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Introductory Communication Theory: Not Another Skills Course

William C. Donaghy

University of Wyoming

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Introductory Communication Theory: 
Not Another Skills Course!

William C. Donaghy

Speech communication departments in every institution of higher education face unique circumstances when deciding their type and number of introductory courses. Different demands are placed on communication departments operating in community colleges, four year liberal arts colleges, land-grant institutions and major research universities. Some of these situational demands are: how the department is perceived by the administration (i.e., service or major oriented); whether skills courses are accepted as part of the college- or university-wide general education curriculum; whether the college or campus has a communication skills requirement; the college division in which the department is located (i.e., humanities, fine arts or social science); whether the department has a graduate program; and how the department perceives itself (i.e., teaching, service or research focused). An introductory course is defined as one without a prerequisite. The term “introductory” is preferred rather than “basic” since a common connotation for the latter term is “remedial,” such as high school English or mathematics.

The main purpose of this paper is to describe an introductory communication theory course which meets the demands placed on the Department of Communication and Mass Media at the University of Wyoming. Other implications, however, are 1) the circumstances at the University of Wyoming appear to be similar to those found on many other campuses, 2) theory based introductory courses have several advantages over skills based courses, and 3) we may be doing our depart-
ments and discipline more harm that good by offering so many introductory skills courses.

Because of our discipline's traditional service obligation almost every communication department offers at least one fundamental communication skills course, usually public speaking. This practice is so common that many of us think of public speaking as THE introductory course. Recently, it has become more or less standard for speech communication departments to also offer an introductory interpersonal communication course. Again, this is typically a skills based course. Although speech communication majors sometimes enroll in these courses, they are primarily designed for students majoring in other disciplines. On some campuses these are the "bread and butter" courses for the department.

Communication skills courses are often so popular that many departments have begun devising offshoots of public speaking and interpersonal communication. One example is the "hybrid" course, which combines public speaking with other communication skills such as interpersonal communication, interviewing, and group communication. The business and professional speaking course is another hybrid offshoot which is designed to meet the particular needs of a specific audience. Some universities also teach skills courses for communication apprehensive students. There are probably many other variations as well. In almost all cases these offshoots have followed the skills based format found in public speaking and interpersonal communication.

Is this emphasis on skills courses at the introductory level helping or hurting our departments and our discipline? No doubt, skills courses are well accepted on most campuses, generate high enrollments, and help sustain a graduate program. But, what impression do we give to the rest of the campus when the bulk of what we teach freshman from other disciplines are skills courses? Are we giving the impression that all we have to offer is skill training? In a section titled
“The Movement Toward Skills” in his paper included in this forum, Joe DeVito claims:

I think that a skills emphasis is easier to justify to administrators and university committees that a theory emphasis. The theory emphasis — especially when coupled with a relational emphasis — would be difficult to separate from many a psychology or sociology course. It isn't quite as unique as a skills emphasis course.

I disagree with Joe’s statement although I know many would support it. At Hunter College, that may be an accurate statement, but at the University of Wyoming, it certainly isn’t. The statement implies that communication is a subset of psychology or sociology and that all administrators expect of us are skills courses. If this were true at Wyoming we would have been eliminated long ago. The case Joe describes is one where I think the department has overemphasized skills courses to the point where all the administration and faculty see as unique about the discipline is it's skills emphasis. To give Joe his due, however, later in that same section he states:

Skills are teachable; we can see the results from our teaching skills; it is difficult to see the results from our teaching theories. And perhaps as communication teachers many of us have been conditioned to look at skill development as a measure of our instructional effectiveness. ... Whether this (movement to skills) is for good or ill, however, is not clear in my mind.

