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Follow-up to the NCA Basic Communication Course Survey VII: Using Learning Objectives in the Course

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A meta-analysis of an array of national articles, commentaries, and publications calls attention to the importance of the study of communication in contemporary society (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Thematic analysis of 93 journal and newspaper articles, reports, and surveys provide evidence of the centrality of communication to: developing as a whole person, improving the educational enterprise, being a responsible social and cultural participant in the world, succeeding in one’s career and in business, enhancing organizational processes and organizational life, and, addressing emerging concerns in the 21st century including health communication, crisis communication, and crime and policing.

The authors acknowledge the support of research assistant, Terry Sears (M.A., M.PA.) of University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. We extend our thanks to those colleagues who responded to the learning objectives survey and to the reviewers who enhanced this writing.
While little argument now exists regarding the importance of communication instruction, administrators and professors in higher education do face challenges to the consistent delivery of high quality communication instruction in the basic course. Consistency of quality instruction, across multiple sections of the basic course at any given academic institution, could be enhanced by the development and adherence to the accomplishment of a similar and consistent set of critical learning objectives. The importance of establishing and then accomplishing clear learning objectives in the basic course is heightened by the fact that the basic course often is the only communication course the vast majority of students complete in their undergraduate studies.

In the most recent iteration of a national survey of the basic communication course (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006), respondents clearly identified consistency in the basic course (reliability across sections in common content, grading, and rigor) as one of the most salient challenges to administering and teaching the course. Related to this challenge is a need to better understand how basic course learning objectives may be used to help achieve desired consistency. Indeed, many factors, such as teacher training and background, teaching style, methods of grading, administrative leadership, use of part-time faculty, and preference for teacher autonomy, all may contribute to a lack of consistency across sections of the basic course. However, collaborating to discuss, develop, and then make a commitment to adhere to a common set of learning objectives for multiple sections holds promise for directly and indirectly addressing these factors, achieving greater
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consistency, and enhancing student learning in the basic course.

Therefore, building on the results of the 2006 national basic course survey and follow up discussions with basic course directors at national and regional conferences, the purpose of this study is to investigate and develop a better understanding of the type, content, and use of learning objectives in multiple sections of the basic communication course at two and four-year colleges and universities in the U.S.

PERTINENT LITERATURE

In this section, we review literature related to learning objectives in higher education, in communication studies, and in the basic communication course. However, first, we provide clarification of the conceptual definition of the key term, learning objectives.

Conceptual Definitions

Respondents were asked to keep the following description of learning objectives in mind when completing the survey: “Learning objectives—sometimes referred to as learning outcomes—are clearly stated expectations of what students will achieve, learn, and/or be able to do as a result of taking a given class or exposure to a course of study.” This description, developed by the authors, differs somewhat from those provided by other researchers, though other definitions were helpful in the development of the definition used in this study.
Kibler, Cegala, Watson, Barker, & Miles (1981) stated that instructional or learning objectives are “statements that describe what students will be able to do after completing a prescribed unit of instruction” (p. 2). Beebe, Mottet, and Roach (2004) similarly noted that learning objectives describe what the student should be able to do once the teaching is completed. These two definitions tend to limit learning to the behavioral component of communication competence, which was not the desire in the present study.

Some scholars use the term instructional objectives, while others use learning outcomes. Gronlund (2004) shed light on this distinction by suggesting that: a “useful way to state instructional objectives is in terms of the intended learning outcomes of the instruction” (p. 4). This semantic choice between terms— instructional objectives or learning outcomes—may suggest a difference in pedagogical focus. Those who use the term instructional objectives may focus more on teaching processes, while those who use the term learning outcomes may focus more on student learning. Regardless of preferred terminology, education researchers in higher education have discussed the matter of learning objectives extensively.

