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Samuel P. Wallace
University of Dayton, swallace1@udayton.edu

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A Model for the Development of a Sustainable Basic Course in Communication

Samuel P. Wallace

Introduction

In the late 1970’s, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Carnegie Foundation, 1977) famously likened the state of general education to a “disaster area,” and argued that, in its current form, it significantly diminished the value of a college degree. Instead of viewing this damming assessment as a call to arms, the response from schools was meek and further muddled programs that were already confusing. Many simply added new areas in which students were required to take classes and did little to integrate general education into major programs of study. This unfortunate response is illustrated by a later report issued by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU, 2002).

In 1994, the AACU examined general education at member institutions and found three fundamental problems with its form and substance that echoed the assessment of the Carnegie Foundation (AACU, 1994). First, general education programs lacked any coherent organizing philosophy that students could comprehend, creating the perception of the core as separate and not part of major areas of study. Second, general education courses presented a fragmented core experience because they lacked any connection with each other. Finally,
students did not understand the value or purpose of
general education, which resulted in a lack of motiva-
tion to study for these courses or to take them seriously.
In response to this state of affairs, the AACU called for
outcome driven general education programs that actu-
ally connected the core with the major areas of study
(AACU, 2002). In 2009, the AACU commissioned a
study by Hart Research Associates that showed institu-
tions both recognized the problems and were beginning
to do something about them by reforming general edu-
cation programs. Even though many positive steps to
reform and improve are underway, they present signifi-
cant challenges for designing, implementing, and main-
taining courses in the new curricula.

The purpose of the current essay is to provide clarity
and direction for developing a course that fits the de-
scription recommended by the AACU. The essay illus-
trates how the concept of outcome driven courses pre-
sents both a change from traditional perspectives of the
basic communication course as well as an opportunity to
integrate communication content into a student’s
broader college education. In addition, based on the
development of the new basic communication course at a
medium-sized Midwestern university, the essay pro-
poses a model that emerged from the experience. The
model should provide support and direction for depart-
ments in the development of sustainable courses that
respond to the criticisms made by the Carnegie Founda-
tion and by the AACU. Overall, the essay argues that
the keys to sustainable courses include careful develop-
ment, integration, rigorous assessment, and adaptabil-
ity.
The Basic Communication Course and Curricular Reform

Former National Communication Association (NCA) President Frank E.X. Dance once called the basic communication course “the bread and butter” course for the discipline because of the revenue and support it creates for communication departments across the country (Dance, 2002). Additionally, in 2012 one of his successors, Richard West, suggested that perhaps there should be a standard basic communication course in much the same way as psychology has a standard approach to its entry-level course (West, 2012). Finally, in 2013, West’s successor, Stephen Beebe, made strengthening the basic communication course his presidential initiative and formed two task forces to explore how that could be accomplished. The focus NCA presidents have placed on the course is appropriate as it has been a central component of general education programs for decades. The centrality and importance of the basic communication course to the discipline, departments, and institutions places its configuration in the crosshairs of the reforms sought by the AACU. In addition to course development, designers need to more carefully consider the integration of the course into the environment where it will “live.” As nearly every environment is different (and sometimes very different), the notion of a “standard” basic course is problematic.

The State of the Basic Course. Although there are multiple iterations of the basic course around the country, two forms dominate. In the latest of numerous analyses on basic course delivery models, Morreale, Worley & Hugenberg (2010) found that 86.7% of the
basic courses in the country were either focused on public speaking or so-called hybrid courses that combine segments on public speaking, interpersonal communication and small group communication. The subject of integration into general education did not appear on the Morreale, et al. survey. It bears noting that the 1996 NCA Policy Platform Statement on the Role of Communication Courses in General Education (NCA, 1996) endorsed the inclusion of a communication course in every institution’s general education program. More recently, the NCA Revised Resolution on the Role of Communication in General Education (2012) as well as the AACU Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative both strongly support the inclusion of oral communication in general education and an outcomes-based approach to those courses.