With this observation, I can agree, but I have a greater concern about the movement toward skills than many. Let me tell you why.
BACKGROUND

When I first came to the University of Wyoming, we had three introductory courses: a basic public speaking course, an interpersonal communication course, and one called “Introduction to Human Communication.” The purpose of the first two courses have remained essentially unchanged over the past two decades. The public speaking course is an individual skill development course offered primarily for non-communication majors and taught by graduate assistants. As with most skills courses, some theoretical material is presented, but the bulk of the course involves students giving speeches and receiving feedback. The interpersonal communication course is taught in essentially the same manner but with the focus on interactional skills. A faculty member lectures one hour per week and graduate assistants conduct the discussion sections, where interpersonal communication exercises are introduced, for the remaining two-thirds of the course. This course is also oriented to the non-communication major.

The introductory course that has seen the most evolution over the years is the third course. Originally the content of this course was very similar to that offered in interpersonal communication EXCEPT that it was taught by tenure-track faculty, there were few individual skill development activities, and the content breadth and depth was much greater than in the interpersonal course. Because the course was so similar to the interpersonal communication course, students originally could not receive credit for both. It was designed primarily to introduce communication majors to other subjects taught in the department. While students from other disciplines did find their way into the course, it certainly was not marketed that way.
The typical content focus was on various cognitive processes (i.e., perception, motivation and the like), verbal and nonverbal communication, and communication contexts such as interpersonal, group, organizational, public, cross-cultural, and mass communication. The text Phil Emmert and I published (Emmert & Donaghy, 1981) is a good example of this beefed-up interpersonal approach. There are many other texts on the market that take essentially the same approach. Communication research and theory are seldom discussed directly. The focus is on concepts and principles derived from theory and research.

Several factors influenced our decision to move away from this curricular format. Although all three courses consistently maintained high enrollments, we felt we could better utilize our faculty if we didn’t teach two courses that had such an obvious content overlap. Second, we switched from the College of Arts and Sciences humanities division to the social science division. This change better reflected our faculty’s teaching and research focus, but it also put us in direct competition for general education enrollment with a different set of disciplines. Introductory social science courses are primarily theory oriented; whereas in the humanities, language and English instruction have a long tradition of skills instruction.

Third, at the University of Wyoming, the number of courses meeting the general education requirements has traditionally been an important operational definition of mission centrality. If there is one common question that is raised on all campuses, it is how do we fit the mission of our university, college and division? This becomes an especially important question when a University, such as ours, is facing cutbacks and reallocation decisions. Although the Arts and Sciences College faculty have undergone many changes in their general education philosophy, they have consistently objected to giving general education credit for skills courses; that includes English writing courses, music performance, courses, and basic drawing courses, as well as public speaking
and interpersonal communication courses. I am aware that this is not true on all campuses.

The most persuasive argument for change was that our discipline has developed a strong theoretical base which should be presented to all students as early as possible. Why should we wait for students to reach our second level courses (if they ever do) before we present them with the basic methods and theories of our discipline? We no longer have to take a backseat to any academic department (including psychology and sociology). Littlejohn makes this point when he says “we once borrowed almost all our theories from fields tangentially concerned with communication; today, most important theories of communication are produced within the field” (288). Teaching only skills loosely derived from a theoretical base makes us appear intellectually inferior to the other disciplines.

With these considerations in mind, the faculty decided to develop an introductory communication theory course. That decision has since proved to be a wise choice. What follows is a description of the course as it is currently taught, some discussion of the problems we have faced, and the future of the course as we see it.

**DESCRIPTION FOR THE COURSE**

The introductory communication theory course is taught in a large lecture format for three hours credit. The enrollment in the course ranges from 100 to 150 students. It is taught by tenure track faculty on a rotating basis. We try to move instructors through this course on a one to two year basis; that is long enough for an instructor to get comfortable with the course, but not so long that he or she gets “burned out.” It is a difficult course to teach, and two years is about all any of us can take at one stretch. The major difference
between this course and the one that preceded it is that this course is designed to introduce speech communication methods and theory to students from all parts of the University. Our new departmental core curriculum also requires this introductory theory course for all communication and mass media majors.

