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The Introductory Communication Course: The Hybrid Approach

Judy C. Pearson
Richard West

The introductory communication course is one of the most important courses in a general education program at the college or university level. Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985) observed that the course “remains a vital component of American higher education” (290). Seiler and McGukin (1989) agreed that the course is critical to a speech communication curriculum. Professors adopt a variety of approaches in teaching the introductory course.

The purpose of this essay is to examine one approach to the introductory course: the hybrid course. The authors will (1) describe the hybrid approach; (2) consider the course structure including general teaching strategies, behavioral objectives, classroom activities, major assignments, and examinations; (3) note the importance of the hybrid approach; and (4) recommend some future directions for the course.

THE NATURE OF THE HYBRID COURSE

The hybrid course is one that examines several communication contexts including, but not limited to, intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking. Subsumed within these contexts are such communication components as listening, critical thinking, perception and language. This approach

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includes interpersonal relationships among families and friends as well as leadership and interviewing. The approach examines a variety of purposes for public communication.

The hybrid course may vary from campus to campus. Some communication educators include mass communication, organizational communication, health communication, and other contexts and settings. Some minimize intrapersonal and interpersonal communication and emphasize public communication. Nonetheless, the large number of popular texts which creatively combine several communication contexts suggest that the hybrid course is fairly homogeneous (Adler & Rodman, 1991; DeVito, 1991; Hybels & Weaver, 1989; Pearson & Nelson, 1991; Verderber, 1989).

This introductory course choice generally moves from the more personal to the more public contexts of communication. Most courses begin with the nature of communication, perception, self-awareness and self-concept, active and empathic listening, critical thinking, nonverbal codes and verbal codes. After considering these components, relevant to all communication contexts, interpersonal communication becomes the focus. Interpersonal relationships, self-disclosure, and conflict are usually part of this unit. Common interpersonal relationships that are examined are those with acquaintances, friends and family members. The interview is included sometimes as a professional interpersonal setting. Small group communication, including a discussion of leadership follows next.

Finally, the hybrid approach includes a thorough discussion of public communication including topic selection, audience analysis, speaker credibility, finding information, organizing the speech, delivery and visual aids. The settings of public communication that are always included are the informative speech and the persuasive speech. A few communication educators also consider the entertainment or after-dinner speech.

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THE HYBRID COURSE STRUCTURE

General Teaching Strategies

The hybrid course can be based on cognitive learning, the learning of skills, or a combination of these two approaches. Classroom activities, discussions, assignments, and tests are influenced directly by the overall approach to learning that the teacher selects.

The cognitive approach to learning involves the teaching of concepts, principles, and theoretical constructs. The learning required is the retention and retrieval of specific information and ideas, either through recognition or recall. The objectives of the cognitive approach are to produce familiarity with, awareness of, and comprehension of information. The underlying pedagogical philosophy is that generalized knowledge is transferable to behavior. The cognitive approach suggests that students who achieve a cognitive understanding of communication concepts can then communicate effectively.

In this approach, teachers rely on lectures and class discussion. They use activities or other experiential methods primarily to facilitate understanding and explanation. Students write assignments, examinations, or papers that require them to retrieve specific information to draw relationships among concepts or to analyze behavior. Students would not be expected to prepare and deliver a speech, for instance, if the cognitive approach to learning was the only preparation for that assignment.

The skills approach to learning focuses on behavior. This approach involves the practice, internalization, and adoption of effective communication behavior. Students learn how to encode and decode messages in order to understand and share ideas and feelings. The underlying philosophy of the skills

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approach is that an understanding of the theory, concepts, and principles of communication is necessary only to the extent to which it facilitates effective performance.

Students using the skills approach should be given an opportunity to practice the skill. The discussion of such activities should focus on the effectiveness of the communication, rather than on an understanding of the underlying concepts. Assessment is of the actual communication, not of the understanding of concepts and principles of communication.

Many teachers combine the cognitive and skills approaches. Within this integrated approach, students learn to comprehend the concepts and principles of communication and to use them effectively in actual practice. Teachers adopting this view believe that effective communication is derived from an understanding of theory and principles but is not inherent in that understanding. The underlying idea is that to communicate without knowledge of the causes and effects of communication results in inefficient, ineffectual learning. The study of the principles and concepts of communication reduces the trial and error involved in learning only by doing.

Most teachers believe that students who take an introductory communication course will become more proficient communicators. The “back to the basics” movement, which has found its way to the college and university level, embraces the idea that students should become more competent in communication. While this interest might seem to require an emphasis on the skills alone, the authors’ philosophy is that both cognitive and behavioral learning are necessary.