In their study of online learning, Clark and Jones (2001) concentrated on community colleges, as those schools offer a huge portion of basic courses across the country. The focus on community college students is relevant and reasonable especially since, as Engleberg, Emanuel, Van Horn, & Bodary (2008) pointed out, 83% of two-year institutions require an oral communication course in their general education programs, compared to the 55.3% of four-year institutions reported by Morreale, et al. (2010). Nevertheless, the majority of schools require the basic communication course, and as Craig (2006) notes, few departments on any campus can claim to have a course all students travel through. Even so, this boast is based on a model in which classes, and not necessarily learning outcomes, are required of students.
Professional groups also share the discipline’s commitment to oral communication instruction, further underscoring its placement in an outcomes-driven general education program. Crosling & Ward (2002) surveyed professional groups and businesses and reported that most employers wanted oral communication training for business majors before they graduated. This was echoed in the Hart Associates (2009) report when they referenced a 2006 study commissioned by the AACU that found 73% of business leaders and executives in the private sector felt colleges and universities should spend more time cultivating communication skills, but did not specify how that was to be done, or even what was meant by “communication skills.” Kelly (2008) found similar results regarding the educational needs of engineering students. This evidence illustrates the need for communication instruction in college curricula, but fails to provide any clear direction on what type of instruction is needed.

Considering the strong need for direction, it is becoming more apparent that the focus should be on student learning outcomes. While the basic communication course has traditionally reflected more of the distribution approach to general education (the requirement that students take specific courses to achieve a well-rounded education), that model is beginning to fade as more schools move toward an outcomes-driven approach. The question now is: what would a basic course in communication look like with such an approach?

An Outcome-Driven Basic Course. The extensive research on the basic course illustrates that it can, and sometimes does, provide instruction on important skills and abilities for students; perhaps the very same skills
and abilities sought by professional organizations. For example Hunt, Novak, Semlak & Meyer (2005) found that students who completed the basic course demonstrated increased critical thinking skills, leading Mazer, Hunt, & Kuznekoff (2007) to argue the course should make critical thinking an outcome. These studies help provide a mechanism to assess critical thinking as an outcome, but there is a need to investigate other possible student learning outcomes for the basic course.

There are useful cases to which schools can look for assistance in creating programs that are outcome driven. For example, a large public Midwestern university's faculty sought to move away from the distribution model to the outcome-centered approach advocated by the AACU. The general education program was rebranded with a different name and the University “centered [it] around student achievement of ten distinct learning outcomes” and a commitment “to assessing student achievement of the outcomes” (Fuess, Jr. & Mitchell, 2011). Unlike a traditional general education program in which students took courses in categories that often did not connect with each other, students at this university were required to pass a certified course for each learning outcome in order to graduate. The new program allowed for the integration of general education into major curricula and establishes “a new and better understanding of the undergraduate educational experience” (Wehlberg, 2010, p. 6). It is important to note that this program does not require courses in the traditional sense, but rather outcomes for which students must demonstrate mastery. Certain courses can achieve multiple outcomes and thus double count in a student’s curriculum. This experience is instructive and useful for
redesigning programs, but falls a bit short of identifying a *process* for how specific courses can be adjusted to a more outcome driven approach.

**Case Study.** To help fill this gap, this essay describes the experience at the University of Dayton, a medium-sized private Midwestern university that developed a new general education core. This particular experience provides an even more glaring warning about the impact to communication departments and the basic communication course when general education focuses on outcomes and not courses. It is no surprise that this school responded to the calls for general education reform from the AACU because integrative education is central to this university’s mission. After an extensive review and using the University’s mission statement as a guide, a faculty committee settled on seven essential student learning outcomes that would comprise the heart of general education at the institution. These outcomes now serve as the guiding principles and rudimentary evaluative framework for courses that seek to be required in the new general education program. Unfortunately, one of the casualties in the first iteration of this new curriculum was the oral communication requirement, which was eliminated as it was initially perceived by the faculty committee as unconnected to any of the seven outcomes.

When the old oral communication approach was summarily dismissed, the Department of Communication quickly moved to create a new course that would be designed to make a significant contribution to the achievement of at least some of the new core learning outcomes. As part of this process, a department committee surveyed administrators and faculty members across
the campus to determine whether a required oral communication course was even needed. Following this extensive consultation, the department committee determined that a new basic course needed to be developed and that four main outcomes, identified partially through the consultation process, would provide the focus of the course. These outcomes included the ability to explain complicated or specialized ideas to non-experts, to advocate a position using credible evidence, to engage in civil dialogue about controversial ideas, and to analyze and critically evaluate the oral messages of others. The committee then mapped the four course-related student learning outcomes back to the university outcomes. It was recognized that student learning outcomes could be achieved in a variety of ways, and so the committee began testing course designs well in advance of the arrival of the first cohort of students who would be required to take it. A fortunate by-product of the process used to develop the outcomes-based foundation communication course was the emergence of a model that other institutions can follow when designing a course, reforming a course, or trying to sustain an ongoing presence in general education.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SUSTAINABLE, OUTCOMES-BASED BASIC COURSE**

In Fall 2011, the department committee began to design the first round of pilots for the new basic course. That course design was influenced by several factors, both internal and external to the department, and those factors are briefly reviewed in this section.
Influence of Mission. Every college or university has a mission statement, and that statement permeates (or should permeate) the mission of all units at the institution. As such, the mission of the university, college or division, and specific departments all influence the development of general education courses. Additionally, the institutional mission is reflected in the general education mission, so the general education plays a role in course development and design as well.