Theoretical Overview

This course is intended to serve as a general introduction to the theories and research questions investigated by social scientists interested in the processes of human communication. The course seeks to orient the beginning student to the major areas within communication by focusing on the types of questions scholars and practitioners ask, and the types of answers offered. (Fall, 1990, Communication Theory Course Syllabus)

One requirement of any introductory course that meets the general education criteria for Social and Behavioral Sciences is that it contain a substantial discussion of the methods of social scientific inquiry and how that differs from other forms of scholarly inquiry. Hence, the first week or two is devoted to examining the various types of scholarship, how knowledge is created, the process of inquiry, the nature and elements of theory, the scientific method, philosophical issues and the like. These themes are utilized throughout the course in assessing the credibility of various theoretical communication models. The major thrust of the course then turns to an examination of communication theory and how scholarship in the discipline relates to that in other behavioral science disciplines. Both general and context theories are examined, as well as the methods used to develop communication theory.
PURPOSE OF THE COURSE

Course Objectives

The purposes of the course are to: (1) provide you with an initial understanding of the perspectives used to describe communication processes in human behavior; (2) introduce some basic concepts, theories and issues central to understanding human communication processes; (3) acquaint you with some of the major approaches used to study human communication, and (4) help you become a better communicator and understand the messages of others through the use of this knowledge. (Fall, 1990, Communication Theory Course Syllabus)

A second requirement of a University Studies course is that it allow students to relate the information gained to their own professional and personal activities. This is certainly not a difficult requirement to meet in a speech communication course. Along with human communication concepts, theories, methods and issues, we provide in-class and out-of-class assignments which require the student to apply this information to “real life” situations.

Course Content

When we first started this freshman level course, there were few books from which to choose. The main communication theory texts were written for junior/senior level students if not graduate students. Over the last several years we have used both Sarah Trenholm’s (1986) and Stephen Littlejohn’s (1989) texts with supplementary readings. I use these
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supplemental readings for several reasons noted below. Both the Trenholm and Littlejohn books present a real challenge for freshman students. Recently several new theory texts have become available. We will be evaluating those in the near future. Over the last three semesters, since I have been teaching the course, we have used the Littlejohn text. The basic content outline (see Table 1) is taken primarily from that text. At an introductory level, I find it easier to adapt my teaching to the text. This causes less confusion for the student, and the outline provided in the Littlejohn text seems to be as good as any currently available.

Table 1
Communication Theory Course Content
## Introductory Communication Theory: Not Another Skills Course

<table>
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<th>The Social Science of Communication</th>
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<td>Grammatology (Derrida)</td>
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<td><strong>Theory in the Process of Inquiry</strong></td>
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<td>The Process of Inquiry</td>
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<td><strong>The History of Communication Theory</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cognitive and Behavioral Theories</strong></td>
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<td>Communication Theory and Scholarship</td>
<td>The Behavioral Tradition</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is Communication Theory?</td>
<td>Language/Behavior Theory (Skinner)</td>
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<td><strong>Structural and Functional Theories</strong></td>
<td>Persuasion/Behavior Theory (Yale U.)</td>
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<td>System Theories (Hegel, Darwin, Spencer, Etc.)</td>
<td>Semantic Space Theory (Osgood)</td>
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<td>Information Theory (Shannon)</td>
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<td>General Theory of Signs (Peirce, Eco, et al.)</td>
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<td>Language Structure Theory (Saussure)</td>
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### Cognitive and Behavioral Theories (continued)

- The Cognitive Tradition
- Stimulus-Response (S-R) Link
- Social Judgment Theory (Sherif)
- Constructivist Theory (Delia)
- Social Cognition Theory (Kelly)
- Action-Assembly Theory (Greene)
- Comm. Apprehension Theory (McCroskey)
- Info. Integration Theory (Anderson et al.)