In addition, the authors hold that the learning of communication concepts and skills is approached ideally in an incremental manner. Concepts and skills should build from one activity or assignment to the next. The activities used in the hybrid course should break the concepts and skills into component parts so that students can learn the components of

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the required skill before attempting to perform the composite behavior. Concepts should be divided into manageable units that students can master before being required to synthesize and integrate the concepts into more complex behavioral or cognitive entities.

Behavioral Objectives

Teaching is most effective when both the teacher and the student recognize the specific goals of instruction. Behavioral objectives are statements of the specific observable behaviors that indicate student proficiency. Behavioral objectives allow a student's performance to be measured against a specific standard of competence to ascertain whether the student has attained the goals established for the course. A statement of behavioral objectives should include five elements: who is to perform, the specific behavior expected, the level of competence required, when the performance is to occur, and a method for evaluating the proficiency of the performance.

In stating behavioral objectives, the teacher should separate the desired behavior into its component parts. The crucial part of a behavioral objective is that the goal be stated as an observable behavior. Learning can only be evaluated if an observable activity is required of students and, then, only if that activity can be evaluated in relation to a known standard of competence. Whether the goal is cognitive learning or the acquisition of a skill, the statement of objectives must entail a behavioral manifestation of learning. Such objectives are useful in designing activities, planning the sequence in which material is to be presented, creating assignments, writing test questions, and conducting class discussions. Each of these instructional practices should be derived directly from the behavioral objectives established for the course.

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Classroom Activities

Activities are designed primarily to increase the experiential basis of student learning. The pedagogical underpinning of activity-based learning is the supposition that students learn more effectively through active participation. Activities can serve as a stimulus for discussion by engaging students in provocative situations. Activities may be seen to be integral to the learning of behavioral skills, as well as to increasing the comprehension of communication constructs.

Activities should not, however, be an end in themselves. They should be regarded as a teaching aid, not as a substitute for the sound instructional practices of listening to a lecture, participating in class discussion, and reading the textbook. Activities must be incorporated into the structure and goals of the course rather than used as isolated games or entertainment to fill class time. Three guidelines may be useful in the selecting of activities. First, activities should be derived directly from behavioral objectives. The key to the effective use of classroom activities is to regard them as directed activities. Second, activities should, if possible, require the active participation of all the students. Students may lose interest if they are not involved. Third, the activity should be discussed in a manner that the behavior and experience are related to the content of the course. An example of an activity follows.

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First Impressions

Objectives: Students should be able to understand the importance of first impressions and witness how these impressions are formed. Students should also be able to identify what nonverbal factors and features played a role in determining their first impression of another person. Students will also be introduced to the process of perception and will be prepared to discuss the variables that affected their perceptions of others.

Procedure: This activity works best at the beginning of the term. Provide students with name tags on which they print their names. Students should attach the name tags to their body so it is visible to others. Distribute the First Impressions Questionnaire. Tell students that they are not to talk to another person during the entire activity. (A variation of this activity can include verbal communication. The activity can then be integrated at different points within the term.) Students should identify words or phrases that they think best represents another student. Thus, a student will look at another person, determine if they are a relevant choice, and place that person's name on the blank next to the words/phrase. This should continue until all blanks are filled. Encourage students to indicate a choice for all words/phrases. Remind students to use only nonverbal communication for this activity.

Class Discussion: Student discussion should focus on the difficulty of making a selection. Yet, our first impressions of others are often solely based upon this nonverbal effort. Students might also be encouraged to relate their feelings on how our perceptions are based upon what others are wearing, their facial features, body type, hair style, etc. At the conclusion of the discussion,

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students should reveal their choices to ascertain the accuracy or inaccuracy of their selections.

Applications: This activity is a good introduction to the course because it allows students to become informally introduced to each other. The activity also introduces students to the perception process and nonverbal communication. Information gained from this activity can later be presented in the course when discussing impression formation in interpersonal relationships.

First Impressions Questionnaire

Most political _____

Most conservative _____

Least likely to march in a protest _____

Most attractive _____

Tallest _____

Shortest _____

Loves to cook _____

Wants to be a celebrity _____

Visits the elderly _____

Has appeared on stage _____

Has read the Bible _____

Has a rich relative _____

Is a “morning” person _____

Has a “love” relationship _____

Is a 4.0 student _____

Hates to watch television _____

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Major Assignments

Communication assignments should be prepared thoughtfully and with a consideration to their validity and reliability. Such assignments should meet, at a minimum, three standards. First, assignments should be consistent with the goals of the course, the instructor, and the student. The course goals dictate the course content and the students' assignments. In addition, the instructor's teaching style, personality, and expertise must be considered. The needs of the students are similarly important. Students should be given assignments that will be useful to them in their future careers and relationships.

Second, the assignment must distinguish between those students who are competent communicators and those who are not. A broad range of competencies should be tested by each assignment. Various levels of mastery of the course objectives should be differentiated. Specific criteria for measuring competence should be inherent in the assignment.