Learning Objectives in Higher Education

The importance of learning objectives in higher education is highlighted by a multiyear dialogue conducted with hundreds of colleges and universities by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2007). The ensuing report, entitled College Learning for the New Global Century, articulated essential learning out-
comes for students based on an analysis of recommendations and reports from educators, administrators, the business community, and accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education.

Some in higher education, in fact, suggest that learning objectives ought to be the starting point for all instructional and course planning. Gronlund (2004) pointed out that when planning for instruction, "teachers frequently focus on the selection of content, teaching method, and instructional materials" (p. 4). Gronlund indicated that, alternatively, starting with instructional objectives is more effective. Instructors first need to clarify specifically what students will know and be able to do as a result of any course before considering any other aspects of instruction.

Others in education discuss a range of ways that instructional objectives may be useful. These scholars state that proper use of learning objectives can enhance teaching, student learning, assessment, and the evaluation of instructional effectiveness (Gronlund, 2004; McDonald, 2002; Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2006).

Instructors can use clear objectives to guide the selection and development of appropriate instructional methods and selection of pertinent teaching materials. Students need clear and understandable objectives to motivate them to actively participate in and assume responsibility for their own learning processes. Kibler et al. (1981) concluded that when instructional objectives are stated clearly, students feel more secure and will not become frustrated by trying to guess what the instructor expects of them. In addition, clear objectives help instructors and administrators determine the most appropriate method and type of assessment of student learn-
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Learning Objectives in Communication and the Basic Course

The importance of learning objectives in the communication discipline is indicated in the approval by the National Communication Association of a set of “Suggested Guidelines for Undergraduate Programs in Communication.” These guidelines cover broad areas of accountability for the administration of communication programs. Issues addressed include the establishment of projected learning outcomes in communication programs and courses (National Communication Association, 2007).

Docan-Morgan (2007) emphasized the importance of using learning objectives in the basic communication course by stating:

Preparing and teaching the basic course in communication, whether it is public speaking, introduction to communication, interpersonal communication, or a hybrid course, is similar to cooking an elaborate meal for the first time. The cook must have a vision of the outcome he/she wishes to achieve....As instructors, well before we step into the classroom, we must have a vision of what will occur by the time each class ses-
Docan-Morgan, who used the term instructional objectives, also provides directions for developing and communicating learning objectives to students effectively. Accordingly, this scholar says that instructional objectives should be: learner-focused and learner-centered rather than teacher-focused; attainable and achievable; targeted toward particular learning domains (cognitive, affective, and/or psychomotor learning); focused on specific behavior and be observable; and, indicate conditions under which students should perform certain tasks and the degree or standard the student must achieve as acceptable performance.

Table 1
Learning Objectives Drawn from Syllabi Submitted by Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive/Knowledge Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Demonstrate, orally and in writing, understanding of the principles of intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify the fundamental elements of the communication process and how they work together to promote understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognize the power, role, and function of verbal and nonverbal elements in the communication process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn and understand the complex and ubiquitous nature of human communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Describe how the self concept and self esteem influence communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Explain how perception affects communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning Objectives

Table 1 (continued)

Behavioral/Psycho-Motor Objectives
Students will:
• Demonstrate effective speaking and listening habits and skills
• Apply communication theories and skills effectively in a variety of contexts and relationships
• Identify and manage the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication in a variety of contexts
• Manage the influences of self concept, perception, and culture on communication in various situations
• Apply the fundamentals of audience analysis, message construction, development, organization, and presentation including electronically
• Display competency in public speaking by preparing and presenting informative and persuasive speeches effectively and ethically

Affective/Attitudinal or Motivational Objectives
Students will:
• Show appreciation and value of the centrality and complexity of communication in their personal, professional, and academic lives
• Reflect an empathetic attitude toward cultural and contextual factors that impact communication
• Develop more self-awareness as communicators and increase their level of self-esteem
• Show an increase in appreciation of the role of empathy and equality in human communication
• Understand both the sender and receiver’s ethical responsibilities in all communication transactions
• Manage communication apprehension and/or public speaking anxiety and lessen its negative impact on any communication event
A selection of learning objectives, while not perfect based on Docan-Morgan’s directions for developing objectives, is presented in Table 1. These objectives were drawn from the syllabi of the three orientations to the basic course submitted by survey respondents in this study. The objectives are categorized based on cognition, behaviors, and affect.