### Social Judgment Theory (Sherif)

- Expectancy-Value Theory (Fishbein)
- Elaboration Likelihood Theory (Petty & Cacioppo)

### Constructivist Theory (Delia)

- Consistency Theories
- Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger)
- Belief/Attitude/Value Theory (Rokeach)

### Social Cognition Theory (Kelly)

- Communication Rules Theories
- Ordinary Language Theory (Wittgenstein)
- Speech Act Theory (Searle)
- Rule-Governing Theory (Shimanoff)
- Socialization Theory (Kelly)

### Action-Assembly Theory (Greene)

- Contingency Rules Theory (Smith)
- Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (Pearce & Cronen)

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### Rule-Governing Theory (Shimanoff)

### Socialization Theory (Kelly)

### Contingency Rules Theory (Smith)

### Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (Pearce & Cronen)
### Interpersonal Communication Theories (continued)
- Discourse Processes
- Conversational Maxims Theory (Grice)
- Propositional Coherence Theory (van Dijk)
- Sequencing Coherence Theory (Sacks)
- Rational Coherence Theory (Jackson & Jacobs)
- Compliance-Gaining Theory (Wheelis)
- Relational Processes
- Relational Communication Theory (Bateson)
- Relational Theory (Watzlawick, et al.)
- Relational Control Theory (Millar & Rogers)
- Relational Perception
- Metaperception Theory (Laing)
- Relational Dimension Theory (Burgoon)
- Relational Competence Theory (Spitzberg)
- Relational Development
- Balance Theory (Newcomb)
- Social exchange Theory (Thibaut/Kelley)
- Social Penetration Theory (Miller)
- Disengagement Theories (Duck/Baxter)
- Relational Conflict
- Game Theory (Neumann/Morgenstern)
- Persuasion & Conflict Theory (Simons)
- Attribution Theory of Conflict (Sillars)

### Group Communication Theories
- Field Theory (Levin)
- Input-Process-Output Model
- General Organizing Model (Collins, et al.)
- Group Syntality Theory (Cattell)
- Groupthink Theory (Janis)
- Faulty Decision Making Theory (Hirokawa)
- Interaction Process Analysis Theory (Bales)
- Decision Emergence Theory (Fisher)
- The Structurationist Perspective
- Structuration Theory (Giddens)
- Group Structuration Theory (Poole)
- Multiple Sequence Theory (Poole)

### Organizational Communication Theories
- Structure and Function
- Bureaucratic Theory (Weber)
- Systems Approach
- Integrative Theory (Farace, et al.)
- Unobtrusive Control Theory (Tompkins/Cheney)
- Human Relations Approach
- Four Systems Theory (Likert)
- Theory of Organizing (Weick)
- Org. Structuration Theory (Poole/Maphe)
- Organizational Culture
- Performance Culture Theory (Pacanowsky)
- Conflict Culture Theory (VanMaanen/Barley)

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**Mass Media Theories**
- The Mass Media
- Popular Media Theory (McLuhan/Innis)
- Semiotic Media Theories (Fry/Fry)
- Media as Social Institution (Hoggart/Williams)
- British Cultural Studies (Hoggart/Williams)
- Media and Audience (Lazarsfeld)
- Two-Step Flow Hypothesis (Lazarsfeld)
- Innovation Diffusion Theory (Rogers)
- Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann)
- Theories of Cultural Outcomes (Lasswell)

**Cultivation Theory** (Gerbner)
- Agenda Setting Function (Lippman)
- Theories of Individual Outcomes (Klapper)
- Powerful Effects Theory (Noelle-Newman)
- Uses & Gratifications Theory (Blumler/Katz)
- Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach/DeFleur)
- Uses & Dependency Model (Rubin/Windahl)