Third, the assignment should be fair to the students. Evaluations of the students should be based on criteria known to them and should measure only those skills that have been taught during the course. The criteria should be as objective as possible. Objective, observable criteria ensure that all students are evaluated on the same basis.

With these guidelines in mind, teachers can design major assignments. Some major assignments that are appropriate for the hybrid course are assigning a journal such as the Communication Analysis Journal or the Self-Awareness Journal described by Pearson and West (1991). Interpersonal assignments may include an assigned conversation or an interview. The small group discussion is often used within the hybrid course. Public speaking assignments may include informative or persuasive speeches delivered in impromptu, extemporaneous, memorized, or manuscript modes.

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Examinations

Written examinations are a time-honored method to evaluate learning. The three major types of written examinations are the essay, multiple-choice, and true-false tests. The choice of the type of test depends on the time available for the construction and scoring of the test, the number of students in the course, and the kind of learning to be evaluated. Essay tests are both difficult and time-consuming to construct if a valid, reliable essay examination is the teacher's goal. Essay questions are appropriate when creativity or originality in explaining relationships among concepts is appropriate or when an analysis of a problem or situation is desired. The potential unreliability in the scoring of essay questions precludes their use except for testing application of information to complex problems. The essay test allows an examination of the student's ability to freely recall information and to synthesize information in original ways. Three examples of essay questions for the hybrid course follow.

1. Construct a model of communication. Your model should include the basic elements of communication, the important variables that affect communication, and the relationships among the variables. Explain your model.
2. When studying a new subject, one of the student's first tasks is to master the vocabulary of the discipline. Relate this statement to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Explain the hypothesis in your answer and cite examples of it from your speech communication class.

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3. If you wished to increase your perceived competence, an aspect of source credibility, what could you do to make the audience believe you to be an expert on the topic? Focus on strategies to use before, during, and after the speech.

Multiple-choice tests similarly take a great deal of time to construct if valid and reliable measurement is the goal. Unlike essay tests, they are easily and reliably scored. Multiple-choice tests require students to recognize, rather than to recall, the answers. When teachers wish to measure students' ability to learn the definitions and attributes of concepts and their relationships to each other, they use a multiple-choice test. This format is also appropriate when teachers: evaluate large numbers of students, use the tests repeatedly, and want uniform measurement of the learning of students in several sections of a course. Three examples of multiple-choice questions for the hybrid course follow.

1. Amputees reporting that they still experience "feeling" in the location of their missing limb is an example of:
 - A. perceptual filtering
 - B. perceptual objectivity
 - C. perceptual recall
 - D. perceptual constancy
2. The EEOC suggests that if an interview question is not within the legal guidelines:
 - A. you should explain your reluctance to answer
 - B. you should refuse to answer without any explanation
 - C. you should report the offending employer immediately.
 - D. you should leave the interview immediately.

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3. The memorized mode of public speaking would be most appropriate in which of the following situations?
 - A. A candidate for office gives the same speech several times a day during the campaign.
 - B. You answer a question in class during a review for a test.
 - C. You are giving a speech to your classmates on ways to improve study habits.
 - D. The President is presenting a special report on the economy to Congress.

True-false tests are less useful than multiple-choice examinations. They can be of value in testing material about which an insufficient number of plausible alternatives exist for multiple-choice questions. These kinds of questions test recognition of definitions of concepts and the relationships among them, just as multiple-choice questions do. The primary weakness with true-false questions is that students have a 50 percent chance of guessing the correct answer. Three examples of true-false questions for the hybrid course follow.

1. The perceptual process by which we supply missing information is closure.
2. In ad hominem fallacy, argumentation is directed at the person rather than the issue.
3. One of the most common immediate behavioral purposes in an informative speech is to encourage audience members to state what they have learned.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HYBRID APPROACH

Although some introductory course researchers have suggested that “we do not know what is the most effective approach to organizing and teaching the basic course” (Seiler & McGukin, 1989, 35), the hybrid orientation has endured as a mainstay in the academy (Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1990). As the academic pendulum swings between an emphasis on professional skills and on traditional liberal arts, the course loses and gains enrollment. Nonetheless, it has remained as one of the two most popular introductory courses in American colleges and universities over the last decade.

A public speaking emphasis characterizes many introductory communication courses (Gibson, et al., 1990), but research has not demonstrated the superiority of the public speaking approach as most effective or satisfying (Seiler & McGukin, 1989). Indeed, surveys have found that many people believe interpersonal skills are more important, or equally important, to public speaking skills. Lohr’s survey (1974) of alumni found that they most frequently engaged in social conversation, making decisions, and giving information to one person. The most important activities included giving information and making decisions with another person, and providing information to a group.