Background to This Study

Formal, consistent investigation of the basic course began in 1968 with a study conducted by members of the Undergraduate Speech Instruction Interest Group of the Speech Association of America (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970). At the time of that initial study, it was determined that subsequent studies should be conducted approximately every five years. The goal was to keep information current as such data are valuable to basic course directors, department faculty, and administrators at the departmental and college levels. Besides, as the discipline changes, so too should the basic course. The study was replicated in 1974 (Gibson, Kline, & Gruner), 1980 (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes), 1985 (Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty), 1990 (Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston), 1999 (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson), and 2006 (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley).

In the 2006 study, respondents were asked to identify and describe the top problems they face in administering and teaching the basic communication course. Table 2 presents the top problems in rank order. The two most frequently reported problems, consistency and use of part-time faculty, are the same as the most frequently cited problems in the 1999 study (Morreale et
It is intuitively obvious that these top two problems may be related to one another; that is, it may be more difficult to attain consistency and commonality of course content, grading, and rigor, when part-time instructors don't have an opportunity to interact with one another regularly.

These top two problems also confirm other results on the 2006 survey related to standardizing the basic course. In response to other survey questions about course standardization, the challenge of using common learning objectives with diverse and part-time faculty in order to achieve consistency was identified as a central problem. This problem is no doubt complicated in some instances by the lack of a basic course coordinator. Approximately 30% of institutions responding to the latest national survey reported that no one in their department is assigned responsibility for the basic course (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). The problem is yet further complicated by issues of personal preference and academic freedom, all of which may contribute to the challenge of maintaining consistency and using common learning objectives across multiple sections.

Another concern is that the basic communication course often is included in general education requirements and likely to be the first interaction students have with the communication discipline. As such, how learning objectives for the course are designed and implemented becomes critical. Because the inclusion of the basic course in general education requirements occurs on campuses across the United States, standardization and consistency of learning objectives and a commitment to their implementation across sections within in
### Table 2
Top Ten Administrative Problems Identified by NCA Basic Course Survey VII

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problems by rank</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>reliability across sections in rigor, grading, common content</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time faculty</td>
<td>qualifications, communication, recruitment, responsiveness</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>academic preparation &amp; performance, attendance, motivation</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General administration</td>
<td>coordination, supervision, communication, teacher evaluation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology/facilities</td>
<td>inadequate equipment &amp; training, access, physical space</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class size</td>
<td>classes too large, not enough sections</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding/budget</td>
<td>insufficient resources</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching assistants</td>
<td>recruitment, training, motivation, international TAs</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty attitude</td>
<td>burn-out, motivation, coherence to policy, openness to innovation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course design</td>
<td>amount of material, lecture/lab format, number of assignments</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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stitutions, while respecting instructors’ autonomy, is an imperative.

This study focuses on these concerns by investigating who helps to develop learning objectives, how they are articulated and communicated to students, how they shape course content and pedagogy, and how their accomplishment is assessed. Specifically, the survey for this study investigated how learning objectives are implemented in the basic communication course generally and specifically across the three primary approaches to the basic course: public speaking, hybrid (public speaking, group, and interpersonal communication), and interpersonal communication. Are we consistent in the manner that we develop and design learning objectives across these approaches? Are we consistent in the manner that we assess the achievement of these objectives across the approaches? Who influences the design of learning objectives? In sum, to what extent are learning objectives a guiding and influential force in achieving consistency across multiples sections of the basic course within institutions?

