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Beyond “Basic”: Opportunities for Relevance

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Changing language is part of the process of changing the world. (Freire, 1992, p. 68)

...the words we use to talk about a thing (a basic course) do indeed work to make it (basic). If we don't love what we do in that course, if we don't believe in it, then who will? Who should? It is our responsibility to tend this garden if we expect it to continue to flower. (Fassett and Warren, 2008, p. 13).

Recently one of my colleagues asked me if I could foresee a time when I would give up supervising teaching associates; she said it in a kindly way, but with a cringe and a shrug, as if to suggest that I was sacrificing my efforts on something beneath me...a departmental *service*. I've been coordinating our introductory public speaking course and supervising TAs for fourteen years now, and I still get this question. Each time, I explain that giving up those responsibilities would be like asking someone to uproot their research passion from, say, performance studies to instructional communication, from any old this to any old that. The question implies that the work I do to nurture, sustain and strengthen the introductory course is a labor. I would contend that our work with the “basic” course is more a labor of love, but, as with all labors of love, we undervalue our efforts.

There is nothing “basic” about introductory courses in communication. The name “basic,” like any other metaphor, invites us to experience—and, indeed, create—the course in some ways and not others (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). That we might explore other metaphors for the introductory course presents us with an important opportunity to underscore its (and our) relevance for ourselves and others.

As Freire (1992), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and others suggest, language doesn’t simply mirror reality, but also shapes that reality. Most favorably, “basic” is an elemental building block, something we must study first before we can move on to more complex topics and skills. In this sense, we might think of “basic” as fundamental or essential. However, we might also think of something basic as not only entry-level, but also bare-bones, unadorned, plain or even remedial. Even where we have the good sense to avoid “basic” in the titles of the courses themselves, how we as communication scholars use the term inevitably shapes our own, as well as public, perceptions of such courses. Thus, the “basic course” is a chore, not an opportunity. The “basic course director” performs a service, but isn’t a visionary. *Basic Communication Course Annual*, as a title, does not command respect, nor does it adequately explain to scholars in and outside of our discipline the power and value of what we do. “Basic” has a congealing quality to it, insular rather than far-reaching or innovative. We would do well to consider alternatives that are much closer to the work so many of us love to do, for example, “introductory,” “foundational,” or “critical.”

Changing our language can begin to transform how we feel about what we do—and, therefore, what we ac-

tually do—as educators and researchers. This presents opportunities in teaching, research and advocacy.

Teaching opportunities. Changing the name of the introductory course, both in how we refer to it disciplinarily (from the “Basic Course” division of the National Communication Association to the routine survey of “basic course directors”) and how we describe it to students, open new vistas for what we can learn. At the disciplinary level, a shift in naming could resist the marginalization of communication pedagogy and remind all communication scholars of their responsibility to better understand how best to teach and learn their particular pieces of communication studies. We might consider, for example, becoming an “introductory course” or “communication foundations” division; still more provocative might be a “pedagogy of communication” division (as opposed to the relatively paradigmatically insular, and perhaps similarly mis-named, Instructional Development Division). At the level of the classroom, a shift in naming helps orient us to the goals and relevance of the course. For example, in the “introductory” course, we help students become familiar with our discipline. In a “foundations” course, we work with students to better understand the essential theories, methods or skills associated with communication studies in order to prepare for more advanced content. For example, a course like “critical issues in communication studies” signals our desire to help students apply theories and methods to particular challenges in our social world (for example, to address global climate change, poverty or violence).

Changing our language around the introductory course requires us to take risks in our pedagogy. For

example, it invites us to resist and nuance the homogenization all too common in our introductory course texts (McGarrity, 2010; Woodhouse, 2009). We might, for example, consider incorporating more complex (and perhaps irresolvable) cases into our texts. We might draw our own passionate research interests, for example in dialogue theory and practice or crisis communication, into introductory courses. Here I’m reminded of Annie Dillard’s (1989) observation about the importance of sharing good ideas as they occur to us instead of saving them for later: “Do not hoard what seems good for a later place...give it, give it all, give it now. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes” (pp. 78-79). While we wouldn’t want to sequence communication theories and methods in ways that are developmentally inappropriate for our students, we all might truly enjoy the challenge to raise the stakes in our introductory courses by engaging our students in asking questions we don’t yet know the answers to ourselves. As our most novice students become ever more profoundly diverse, they may become our greatest collaborators in better understanding ideas we once only reserved for graduate students and colleagues. By exploring our own language choices, we can develop ways to innovate in the classroom, engaging students and their lives in lasting and powerful ways.

Research Opportunities. In taking our introductory communication courses to be complex and suited in their own way to nuanced and contemporary communication scholarship, we will continue as a discipline to explore a variety of what the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) describes as high

impact learning practices, including service learning, collaborative learning, and sustained and substantive exploration of diversity. It is a shame that faculty, where privilege allows, often reserve their teaching commitments for what we tend to think of as more advanced subjects and students. Introductory courses could well nurture and sustain undergraduate research, individually and in collaboration with faculty, as yet another high impact practice (Kuh, 2008). Palmer (2007) suggests that educators see themselves as co-learners with their students, exploring together the questions that motivate the content and relevance of the course; such an approach engages students in deep learning, shapes research in unexpected and potentially powerful ways, and is hardly "basic."

Further, in recognizing introductory courses as more than "basic," there is an opportunity to develop research that delves deeply into how students best learn communication. More than 20 years after Sprague (1993) published "Retrieving the research agenda for communication education," we still struggle with a gaping hole where much of our communication education research should be. What does exist typically appears in the pages of *Basic Communication Course Annual*, where it is seen by a dedicated, but decidedly small, few. Revisiting Sprague's recommended research agenda is a good place to begin reinvigorating our research, but we might also work to more broadly share what each course director and TA supervisor already knows well. Our conference gatherings are replete with anecdotes that, if published, could be of value to us all; recognizing the complexity of our work, that what we do is beyond "basic,"

would help us recognize the scholarly merit in what others would cast away as service.

Advocacy Opportunities. This shift in language and perspective regarding introductory communication courses challenges us to advocate for our discipline and the work we do within it. Perhaps most important is reminding our colleagues that introductory courses are the lifeblood of our discipline, the vital link between the numbers of students drawn to study with us and our beloved graduate programs, our lines of research and our symbiotic relationship with the communities in which we live and work. It is incumbent upon us to remind our colleagues in other quarters of the discipline that pedagogical work is not marginal, but rather central to our disciplinary success (Sprague, 1993). Changing our language creates an occasion for us to revisit what we do and why it matters.

There is increasing scrutiny of general education course requirements, which is of concern to the vast majority of us. At my own institution, we have been fortunate that our colleagues in other fields understand the value of public speaking as civic engagement and continue to support this requirement for our students. However, the relevance of any required course will and should be questioned; this on-going assessment is essential to our own disciplinary growth and development, as well as our students'. Here we would be wise to share, publicly and frequently, that our courses are complex, that they respond directly to our students' lives in and beyond the classroom, as well as to issues that are of direct consequence to our social contract. If our introductory communication courses are “basic,” if we routinely staff them with novice teachers, then why

shouldn't faculty in business, English or other fields attempt to teach them? A shift in our rhetoric surrounding the introductory course affords us a means of resisting encroachment from other disciplines by powerfully asserting the relevance and meaning of what we do.

As Freire (1992) suggests, "changing language is part of the process of changing the world" (p. 68); few understand that more acutely than communication studies scholars. Challenging ourselves to better name our work gives rise to possibility, for us, for our students, and for our discipline. We are, as educators and as a field, complex, multifaceted and essential, certainly not basic.

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