**Public Communication Theories**
- Intercultural Communication Theories
- Trends in Communication Theory

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**COURSE STRUCTURE**

**Syllabus**

I use an extensive syllabus in this course. Besides the course content, broken up into daily reading, lecture and application assignments, the syllabus contains information related to examinations, exercises and the evaluation procedure. The supplemental readings packet contains the syllabus, a study guide for each chapter, and sample questions taken from previous pop quizzes and examinations. In the future I also intend to add fairly extensive application exercise descriptions to the packet as well.
Student Assignments

Outside-of-class activities are assigned throughout the semester. These observation papers, journals and other activities require the student to apply the materials learned in class to their own experiences. In conjunction with the semiotics section, for example, students find and report on various signs in their environment. When we discuss nonverbal communication theories, the students observe various types of nonverbal behavior and write a short paper describing these observations. When we study muted group theory, students keep a log of the sexist language they find in their environment. When we study contextual theories, students are required to keep a journal of communication episodes in various contexts, including dyadic relationships, group meetings, organizations they come in contact with, and what they see and hear from the media. These assignments are usually evaluated on a pass/fail basis. The purpose of these assignments is cognitive awareness, not practice in performance. Individual skill development, such as public speaking or interpersonal communication assignments, are not included as student activities.

Course Examinations

Normally there are three or four examinations during the semester. The examinations are all objective, consisting of multiple choice and true-false questions. Two forms are developed for each examination. Both have the same questions but in a different order and multiple choice questions have a different foil distribution. Each form is also copied on a different colored paper, to ensure that students sitting next to one another other do not have the same form. Examinations are
taken in a larger room which allows for an empty seat on either side of each student. No make-up exams are given unless “authorized” excuses are provided prior to the examination day. The mean examination score is about 75%.

Pop quizzes are given over the reading and lecture material throughout the semester. These quizzes are not announced. There are no make-up quizzes. The quizzes are usually easier than the examinations. The main purpose of the quizzes is not necessarily to test content knowledge but to keep the students reading and maintain good class attendance without taking roll. With a class this size, taking attendance requires almost half the class period.

In addition, part of the grade comes from class participation. Since attendance is not taken, roll sheets are passed around from time to time and count as class participation. Satisfactory completion of the in- and out-of-class exercises also counts as class participation. Finally, students are sometimes asked to participate in a department research project and this counts as class participation as well. The traditional grade cutoffs (90% = A, 80% = B, 70% = C, and 60% = D) are used to score all examinations and pop quizzes as well as determining the final grade.

**Course Exercises**

Because of the course size, in-class exercises are primarily selected from those that can be done with large groups. Sample activities include a symbol-using exercise where students must identify various symbols used in our culture including words, icons, sounds, and pictures and the feedback exercise where volunteers describe a series of rectangles so others can draw them, using no feedback, limited feedback and full feedback. We also do a modified version of the Prisoner’s Dilemma game in-class to demonstrate cooperation.
and competition during the discussion of game theories. There are, however, only a limited number of exercises which can be done with over 100 students in a short time period. When time permits, film and videotape material are also used to illustrate the content.

**Course Evaluation**

At our University, course evaluation has never been very systematic. Every department uses a different method of gathering peer and student responses to a course. Recently the Department of Communication and Mass Media has instituted some new course evaluation procedures including peer visitations and exit interviews with students. In general, however, student evaluations of the course are fairly good compared to those in other introductory social science courses (above 3.0 on a five point scale). When compared to evaluations generated in skills courses or upper division courses, the evaluations are rather low. As is true with student course evaluations in general, the expected grade is the single best predictor of the course evaluation; those students who do well in the course generally like it, while those who don't do well can usually find a reason to blame the content, text, or instructor.