METHOD

This study investigated current thinking and praxis in the communication discipline with regard to the use of learning objectives in the basic course. A survey on the use of learning objectives was developed and administered by mail to a random sample of the membership of the Basic Course Division of the National Communication Association. Members of the Basic Course Division were selected as the population for this study
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because of the members’ participation and/or interest in administering or teaching the basic course. Previous national studies of the basic course have been criticized because the researchers did not create a sample population to survey. So for this study, each member of a random sample of 94 identified in the population (current membership of the Basic Course Division) was mailed a survey. This random sample equated to approximately 25% of the membership of the division.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument for this study was created based on responses to the last national survey of the basic course (Morreale, Hugenberg, Worley, 2006). The instrument was designed to more deeply explore responses from the earlier survey regarding the use of learning objectives in the basic course. After its initial development, the survey was subjected to pilot study analysis and then revised to reflect the recommendations of the basic course administrators and instructors who reviewed the instrument. A purposive sample of nine basic course directors and instructors recommended minor edits to survey questions and requested that the survey provide a clear definition of learning objectives for the respondents.

The resulting survey examined the use of learning objectives in the basic course with an eye toward the manner in which learning objectives help address and ensure consistency across multiple sections of the course at the given institution. It contained 54 quantitative questions and three qualitative questions on how academic units develop, use, and evaluate learning objec-
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tives in their basic communication courses. The survey began with 19 questions covering respondent demographics and their use of learning objectives regardless of the type of basic course on their campus. Respondents also were asked to indicate whether their basic course is: public speaking, hybrid (public speaking, group, and interpersonal) and/or interpersonal. Depending on their course type, respondents then were directed to another set of questions specifically focused on learning objectives for each course type.

Sampling and Data Collection

The survey was mailed to the sample population of 94 members of the NCA Basic Course Division. Thirty-seven members completed and returned the full survey yielding a response rate of 39.6%. Respondents were provided a postage paid envelope in which to return the surveys; and, they were asked to provide a copy of the syllabus for their course to the researchers. A follow up mailing to the same random sample encouraged additional responses. Respondents were offered the opportunity to receive the results of the survey anonymously prior to publication of the study.

Kazmier (1988) recommends that any actual sample size should be at least 30 events when estimating averages since the standard formulae for data analysis presume normal distributions. The stipulation is that the events themselves in the sample must be drawn at random, which was the case with the present survey.

Of the 37 respondents, 11 (29.7%) are at two-year academic institutions, ten (27.0%) are on campuses that offer master’s degrees, and 16 (43.2%) are at doctoral
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degree granting institutions. Twelve of the 37 respondents (32.4%) are at campuses with a student population of more than 20,000; 14 (37.8%) are at campuses of 10,000 to 20,000; eight (21.6%) are at campuses with 2500 to 10,000 students; and, three (8.1%) are at campuses of 1000 to 2500 students.

Each respondent was asked to indicate what type of basic course is offered at their institution. Since some of the 37 respondents indicated multiple course types, the result is that, of the 37 respondents, 19 (51%) identified public speaking, 19 (51%) identified hybrid, and seven (19%) identified interpersonal communication. By comparison, in the 2006 basic course national survey, of 306 respondents, 57.8% indicated that the most popular approach to the basic course was public speaking, followed by the hybrid course (35.3%), interpersonal (1.9%), and small group (0.3%). While the validity of the survey results related to the general use of learning objectives is provided by random sampling, disaggregating the data based on course orientation yields smaller samples for each orientation. Despite this issue, the results are presented later based on course orientation, to inform readers interested in these findings who will view them in light of this sampling limitation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequency responses to the quantitative questions and themes for the qualitative question responses. In addition, cross tab analysis was used to compare results based on course type, institutional type,
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and size of campus in the initial section completed by all 37 respondents. The results were categorized as public speaking, hybrid, or interpersonal in course approach, as identified in the survey by each respondent. Since several respondents identified themselves within multiple course orientations, their results were analyzed for each of those orientations, for a total of 45 individual survey responses. For example, four respondents identified themselves as both interpersonal and public speaking; they completed both these sections, and their results were analyzed for both interpersonal and public speaking. In addition to frequency analysis of data for each course approach, the course syllabi were submitted to qualitative review. A thematic analysis of the syllabi was conducted in order to identify descriptive information about various types of basic courses, representative learning objectives (see Table 1), and representative statements that characterize the overall course and its learning objectives.

