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Suzy Prentiss

University of Central Florida, suzyprentiss@gmail.com

Michael G. Strawser

University of Central Florida, michaelstrawser@ucf.edu

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Basic Course Forum

Redesigning the Basic Course for Today's Students: Now There's an IDEA

Suzy Prentiss, University of Central Florida

Michael G. Strawser, University of Central Florida

As members of the Basic Course family, most of us have witnessed the continuing evolution of a more diverse and eclectic student body as highlighted by Ruiz-Mesa and Broeckelman-Post (2021) and appreciate that our students deserve “having and feeling like their own identity has space in the classroom” (Munz & Colvin, 2018, p. 191). We understand, too, that with this challenge comes a real opportunity: to craft a course that provides all students with the skills and confidence needed to share their authentic stories and talents. To truly support all students, honor their lived experiences, and provide a robust educational experience, we need a redesign based upon an expanded model—Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access (IDEA). Within this framework, we value authenticity (Inclusion), support and celebrate the multiple ways we differ (Diversity), promote equivalent opportunities (Equity), and encourage full participation for all (Access) (CCLC, 2021).

Our students today are more diverse than ever (American Council on Education, 2020). This new generation has a higher social awareness, interest in the planet, and desire to be more inclusive than we have seen before (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Students also want a more career-focused curriculum, with an emphasis on utilizing technology, prioritizing diversity and inclusive efforts, and showcasing the importance of wellbeing and mental health (Skopec, 2021). Furthermore, according to the AAC&U (Finley, 2021) survey, employers under 40 years of age are “more racially and ethnically diverse” and “more likely to be female” (Figure 13, p. 18), just

like our students. These data trends support the need to transform our view of public speaking and expand from a “one size fits all” approach, to one that is more nuanced and respectful of our students and their diverse and authentic lived experiences (Prentiss, 2021) and focused on soft skill development for today’s workplace (Broekelman-Post et al., 2022). In short, the time is right for us to redesign the basic course, not just as a cosmetic renovation of our discipline’s “front porch,” but as an intentional welcoming of all students with a commitment to see and listen to who our students are and where our students want to go.

Throughout recorded education, from our most ancient civilizations to modern day, oral communication, most notably “public speaking,” has played a prominent role. According to Valenzano and Braden (2015), “public speaking instruction is rooted in a long tradition that we can trace back to at least Classical Greece approximately 490–322 B.C.” (p. 5). Then, education was a luxury for those families with money and was available to only boys and men, not girls nor women. There was also a focus on “rhetoric, which for them essentially meant the ability to speak well and persuade audiences” (p. 5). We suggest that this approach needs to be updated to: empower a wider variety of speakers, not just privileged white males; support varied goals and situations among multiple audiences, not just to argue and persuade; and adopt a more authentic delivery style, one that does not advocate for memorization and predicate performance.

In their “metasynthesis” of the introductory course, LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020) assert that “the introductory course is one of the most enduring pedagogical offerings in the Communication discipline’s undergraduate curriculum” (p. 199). Their analysis revealed that, overall, public speaking was the primary focus and “how little the core content of the introductory communication course and its assignments have changed” (p. 217) over the past sixty years. Consider how much our collegiate student body has changed during that time, how their audiences have evolved, how much more we know about student-centered pedagogy, such as learning styles, neurodiversity and mental health (Underhill et al., 2021), and how technology has impacted communication. All of these are formidable and important changes and yet, according to researchers LeFebvre and LeFebvre (2020), the basic course has, essentially, not evolved to meet the changing needs and lived experiences of our students.

So, what can we, as members of the basic course family, do? Here are three suggestions:

1. Apply Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on encouraging students to uphold their cultural identities. Ladson-Billings (1994) suggests three main components of culturally relevant pedagogy: a focus on student learning and academic success, the development of cultural competence to assist students in developing positive identities, and supporting students' understanding of real-world problems. Our students are increasingly diverse and will not be effectively served by a "one size fits all" approach. Our basic courses can encourage development of effective communication skills as students grapple with difficult and challenging issues. By applying culturally relevant pedagogy, we empower students to address real-world problems through authentic assignments and applied projects that celebrate our diversity of thought and experience. We can infuse our classes with a variety of authors, resources, and activities using examples of diverse, authentic methods of communication across assorted situations.

2. Include a Variety of Communication Experiences

On any given day, we communicate to various audiences in a myriad of ways across multiple modalities, and our classes should incorporate this breadth and depth, as well. For example, students could lead discussions in roundtable format or serve as panelists, be the reporter for breakout sessions, present a poster or scholarly synopsis, craft a TED Talk or a podcast, create a PowerPoint slide deck or infographic with or without narration, and can present in person or virtually alone, with a partner or as a team. Ask students to explore how oral communication skills are used in their academic discipline, career plans, or advocacy work. Relevancy and authenticity are powerful ways to empower students to invest in our class.

3. Celebrate Authentic Storytelling

Since our earliest cave drawings and across all cultures throughout human history, we have been storytellers. In fact, according to Nossel (2018), we are "hardwired for story" (p. 3). Whereas in ancient civilizations, platform oratory was the privilege of the few, today storytelling is the purview of the many. Think of the proliferation of YouTube videos, TED Talks, TikTok posts, podcasts, and blogs; it is clear that we want to tell and share our stories (Edwards, 2021). We have the opportunity to prepare our students to share their authentic stories in meaningful, impactful and empowering ways. Basic course students should be encouraged and empowered to

share their own culturally relevant and uniquely lived experiences while connecting their own narrative to real-world scenarios and practical applications (Ruiz-Mesa, 2021).

In summary, the IDEA to reimagine the basic course by infusing Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access principles throughout the curriculum, benefits our students, strengthens our value as a discipline, and provides real-world application of the concepts and theories we teach. It is time we had a redesign: it is a good IDEA.

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