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## Celebrating Community in the Basic Course

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## Celebrating Community in the Basic Course

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Dr. Huber is an Assistant Professor and Director of Public Speaking at the University of South Florida. Her major research interests are in Communication Pedagogy and Performance Studies. She teaches courses in pedagogy and performance. She would like to thank the reviewers for their feedback in the development of this essay.

## *Basic Course Forum*

# **Celebrating Community in the Basic Course**

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*Aubrey A. Huber, University of South Florida*

*This Basic Course Forum highlights authors' responses to the following topics: What curricular programs present the best opportunity for curricular connections to the basic course? Building upon conversations from the July 2018 Basic Course Institute (hosted by University of Dayton), what administrative successes and challenges do basic course directors face?*

In one of his last essays, basic course director John T. Warren (2011) describes the insightful and rigorous pedagogical work of one of his colleagues. As a result of this classroom observation, Warren challenges communication scholars to re-invest in communication education by documenting how teaching expertise shapes communication theory, philosophy, and practice. As a basic course director myself, I also have the privilege to experience the creative, rigorous, and theoretically rich work of my fellow faculty and graduate student colleagues. Though there are challenges in directing the basic course such as course design and assessment, textbook affordability, and teacher education and training, I want to celebrate the success of the basic course to document this important pedagogical work.

My greatest accomplishment in directing the basic course is creating a community of teachers. Located at a large public university in the Southeastern United States, the basic course taught at my institution is public speaking. The basic course program encompasses a wide array of teaching experience ranging from first-time teachers, to instructors with experience at other institutions, to seasoned pedagogues who have never taught the basic course, to experienced basic course

educators. When instructors begin their work in public speaking they are required to complete a teacher-training program that consists of a weeklong orientation and a yearlong series of pedagogical workshops. Workshops are open to all instructional staff in the department. Returning instructors will often participate in the professional development-oriented workshops and/or help facilitate these workshops. I observe all of the instructors annually. The basic course program is the initial site of communication education in my department, and therefore promotes a community of teacher-scholars, which attends to the nuances of communication in teaching and research. In my experience, the basic course program champions the development of pedagogical community by generating a cohort, fostering mentorship, and emphasizing holistic assessment.

First, directing the basic course affords me the opportunity to establish a community through cohorts of public speaking teachers. At my institution, incoming public speaking instructors form a cohort of “new” instructors and participate in teaching orientation sessions and biweekly workshops. Even though all the instructors are “new” to teaching at my institution, they vary in terms of teaching experience. As a cohort, instructors have peers who are going through similar experiences. They all negotiate new texts, new assignments, and new institutional requirements. As basic course director I experience how cohorts of teachers connect with each other through the shared experience of teaching the course. In and out of workshops, instructors share classroom experiences, collaborate on strategies for teaching, and commiserate about challenges they face. In other words, cohorts have a built-in community to support one another, discuss teaching ideas, and give and receive feedback, advice, and reassurance. Cohorts work to strengthen the overall function and delivery of the basic course by making the experience of teaching the basic course a point of connection and common ground. The theme of community extends to the basic course classroom and is reflected in the course evaluations that instructors receive each semester. Course evaluations often reveal that the basic course is a favorite among students. They commonly cite getting to know one another and being able to become part of a community as the rationale for their admiration of the class.

Second, the basic course program enables the formation of community through mentorship. As part of the general education curriculum, the basic course includes 30-40 sections per semester, taught by 18-24 instructors, most of whom are returning to teach in the program. The basic course program therefore generates various opportunities for cross-generational mentorship. Formally, all instructors meet for

staff meetings and engage in peer classroom observation each semester. Similarly, basic course instructors participate in seminars about best teaching practices. Instructors also organize and facilitate their own annual event in which they share successful teaching activities. Informally, basic course instructors engage in mentoring relationships when they discuss the classroom, share ideas for upcoming topics and assignments, and strategize how to negotiate challenging classroom situations. By generating opportunities for mentorship, basic course directors can further foster a community of teachers. Basic course instructors are dedicated teachers and mentors of others in the department, who are often recognized for their efforts. For the past five years, current and former instructors of the basic course have won the Provost's "Outstanding Teaching Awards" for their work in the classroom as well as their abilities to mentor undergraduate students and teaching colleagues. This mentorship enhances instruction and extends beyond institutional boundaries to other programs and pedagogical relationships. For instance, in recent years, several former basic course instructors have been hired as basic course directors themselves, extending mentorship to a new generation of basic course instructors.

Finally, a qualitative approach to evaluating instructors that includes focus groups, ethnographic observations, and interviews produces a holistic approach to assessment that further builds the teaching community. As basic course director, I hold monthly meetings and workshops for the basic course. These sessions function as a "focus group" in that they provide a forum for which instructors can discuss particular issues related to teaching and the basic course. Additionally, I participate in ethnographic observations of basic course instructors. These classroom observations allow me to observe and assess teaching and provide concrete feedback. I also meet individually with instructors at various times while they are teaching in the basic course. In these one-on-one "interviews" we discuss classroom observations, address concerns, and strategize how to negotiate challenges. We also discuss how to document and theorize the pedagogical labor as a reflective practice, as well as for publication in pedagogical outlets. These focus groups, ethnographic observations, and interviews function as support for teachers of the basic course and connect them with institutional resources and larger pedagogical communities. This community not only strengthens the program at my institution, but also contributes to the field of communication pedagogy when instructors present at conferences and publish pedagogical work. Each year basic course instructors present pedagogical research locally, on campus, and at regional and national conferences, such as the National

Communication Association (NCA) Conference. In the past three years, instructors from the basic course have been selected for top paper panels and are able to share research that began in the basic course.

In their conversation about the scarcity of connectedness, McKnight and Block (2010) write about the rarity of communities in that they are “both a place and an experience of connectedness” (p. 16). The basic course serves not only as an introduction to communication for undergraduate students, but it also serves as an introduction to teaching communication for instructors. For me, the most significant administrative success in directing the basic course is the facilitation of a community of teachers. This community then extends to undergraduate students in the basic course. Cohorts, mentorship, and holistic assessment are all features that contribute to a teaching community. Building on Warren’s (2011) call, I implore basic course directors to continue to document and theorize additional community building features as a way to demonstrate the rigorous, insightful, and innovative pedagogical labor in the basic course.

### References

- McKnight, J., & Block, P. (2010). *The abundant community: Awakening the power of families and neighborhoods*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
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