RESULTS

The following results, presented in narrative and table form, come from 37 respondents to the survey. First, results regarding the use of learning objectives in general, regardless of basic communication course type are presented. Then results are presented categorically based on the type of course indicated by the respondents; that is, public speaking (n = 19), the hybrid course (n = 19), and the interpersonal course (n = 7). Summative conclusions, recommendations for future studies, and limitations of this study then follow.
General Use of Learning Objectives

All respondents to the survey answered the same 19 questions about the nature of their basic course and the use of learning objectives in their course. Of the 37 total respondents, 24.3% (n = 9) offer more than 50 sections of the basic course each term; 27% (n = 10) offer 31 to 50 sections, 18.9% (n = 7) offer 21 to 30 sections; 13.5% (n = 5) offer 11-20 sections; and, 16.2% (n = 6) offer ten or fewer sections.

When asked if their basic course has a set of learning objectives, 91.9% (n = 34) said yes and 8.1% (n = 3) said no. Twenty-nine respondents (78.4%) reported that their basic course is part of the general education program on their campus. When looking at inclusion of the basic course in general education based on course type, the hybrid course responses were highest with 84.2%, followed by interpersonal (71.4%) and then public speaking (68.4%).

Respondents were asked where their learning objectives are articulated. All 37 respondents said objectives are included in their course syllabus; 67.6% (25) said their learning objectives are contained in oral explanations provided by instructors during class; 51.4% (n = 19) said in grading rubrics, and 48.6% (n = 18) said in course assignment descriptions.

When asked if their learning objectives are linked to and help shape course content, instruction, and pedagogy, 94.6% (n = 35) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that objectives serve this purpose in their program. Although a high percentage of respondents from all course types strongly agreed or agreed that learning objectives help shape course content, the interpersonal course had over twice as many respondents indicating...
they were unsure (14.3%) if learning objectives shaped course content. Comparatively, 5.3% of respondents from both public speaking and hybrid courses indicated that learning objectives play a key role in shaping course content.

Of the 37 respondents, 100% strongly agreed \((n = 29)\) or agreed \((n = 8)\) that their learning objectives emphasize communication competence as a course goal, with 100% concurrence across all three course types. Twenty-three respondents (62.2%) strongly agree or agree that their learning objectives describe minimum levels of communication competence expected of students successfully completing the basic course. Specifically, 94.7% of respondents for public speaking indicated that learning objectives describe minimum levels of communication competence, while 85.7% of respondents from interpersonal courses indicated that this was the case. However, a relatively high percentage of hybrid respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed (10.6%) or were unsure (36.8%) as to the significance of the role of learning objectives in describing minimum levels of communication competence.

When asked which components of communication competence are addressed in their course learning objectives, of 37 respondents, 100% identified knowledge and cognition, 97.3% \((n = 36)\) identified behavior and skills, and 56.8% \((n = 21)\) identified motivation and affect (attitudes).

When asked about topical content, respondents indicated that their learning objectives include these six topics: verbal communication 89.2% \((n = 33)\); listening 89.2% \((n = 33)\); nonverbal communication 81.1% \((n = 30)\); the nature of human communication 75.7% \((n = 28)\);
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perception 70.3% \((n = 26)\); and models of communication 67.6% \((n = 25)\). In addition to these topics, ten respondents (27%) identified a range of other topics included as learning objectives. Five respondents (13.5%) identified delivery learning objectives that attend speaking in a variety of contexts. Two respondents (5%) identified issues of research and support in public speaking as learning objectives, while one each identified cultural sensitivity, leadership and organizational theory, and propaganda/media influence as significant learning objectives.

