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## Our Basic Course and Communication Skills Training: The Time for Innovation is Now (Yes, Even in a Pandemic)

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## *Basic Course Forum*

# **Our Basic Course and Communication Skills Training: The Time for Innovation is Now (Yes, Even in a Pandemic)**

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### **Abstract**

*Our basic communication courses have always been important for our students. COVID-19 presents us with many challenges as well as opportunities for innovation and reflection. We can now heed the call offered by Joyce et al. in 2019 to match the skills most in demand with those we teach and infuse intentionality and value throughout our courses. As we pivot to online education and digital communication, how can we craft the basic course to provide effective communication skills training in engaging, empowering and impactful ways?*

*Keywords: basic course, pedagogy, course design, skills training*

Before the pandemic, headlines consistently celebrated the importance of the skills we teach in our basic communication courses (c.f., Forbes Coaches Council, 2019; Poague, 2020), often referring to them as *soft skills*. A list of professional soft skills reads like a summary of the activities, assignments, and skills developed in our Basic Courses: communication skills, listening, nonverbal communication, presentations, public speaking, storytelling, visual communication, and writing skills (Doyle, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, as recently as 2019, communication skills were highlighted as

necessary for our students for entry into the workforce (Marr, 2019). Since the pandemic, our basic course skills continue to be cited as important, including communication, both virtual and nonverbal communication, problem-solving and critical thinking, creativity and innovation, and leadership (Poague, 2020; Marr, 2020).

Basic course professionals know that communication skills are needed in all facets of life, including career success. Joyce et al. (2019), in their comprehensive review of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* (2005-2018), suggested that “more research needs to be conducted to determine if the skills taught in the basic course match the skills most desired in an increasingly diverse and technological workplace” (p. 24). COVID-19 has altered that “workplace,” just as it has altered all aspects of life. It has presented us with roadblocks and challenges, but it has also opened doors to new possibilities. The educational landscape sculpted by COVID-19 poses questions for those willing to imagine a more engaging, empowering, and impactful course.

### **What Does It Mean to Prepare Students for a Post-COVID-19 Workforce?**

Traditionally, public speaking is the most common form of the basic course and that has been true throughout its history (Lefebvre & Lefebvre, 2020). This traditional approach favors performance and platform oratory of informative and persuasive speeches that has changed little “over 60 years” (Lefebvre & Lefebvre, 2020, p. 20). Let’s change that.

Let’s encourage innovation, application, and reflection in our assignments and approaches to prepare our students to effectively communicate in our post-COVID world. Instead of detailed speech outlines, let’s have students craft presentations modeled after TED Talks, complete with engaging stories and valuable nuggets of information. Let’s intentionally engage in collaborative projects showcasing active listening, diverse perspectives, and effective communication strategies, such as advocacy presentations, promotion of non-profit organizations, and celebrations of cross-cultural communication. Let’s proactively connect their interests, passions and communication skills to our courses and their future employability and success.

### **How Can We Embrace Innovation and Technology to Create Value-Added and Meaningful Experiences for Students in the Basic Course?**

Before the spring of 2020, we probably used some digital communication (i.e., communication through online channels) in our courses, such as our campus course

management system or mechanisms to record and review speeches. Now, however, we have a mandate to prepare our students to communicate in this more virtual and digital world. Whether casual or formal, most work sessions, meetings and presentations have a digital component and that is probably here to stay. Digital communication, when used skillfully, allows communicators to develop a social connection to others that presents the raw material for effective collaboration (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). We can infuse opportunities to use digital communication in assignments such as podcasts, Zoom meetings, and Google Slides to prepare students to design messages and build connections effectively and with purpose. We can seize this time of change to “revitalize and revise our pedagogy” (Gehrke, 2016, p. 252), through the incorporation of digital communication assignments and activities. Let’s add value to what we do by focusing on transferability (Ward, 2016), carefully considering how the communication skills we highlight in our basic course apply across disciplines, careers, and modalities.

### Conclusion

Whether we are teaching face-to-face, in flipped or mixed modal classrooms, or through online synchronous or asynchronous channels, it is time to cultivate this chance to innovate. We must apply a “more personal touch” and explore a “more digital future” (Gardner, 2020, para. 19; para. 18). We also need to reflect and consider “new routes to relevance” (Supiano, 2020, para. 24). Finally, in addition to the challenge issued by Joyce et al. (2019) to investigate if we are teaching the skills most needed in the workplace, we also should rally around the charge of Gehrke (2016) who advocated “what the public speaking course needs right now is a revolution” (p. 247). The time is right for a revolution through innovation and action. Let’s do this.

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