also deserve the best preparation that can be afforded them. Before stepping foot inside the classroom, GTAs should receive training in classroom management and communication education principles, such as immediacy. Fourth, as the basic course assumes greater responsibility for teaching students critical thinking skills, more research in critical thinking instruction and assessment becomes vital. If the basic course is charged with the responsibility to cultivate critical thinking, as a part of a university's general education program, then researchers must devote more attention to the methods in which this instruction and assessment can best be addressed. Fifth, issues of speech evaluation should be examined. The development of effective, standardized grading rubrics for presentations and speeches should be explored. For example, rater fatigue is one specific area related to speech evaluation that has not been adequately studied. Sixth, the basic course typically covers a wide range of instructional units, each of which could easily be expanded if time permitted. However, due to the unique nature of the basic course, instructors are often faced with the task of trying to squeeze large amounts of materials into a relatively short amount of time. Research addressing the most effective ways to manage these

time concerns through prioritizing and sequencing materials properly is warranted. Seventh, the educational benefits of speech labs, and their impact on students' development of presentation skills should be more closely examined. Eighth, as Janusik and Wolvin (2002) have noted, listening must become a point of emphasis in the basic course. Authors of introductory texts should devote more attention to this topic and researchers should explore the best teaching methods for improving students' listening skills.

### ***Alignment of Curriculum***

A final area of concern for future research should center on the alignment of basic course curriculum. First, basic course directors often find themselves fending off or trying to redirect political pressures. As assessment concerns and curriculum development become a greater concern for basic course directors attempting to satisfy the requirements placed upon the basic course by general education programs and higher authorities, there is a danger that the basic course may lose its identity. Second, streamlining the basic course curriculum with communication instruction in secondary schools and junior colleges is of particular concern. Increasingly, more students are entering institutions of higher learning with prior preparation in communication skills during their high school years. Additionally, vast numbers of students are receiving instruction in the basic course at junior colleges, and then transferring those credits to four-year institutions. An examination of the unique offerings of the basic course, and its role with regards to the prior communication experiences of stu-

dents is warranted. Third, research should examine the ramifications of allowing students to test-out of the basic course.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is critical that we not overlook the importance of the commitment of communication faculty to the basic course. Simply put, a commitment must be secured as we progress through the next 15 years of the *Basic Communication Course Annual*. Too often, the most experienced and distinguished faculty within communication departments view the basic course as an area of less importance than their particular area of specialty. The basic course is seen as a convenient site for collecting data for research studies, but not as an area of study unto itself. If communication researchers benefit from the use of basic course students as a sample for studies in more specialized areas, then they have an obligation to also give back to the basic course and its students.

Communication researchers should devote more time and attention to the integration of communication theory and pedagogy. As Sprague (1993) has persuasively argued, far too much of our pedagogical research is divorced from the theories in our discipline. The gap between theory and pedagogy severely marginalizes our pedagogical work, and often stigmatizes those associated with the basic course. We agree with Sprague (1993) that communication educators must revitalize their efforts to connect theory and pedagogy and ultimately develop a basic course-specific pedagogy. To this end, Sprague (2002) has suggested a number of ques-

tions that communication educators should seek to address (we have adapted these for the basic course):

1. Are there agreed upon cognitive and affective performance goals in the basic course?
2. What authentic assessments can be utilized in the basic course?
3. What are the hierarchies of concepts and skills students need to master in the basic course?
4. What are the most difficult concepts to teach in the basic course?
5. What misconceptions do students typically bring with them that block or distort learning in the basic course?
6. What strategies do students employ to resist learning in the basic course?
7. What specialized curricular materials and pedagogical approaches have yielded significant high-level learning in the basic course?
8. What ideas or practices do students tend to overlearn in the basic course (i.e., using rhetorical questions as attention getters in public speeches)?

A renewed effort to ground our pedagogy in the best theoretical work of the communication discipline would go a long way toward reducing the stigma associated with the basic course, and ultimately result in a pedagogy that meaningfully reaches out to students in the basic course.

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