With regard to assessment, 89.2% \((n = 33)\) indicated that student achievement of learning objectives is assessed in ways other than performance on course tests and exams. Those other assessment processes include: preparing, delivering, and evaluating one’s own public speeches 97.2% \((n = 36)\); written assignments 89.2% \((n = 33)\); evaluating public speeches 81.1% \((n = 30)\); group discussion 67.6% \((n = 25)\); group presentations 62.2% \((n = 23)\); and role playing activities 32.4% \((n = 12)\). In addition, three respondents (8%) indicated that they employed some form of interviewing as an assessment measure, while one respondent (2%) indicated that no assessment measures were employed.

When asked if their course’s learning objectives are supported by service learning assignments, 18.9% \((n = 7)\) said yes (strongly agree or agree); 64.8% \((n = 24)\) said no (strongly disagree or disagree), with 16.2% \((n = 6)\) unsure. Examining these results across the course types, the hybrid course percentages for strongly agree or agree were slightly higher (26.2%) than either the public speaking (15.8%) or the interpersonal (14.3%) respondents. As indicated in the overall results, the ma-
majority of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed that their learning objectives were supported by service learning assignments: public speaking (68.5%), hybrid (57.9%) and interpersonal (57.2%).

Twenty-four respondents (64.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that their students clearly understand the learning objectives for their course. Two respondents (5.4%) indicated that their students do not understand the learning objectives (strongly disagree/disagree). Eleven respondents (29.7%) were unsure whether their students understand the learning objectives. Relatively high percentages in the hybrid course (42.1%) were unsure if their students clearly understood the learning objectives for their course as compared to public speaking (21.1%) and interpersonal (14.3%).

When asked who contributes to the development of their learning objectives, respondents answered as follows: 25 (67.6%) said full time faculty in the department contribute; 23 (62.2%) said the basic course director; 20 (54.1%) said the department chair; 11 (29.7%) said part-time faculty in the department; eight (21.6%) said a department curriculum committee and other faculty on campus; six (16.2%) said graduate teaching assistants; and five (13.5%) said the college dean.

Cross tabulations indicated no significant differences in whether the basic course has learning objectives and whether the learning objectives shape course content and pedagogy, based on type of institution (highest degree offered on the campus), highest degree offered in the department, or size of student population on the campus.
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Learning Objectives in the Public Speaking Course

Of the 37 total respondents, 19 indicated that one of the basic courses they offer is a public speaking course. Those 19 answered 16 quantitative questions and one qualitative question on how the learning objectives are used in their public speaking course.

Fifteen of the 19 respondents (79%) said that they strongly agreed or agreed that instructors in their course pursue the same public speaking learning objec-

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic area included in learning objectives</th>
<th>% strongly agree/agree</th>
<th>N/total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conducting research for public speaking</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>18/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent verbal delivery skills</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>18/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively organizing a public speech</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>17/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent non-verbal delivery skills</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>16/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting and narrowing a topic</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>16/18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of evidence in public speech</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical speechmaking</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection, creation and use of speaking</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aids (visual aids) other than PowerPoint</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of oral citations in a speech</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>14/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>14/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective methods for practicing the</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>11/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delivery of a speech</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of public speaking</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>10/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection, creation and use of PowerPoint</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>5/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>during a speech</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One missing response
tives and the same learning objectives for preparing persuasive and informative speeches. When asked about topical content of learning objectives for their public speaking courses, respondents indicated that their objectives include those topics listed by rank order in Table 3.