A survey of college students and alumni found that, regardless of the nature of the introductory course experienced, both students and alumni believed the hybrid course to be most appropriate (Pearson, Sorenson, & Nelson, 1981). The researchers observed, “Surprisingly few subjects selected the public speaking course which most of them had experienced” (298).

In a related study, alumni were asked about those communication skills that were most important to their job

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success. Sorenson and Pearson (1981) found that interpersonal communication, not public speaking, was most important. Although the alumni surveyed did believe that public speaking skills formed part of their communication core, it was listed after an understanding of interpersonal communication, communication climate, leadership communication, message flow, small group communication, written communication, and interviewing,

Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) surveyed alumni, students and instructors. All three groups agreed that listening was among the top three most important communication skills. The students and instructors agreed that small group communication ranked in the top three while the students and the alumni agreed that interpersonal skills were in this top three category. The alumni, alone, rated handling questions and answers as a top three skill while the instructors placed organizing the speech in this category.

National leaders and introductory communication course researchers have recommended that we listen to former and current students. While serving as the President of the Speech Communication Association, Wallace Bacon (1977) observed, "Institutions are facing the task of teaching men and women to interact with others in the day-to-day world outside their walls" (10). Bendtschneider and Trank (1988) encouraged administrators and faculty "to be primarily concerned with the extent to which the basic course is fulfilling the communication needs of their students" (4).

Another rationale for the hybrid approach concerns enrollment in communication courses. Most college students enroll in only one communication course. Serving in the national office of the Speech Communication Association, Don M. Boileau (1985) remarked, "If 'the eyes are the mirror to the soul, then the *basic course* is the 'mirror' to the *discipline*. For many students the basic course is the only instruction in speech communication" (74). Since the introductory course serves as their sole exposure to the communication field, it is

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imperative that the course be as comprehensive as possible. The luxury of studying a single context within an individual course should be reserved for upper division courses taken by communication majors who enroll in many communication courses.

Administrators from programs outside of the communication field are more likely to know about and require students in their academic units to take courses in our discipline that include public speaking than they are to take interpersonal communication courses. The hybrid course includes this communication context seen as vital to those in the ivory tower. At the same time, it averts student fears that often accompany enrolling in an exclusively public speaking course. Students are gentled into public speaking experiences after participating in intrapersonal activities, dyadic exchanges, informative interviews, personal conversations, and small group discussions. The hybrid course naturally follows an incremental approach which allows students to move developmentally from intrapersonal to interpersonal to public speaking contexts.

Finally, the hybrid course, unlike some other approaches, can be offered in the small, traditional, autonomous section, in personalized systems of instruction (PSI), and in large lecture courses. Public speaking, nearly always present as a skills course, cannot be taught in the same variety of delivery systems. As our academic dollar continues to shrink, more economic formats may become necessary.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE HYBRID COURSE

The future of the hybrid approach is bright. The course continues as a mainstay among the introductory courses. Further, an examination of popular textbooks written for this

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course demonstrates a sensitivity to cultural and societal changes. For example, of the top four textbooks cited by Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990), only one is hybrid in nature. *Understanding and Sharing: An Introduction to Speech Communication* (Pearson & Nelson, 1991), originally published in 1979, has gone through five revisions and now includes chapters or major sections on gender, friendship, family communication, critical thinking, critical listening, active listening, empathic listening, interpersonal relationships, leadership, and visual aids. None of these topics were included in the first edition. Furthermore, the book exhibits a multicultural sensitivity, essential on the college campus in the last decade of this century. Gray (1989) acknowledged that the introductory course “is highly valuable to the students and to the speech communication profession and so it needs to be kept current with societal needs and expectations” (3). The hybrid course, as illustrated in the most popular text adopted in the course, has met that challenge.

Within the next decade, the hybrid course will probably reflect the business and professional skills desired by a heavily work-oriented student population. Beyond the decade, the course will probably continue to adapt to changing cultural, social, and economic conditions. The hybrid course has a diversified portfolio and is more likely to survive in uncertain times than are the individually invested courses we teach.

College and university curricula will probably be transformed by the year 2000. Telecommunication and computer industries have begun to demonstrate the possibilities of combining audio, video, and computer systems into interactive learning opportunities for students. Within our own discipline, textbook companies have become increasingly able to offer computerized text packs, video tapes, overhead transparencies, and other learning ancillaries. The introductory communication courses, including the hybrid course, will be

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markedly different because of the developments within communication systems industries.

SUMMARY

This paper described one approach to the introductory communication course. Specifically, the essay delineated the course structure, the importance of the course, and some future directions for the course. Over 25 years ago, Dedmon (1965) wrote, "Our traditional approaches have blinded us to the real objective of the required first course: To teach a general education course in oral communication" (125). The hybrid course answers Dedmon's call to action. It provides a viable educational opportunity.

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