Well-crafted and carefully considered mission statements normally contain a good deal of latitude for interpretation. Nevertheless, items that define the uniqueness of a university always stand out. This medium-sized private university is a comprehensive institution that values both research and teaching with specific emphasis on linking the two. Second, it is interested in educating the whole person, which indicates an emphasis on liberal education for all its students. This University is focused on broad interdisciplinary education grounded in solid scholarship and research, so it is imperative that classes reflect this value structure.

In addition to the university mission, The College of Arts & Sciences, where most liberal arts education courses are found at this school, has a mission. Its statement says that liberal learning is essential for responsible, engaged, and worthwhile living. It teaches students to reason and communicate clearly, to think analytically and critically, and to appreciate the value of global, societal, and individual perspectives. Any course aspiring to support and remain central to the mission of the College should somehow support this perspective, which is clearly derived from the University’s mission statement.
The Department of Communication, which is housed within the College of Arts & Sciences, has an even more specific mission statement for its courses. The mission promises a theoretically and professionally oriented communication education; one that promotes research that advances the communication discipline, and supports service in the department, university, profession, and community. The Department’s student learning outcomes suggest that, upon graduation, communication majors should be able to effectively articulate messages, to critically analyze messages, to make communicative choices within an ethical framework, to engage in culturally diverse communities, and to adapt to evolving communication challenges. Four of these student learning outcomes find their roots in the University mission. To support the mission of the Department, the new foundation course was designed to contribute to the achievement of as many of these student learning outcomes as possible within the parameters of the course.

Finally, course designers carefully examined the mission of general education as articulated by the AACU when developing classes for the core. At this medium-sized institution, the new program reflects the trends in higher education moving from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm, as described by Barr and Tagg (1995), where the focus is much more on student learning and a good deal less on faculty teaching. To adhere to this new philosophy and to support the mission of the University, the basic course was to be developed in such a way that its course description and goals could be traced or mapped back to the missions articulated here.
Objections could be raised to adapting the basic course in communication to general education curricula because it might suggest “selling out” just to get enrollment. However, a close tie between general education programs and the basic course in communication is nothing new. Oral communication classes have been a part of general education programs nearly since the inception of general education, as those programs contained requirements for students to take courses in the humanities and the sciences (Cohen, 1988; Thomas, 1962). The basic course in communication supports, and is supported by, many general education programs. The oral communication course supplies some essential knowledge and skills, and the general education curricula supplies the large enrollments that fund many graduate programs as well as to provide instructional training and experience to new teachers in the field (Valenzano, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014). As a result, it can be argued that Communication departments who fail to adapt to and integrate with general education curricula do so at their peril.

**External Influences.** Although the scaffolding of missions within a university is an important influence on a general education course, it is not the only influence to which a course should respond. General education courses serve students from all majors on campus, so those constituencies should also be consulted in the course development process to identify what they believe are primary outcomes for the basic communication course. For this example, consultation took place during the initial stages of the process to make sure the course adequately reflected their concerns and the needs of the students. This process involved representatives of the
Department interviewing faculty members and administrators in more than 30 departments spanning all the academic divisions. If a foundation course in Communication is to survive and thrive in the new program, it should fulfill a genuine need as perceived by the constituent departments.

An unexpected but considerable challenge came in the form of how to begin those conversations. The representatives of the department quickly discovered that asking faculty members about the oral communication needs of their students resulted in the interpretation of “oral communication” as “to give a speech,” and perhaps to use a visual aid such as PowerPoint. The immediate and powerful reaction made it clear that these were things that client departments felt were unnecessary. When framed as fairly specific communication learning outcomes for their students, however, the demeanor of the constituent departments changed. In fact, after lively exchanges, many colleagues offered to continue to supply feedback during the development and pilot testing of the new course and expressed an interest in ongoing consultation. The specific knowledge and skills identified by the client departments during this process helped form the student learning outcomes for the new basic course.