Information obtained from other communication instructors and advisors in other departments tends to be more positive. They like the new structure in that students come into their courses with a breath of knowledge about communication which was missing before. They find students using information gained from this course in subsequent, upper division courses. Constantly increasing enrollment is one of the best indications that students and faculty are evaluating the course positively.
TEACHING METHODS

Some of our faculty have found the course beyond their capabilities. Because of the challenging text content, I find it necessary to spend at least one full class period working the students through each of the major theory chapters. Last summer, two graduate students helped me put together a packet of supplementary readings which deal with the major theories in each chapter. The purpose of these readings is to supplement and reinforce my discussion of the theories and explain the content in a way that is more understandable to lower division students. These readings also appear in the student’s packet. In the future I hope other course instructors will refine that information.

While discussing the various communication methods and theories, I naturally try to add additional information and tend to focus on those I find most interesting. I also find, however, I must get back to primary sources for many theories outside my speciality areas. The course forces me to keep up with new concepts and developments in all areas of our discipline and may be an important, unintended, benefit of such a course for the department. Students ask questions during these discussions about anything they do not understand. I try to answer them to the best of my ability, even if I have to delay my response until I can obtain the information. I also spend one day before each examination reviewing and answering questions on the material to be covered.

The amount of effort devoted to making sure students understand the basic concepts, issues, and theories, does not leave much time for enrichment lectures. I have thought of taking the approach some others use and making the students individually responsible for text material no matter how difficult and confusing it may be. That’s just not my style, however; so after working through the basic content and
taking time out for test preparation and examinations, I usually have 12 to 15 class periods for enrichment lectures. In my case, for example, I spend two class periods discussing nonverbal communication principles and theories because the text does not give this area much attention. I also present enrichment lectures on such topics as the history of communication as a discipline, listening, conflict, public communication and intercultural communication. When the course is taught by other instructors, they naturally focus on enrichment material that is most interesting to them.

**PROBLEMS IN THE COURSE**

**General Problems**

There are several reasons why some faculty find this course hard to teach. One reason is the amount of preparation it takes to get familiar with so many different theories. The graduate preparation of many new professors has not included the theory and methods used in sub-specialities within our discipline. The alleged rhetorical/behavioral science split is the most obvious, but a quantitative/qualitative division is also appearing. We find new faculty know a great deal about one context such as interpersonal communication, but little about groups, organizational, or mass communication. In my opinion, this is a fault of our M.A. level preparation where breadth should be emphasized.

A second reason some faculty have problems in this course is a lack of effective classroom management strategies. Like any large lecture class, students are prone to be somewhat rude at times. They try to get away with arriving late, leaving early, reading a newspaper, talking to one another, and asking frivolous questions. Student feedback occasionally
indicates confusion, disagreement and even hostility. They test each new instructor. This is especially true of students from other disciplines who don’t necessarily want to take a social science course in the first place. It is a challenge to make some of the theories and concepts meaningful to these students. The text provides some helpful examples and explanatory material but Littlejohn tries to stay with the scholarly terminology as much as possible. Many students find this confusing without adequate explanation by the instructor.

Just the pure mechanics of recording grades on pop quizzes and tests is difficult for some instructors in a course of this size. We do not have the resources to provide much assistance for instructors teaching large courses. I use a spreadsheet computer program to perform the gradebook functions. I have developed a spreadsheet program which sums the pop quiz, test and total points; deducts points for absences and incomplete assignments; provides a running grade percentage and letter grade for each student; and even maintains a continuous course GPA. The running grade percentage is useful when the student affairs office, educational opportunity office, fraternity and sorority groups, or the athletic department want progress reports on students. I also provide this information to each student at least three times a semester (after each examination). If the students have been keeping track of their own scores and absences, they can check to make sure my (and their) records are accurate. They also know exactly where they stand at any point in the course. This reduces the amount of argument about final grades.