Respondents were asked what steps are taken to evaluate achievement of the learning objectives related to public speaking. Of the 19 public speaking respondents, six (31.6%) said no evaluation process is in place at this time. Ten (52.6%) said assessment takes place through the evaluation of speech performances. Six respondents (31.6%) reported the use of a standardized public speaking evaluation form or standardized rubrics to evaluate assignments across sections of the basic course. Six respondents (31.6%) pointed to the use of written tests and four respondents (21.1%) use some form of student self-assessment. Three respondents (15.8%) participate in campus wide assessment programs. In their comments, six respondents (31.6%) indicated that frequent faculty meetings, briefings, and other discussions focus on the achievement of learning objectives.

**Learning Objectives in the Hybrid Course**

Of the 37 total respondents, 19 indicated that one of the basic courses they offer is a hybrid course (public speaking, group, interpersonal). Those 19 answered 38 quantitative questions and one qualitative question on how the learning objectives are used in their hybrid course.
Table 4
Topical Content of Learning Objectives for the Public Speaking, Group, and Interpersonal Components in the Hybrid Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1. Topic area included in learning objectives for the public speaking component</th>
<th>% strongly agree/agree</th>
<th>N/total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conducting research for a public speech</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>18/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of evidence in a speech</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>17/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective use of oral citations in a speech</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>17/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent nonverbal delivery skills</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>17/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>84.2</td>
<td>16/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical speechmaking</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectively organizing a public speech</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>14/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective methods for practicing the delivery of a speech</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>15/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting and narrowing a topic</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>12/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of public speaking</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>11/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection, creation and use of speaking aids (visual aids) other than PowerPoint during a speech</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>11/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection, creation and use of PowerPoint during a speech</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>7/19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2. Topic area included in learning objectives for the group component</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leading group discussion</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing group member skills</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making skills</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing diversity in groups</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective thinking</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group presentation skills</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills in groups</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of leadership</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sixteen of the 19 respondents (84.2%) said that they strongly agreed or agreed that instructors in their course pursue the same learning objectives for public speaking; 14 respondents (73.7%) said they pursue the same learning objectives for group communication; and 13 respondents (45.1%) said they pursue the same learning objectives for interpersonal communication.

For the public speaking component of the hybrid course, when respondents were asked about topical content, they said their learning objectives include those topics listed by rank order in Table 4, Section 1. For the group communication component of the hybrid course, when respondents were asked about topical content, they said their learning objectives include those topics listed by rank order in Table 4, Section 2. For the interpersonal communication component of the hybrid course, when respondents were asked about topical content, they said their learning objectives include those topics listed by rank order in Table 4, Section 3.
Learning Objectives in the Interpersonal Course

Of the 37 total respondents, seven indicated that one of the basic courses they offer is an interpersonal communication course. Those seven answered ten quantitative questions and one qualitative question on how the learning objectives are used in their interpersonal course. Five of the seven respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed that instructors in their course pursue the same interpersonal communication learning objectives and the same objectives for developing interpersonal communication skills. Four of seven respondents said that instructors have the same learning objectives for theories of interpersonal communication.

Table 5
Topical Content of Learning Objectives in Interpersonal Communication Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic area included in learning objectives</th>
<th>% strongly agree/agree</th>
<th>N/total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing listening skills</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing conflict in interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and ending or terminating interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>6/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to effective listening</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>6/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertiveness in interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>5/7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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When asked about topical content of learning objectives for their interpersonal communication courses, respondents indicated that their objectives include those topics listed by rank order in Table 5.

Regarding assessment in the interpersonal course, of the seven respondents only one said that no evaluation process is in place at this time. Five of the seven use written tests, three use written assignments such as reflection papers, three use interviews with students, three use group projects of some kind, and one respondent uses role playing. Some standardization of assessment and learning objectives was evident in some respondents’ comments. One uses the same final exam across all sections; another uses a committee of instructors to periodically review objectives and their achievement; and, on one campus, sections of the basic course are randomly selected and their assessment portfolios are sent to the main campus for analysis.