To truly be a foundational and integrative course for all students, the skills and information imparted in the new course needed to be incorporated into other courses students would take during their time at the university. The schools of Business and Education, and the College of Arts & Sciences all had specific course and educational experiences that could build on and expand the skills and knowledge acquired in the basic communica-
tion course. In order to respond to the issues presented in the course, it was designed to be taken in the first two years. Previous basic courses in oral communication at this university could be taken at any time prior to graduation.

Another external influence that pertains specifically to the basic communication course, and was discussed earlier, is the importance of communication instruction to employers and professional organizations. Including these groups in the developmental process can be difficult, but the Department managed to conduct a series of interviews with professionals who hire college graduates and depend on them for the success of their various companies. In these discussions, it became apparent that very few of those professionals reported a need for good public speakers. Instead, they identified a need for skills related to careful and open-minded listening, understanding and participating in cultures of organizations and regions, collaboration, ability to explain concepts, the ability to solve problems, the ability to focus clearly on the moment (avoiding distractions), the ability to establish, build, and maintain interpersonal relationships, and the ability to clearly advocate a position.

One final area of influence on course design is the discipline itself. Recently, the field of communication has expanded its approach to foundational knowledge and skills in oral communication. Very recently, conference panels and conversations more and more contain the terms "civility" and "dialogue," and those concepts are beginning to gain traction in communication courses. Consistent with the new trends in the field, with elements identified in the various mission statements, and with needs identified by constituent depart-
ments and employers, the committee decided to design the course with an emphasis on civil dialogue. Additionally, the new course design focused on student learning rather than the completion of specific assignments.

Specific Constraints. Institutions vary in many ways. Some have more financial and instructional resources than others, while others have the ability to use larger and better equipped classrooms for instruction. At the institution in question, the technological and physical facilities were up to date enough to allow for the use of fairly sophisticated teaching tools. However, like most other schools, the course needed to be designed for 15-week semesters, meet in established classrooms that typically could accommodate no more than 35 students, and meet one, two, or three times per week for a total of 150 minutes. Finally, there was a need to select which core university learning outcomes the course would seek to achieve. Once finalized, there remained only a very short time to pilot and assess sections of the course and to adjust the design to meet the goals of the course as well as the new general education program.

Self-Monitoring and Revision: Pilot Testing. Once the student learning outcomes were identified, the development team set about testing a variety of different assignments, materials and instructional methods. As this team believed that learning outcomes could be achieved in a number of ways, several approaches were tested over the course of the pilots. For example, one of the sections in the first round of pilots designed an assignment to achieve the “explanation” outcome by requiring students to use online meeting software to make
the presentation to class members who were located all over campus, one section used a “committee” environment, and the third section used a more typical public speaking scenario.

Pilot One consisted of three sections of twenty students each. Although the student learning outcomes were the same, each section in this round of testing used different assignments, methods, and instructional materials to try to understand what worked best. In addition to an externally administered Midterm Instructional Diagnosis (MID) and individual interviews conducted with all 60 students at the end of the term, this first-round assessment included a twenty-item pre/posttest attempting to measure mastery of content. The most significant issue that emerged was related to the need to reconsider the required readings. There was a need for a textbook representing a single voice; a need for a textbook written at a level to challenge the students in the course; and a need for content relevant to civility, dialogue, and especially explanation.

Pilot Two was made up of twelve sections. In this pilot, the assignments were much more standardized, a single textbook was created to try to address the issues identified in Pilot One, a revised version of the pre/posttest for measuring content mastery was implemented for basic content assessment, a rubric for assessing performance-based assignments was tested, and instead of interviews (which were impractical with the large increase in students in the course) an open-ended survey was administered at the end of the term to gather information on strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement.
Pilot Three was the final round of testing, and this group grew to 15 sections. This was the last chance to “clean up” any remaining issues before the class became an official university-wide requirement and expanded to about 44 sections per term. For this final series of pilot sections, the assignments were standardized, the pre/posttest for content mastery was “tweaked” to improve reliability, and the evolving rubric for evaluating performance assignments was revised to better describe the various levels of student achievement.

It should be noted that the end of pilot testing does not mean the end of content and performance based assessments, revisions to course materials and assignments, intense instructor training, or gathering student feedback. Once developed, sustaining a course requires ongoing activity in all of these areas to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to provide a path for improvement.