Another course problem involves grading, distributing and reviewing examinations. Some instructors end up arguing with students about exam questions and grades. I use University facilities to scan the test answer sheets and get an item analysis as well as descriptive statistics. It takes at least twenty minutes just to distribute each exam. I provide an answer sheet for each test along with the answer form and
test. The answer sheet also contains information regarding the percentage of students that got each question correct and the predictive value for each question (i.e., point-biserial correlation of how students in each quintile for the entire exam did on each individual question). I do not allow students to argue in class about any question where more than 40% of the class got the answer right or one which has a high predictive value. Students who still want to argue about one of these question can talk with me during office hours. Over the last two years I have had no more than a half dozen students avail themselves of that opportunity.

**Campus Problems**

The state of Wyoming, like several other mineral dependent states, has been undergoing financial problems for the last several years. Wyoming has no property or state income tax, so it has been hit especially hard. The University of Wyoming is primarily state supported and, therefore, has had to deal with little or no salary increases, high turnover, faculty cutbacks, reallocation decisions, program justifications, and many similar problems. Our Arts and Sciences College is becoming increasingly unwilling to provide lower division courses for other colleges without adequate compensation from those colleges.

Our Department has been targeted twice in the last five years for reduction or elimination. We have had to justify the existence of both our undergraduate and graduate programs; in each case, the justification required was not on the basis of enrollment, but on our centrality to the mission of the University. There was never a question of the need for our service courses. The issue was why is a separate department and degree program required merely to teach service courses? Major questions were raised about how we fit the mission of
the Arts and Sciences College and University, how we justify ourselves as a social science, how a communication major is at least as important than other majors, and how our research is important and integrated into our curriculum as well as that of other departments.

In the eyes of many we were (and still are) simply a service department. Before we changed the communication theory course, that was not necessarily a misinterpretation. We did it to ourselves! Like many departments we had been focusing most of our energies at the introductory level on the traditional skills courses. We had to justify our value and establish our legitimacy as a social science. As we have gotten our courses approved for general education, as more departments are recommending and as more students are taking our content courses, we have begun to be perceived as a viable academic discipline. We are even gaining acceptance as an important social science discipline. We are finding some other unexpected benefits as well. For example, although the number of majors has remained essentially the same, the quality of our majors (as determined by overall GPA) has improved. We also find they take greater pride in being a communication major. This is due in part, I think, to the fact that the communication theory course is rigorous, and students from all parts of the University have to work hard to pass. We still have a long way to go, but we are now on the “right” course.

THE FUTURE OF THE COURSE

At the University of Wyoming, the future of the communication theory course looks very bright. As of November 1990, the course meets the social and behavioral sciences requirement for the newly instituted University Studies (i.e., general education) program, and we are submitting several others for
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various categories in University Studies. The course matches up very well with the other University Studies social science courses. By the number of new communication theory textbooks being published, I suspect that others are facing similar issues at their institutions.

We still face many questions with regard to this course and others in the department. Should we strive for breadth or depth? How much depth can we expect from lower division students given this is now a core course in our curriculum? What content is actually necessary to prepare students for upper division courses? What is it that students from other parts of the university need to know about communication processes and how much do we accommodate their expectations? How do we use this course in recruiting majors? Should we continue using the more challenging texts such as Littlejohn and Trenholm or should we switch to one that is easier for the students to understand but handles fewer theories in less depth? What is the appropriate mix between knowledge of theories and application in the student’s life? Those questions will be continually debated within our department and in the discipline.

Finally, we are once again questioning how much effort we should be devoting to service courses. What is the optimum balance? We are using a rough rule of thumb of 20% skills and performance courses, 20% methods courses, and 60% theory courses, but the appropriateness of these percentages has not been adequately assessed. Obviously, these percentages will be different for an institution with a different set of circumstances. I am convinced, however, that at my institution shifting resources away from skills service courses and into general education and major theory courses is doing us more good than harm. Aside from the benefits I have already mentioned, it is helping us clarify the focus and future of the entire departmental curriculum. Perhaps it is also a good time to think about the focus and future of our discipline, and the focus and future of any discipline is in
large part reflected in the nature of its introductory course(s). Maybe we don’t really need another introductory skills course.

REFERENCES