REFLECTIONS: TOWARD A MODEL OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

The model presented here is based on the following assumptions: First, the basic course should make a positive contribution to supporting the mission of the University and to supporting the mission of the general education program. Second, the basic course should make a positive contribution to developing the specific skills and knowledge identified by constituent departments as necessary for the development and success of their students both before and after graduation. Third, the basic course should respond to the feedback provided by professionals regarding the oral communication knowledge.
and skills needed for success in their organizations. Fourth, the approach to the basic course in Communication should reflect the best thinking, practices, and research of the field of Communication. Finally, having established itself as central to the support of the University mission, responding to the needs of the constituent department and the related professions, and reflecting the best thinking of the field of Communication, the basic course will be much more resistant to administrative challenge when questions of budget, necessity, or mission arise.

The model is perhaps best viewed from a systems orientation such that anything that affects one part of the model will potentially affect all parts of the model. The model itself contains five major components: environmental influences, the course mission, student learn-

![Diagram of Course Development as an Ongoing Process: Part 1](image_url)
ing outcomes, course design, and self-monitoring and adjustment. Please see the model illustrated in Figure 1. Each of these components will be briefly described in this section.

**Environmental Influences.** Because no general education course can exist in a vacuum or in isolation, any model must consider how the environment affects and interacts with the course as well as how the course affects and interacts with its environment. Those factors that seem to be most salient to the basic course and should likely be considered in its design are: The mission of the University; the mission of the General Education Program; the mission of the College or Division; the mission of the department; the needs or requirements of constituent departments; the requirements of the professional marketplace; possible constraints such as legislative/administrative or other mandates affecting the course, or procedural or structural constraints (for example, length of class periods, classroom space, the length of the academic term, etc.); relevant perspectives and best practices of the field of Communication; and other classes or educational experiences that might build on this foundation.

**The Course Mission.** The course mission should reflect, to an appropriate degree, the environmental influences. The statement of the mission should be a description of the course content along with generalized course goals or objectives, philosophy, or other guiding principles.

**Student Learning Outcomes.** Based on the learning paradigm, these outcomes should directly reflect the course mission. What specific knowledge should be gained or skills acquired by students as a result of tak-
ing this class? What will students know? What will students be able to do? What will students be able to demonstrate? They should be high priority items that are focused and specific, and they should be both actionable and measurable.

**Course Design.** The design is the specific strategy that will be used to accomplish course goals. The design of the course should be directly focused on the achievement of the student learning outcomes. This design should include the basic structure of the class, the choice of literature or readings, the development of assignments and/or activities designed to achieve specific goals, and methods of evaluation of student performance. A common mistake is to create assignments and then try to somehow fit the student learning outcomes to them; the learning outcomes must come first.

*Figure 2. Course Development as an ongoing Process: Part 2*

**Self-Monitoring and Revision.** This component is commonly referred to as assessment. We chose not to use what has become known as the "A" word in the model because of the negative connotation the term car-
ries in many quarters. Unfortunately, and perhaps for good reason, a typical perception of assessment leans less toward a useful tool for course development and more as useless administrative busywork. While Hess (2013) suggests that “evidence” might be a better term, the model proposed in this essay would suggest “feedback” as another alternative. Whatever it is called, on the more micro level, the self-monitoring function should provide measures or other indicators of how well the SLOs are being achieved and inform the course designer about modifications to assignments or other course structures that might be needed to better achieve the SLOs and enhance student learning. In the particular case of the basic course in communication, careful attention should be paid to assessing content mastery as well as performance or application. On the more macro level, the assessment should provide indicators of how well the course mission is being accomplished, and how well the course mission and design are aligned with the influences that constitute its environment, especially the University Mission, the General Education Mission, and the needs of the constituent departments.

While few models are perfect, the course development model discussed here can be useful and effective for nearly any course aspiring to position itself in the general education curriculum. The outcome-oriented approach makes the course’s efficacy more apparent than the teaching-oriented approach as it changes the argument for inclusion from "What courses should be taught?" to "What outcomes should be achieved?" The basic course in Communication can especially take advantage of the change in perspective to establish its position in general education. Instead of the often chal-
lenged "defense" of the basic course that public speaking is necessary for a well-rounded college education, basic courses in oral communication can demonstrate measurable outcomes that support the mission of the institution, the general education curriculum, and the specific requirements of constituent departments. As those missions and requirements are revised or reconsidered over time, the basic course can adapt. Instead of defending the "one size fits all" (i.e., the way we have always taught it) basic course by merely changing the argument as demands change, the outcome-driven basic course can truly adapt. The Communication faculty will then bring its expertise to the table to design learning experiences to achieve the relevant student learning outcomes.

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