Qualitative Review of Course Syllabi

Twenty-one respondents sent copies of their basic course syllabi along with their surveys. Of these, eight public speaking course syllabi, nine hybrid course syllabi, and four interpersonal course syllabi were received. Some similarities were observed across the syllabi; for example, they all tended to present a numbered or bulleted list of learning objectives, each describing what a student will learn or be able to do by the end of the course. The list of student expectations was varyingly referred to as course objectives (most frequently used term), core or student learning outcomes, or course learning goals. Some listed as few as four objectives
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while others had as many as ten. Only one syllabus, for a public speaking course, listed no learning objectives at all.

In addition to the lists of objectives for student learning, some syllabi also presented statements about the learning objectives, the purpose of the course, or a course description. Statements for the public speaking courses commonly focused on speech preparation (research and composition), organization of ideas, delivery skills, and the presentation of various types of speeches. A typical statement for a public speaking course is: “Upon completion of the course, students will be able to effectively organize and deliver several types of speeches, from introductory through informative, to persuasive and commemorative.”

Statements for hybrid courses emphasized the application of basic communication theory and skills to a variety of contexts in communication, most typically intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, and the public speaking context. A typical statement for the hybrid course is: “This course is designed to help you become a competent communicator in a variety of contexts. You will be introduced to principles and basic skills of interpersonal communication, small group and team communication, and public communication.”

Statements for the interpersonal course emphasized relational communication theory and skills. A representative statement for the interpersonal course is: “An introduction to the knowledge and skills of interpersonal communication. The course content includes facilitation of more effective and supportive behavior, reduction of communication barriers, and development of increased skill and confidence in relationships.”
DISCUSSION

The results of this survey indicate that the majority of basic courses represented in this sample have clearly articulated, shared learning objectives, regardless of course orientation. However, the presence of learning objectives for the course does not necessarily indicate that the objectives are consistently implemented across multiple sections. In addition, there is some divergence across orientations in the relative frequency of the topics included in the objectives and the manner in which assessment is conducted when comparing the three orientations.

All three orientations, public speaking, hybrid, and interpersonal basic courses, focus on communication competence as a major learning outcome. All three orientations adequately address the competence components of knowledge/cognition and behavior/skills; but less, 56.8% of respondents \((n = 21)\), indicate that they include affective learning objectives, related to motivation and attitudes. Given the affective issues that attend communication competence, such as level of self esteem and communication apprehension, this percentage is of particular interest and raises some questions for future research regarding the role of affective learning objectives in the basic course.

Interestingly, respondents only mention members of specific departments or institutions as the primary resources for framing learning objectives for the basic course. While external organizations, such as the National Communication Association, could play a role in developing or refining learning objectives, these contributors were not clearly mentioned by respondents.
Such external sources either could provide expert advice or could serve as a gathering point for discussions of learning objectives; but, they do not seem to serve that purpose as yet.

Notably, service learning does not play a significant role in learning objectives for the basic course, even though this is a widespread trend in higher education. While attention has been given to the integration of service learning in the basic course (see Harter, Kirby, Hatfield, & Kuhlman, 2004), this form of pedagogy is not represented in the learning objectives examined in this study. However, the fact that service learning is not listed as a course objective is not necessarily an indication that these activities and projects are not used in the course.

While respondents indicate a variety of assessment methods in the various orientations to the basic course, performance assessment remains the most frequent method regardless of orientation, while tests and exams remain the least preferred method. Among the other methods of assessment identified by respondents, 67.6% (n = 24) indicated that group discussion was an assessment method. While the survey did not ask how group discussion was assessed, future researchers would do well to focus on understanding the nature of this assessment. At a recent Basic Course Directors Conference, there was relatively little agreement about how instructors ought to assess group interaction and processes in the basic course.

There were mixed responses to the question inquiring about student understanding of learning objectives. Eleven (29.7%) of all respondents were unsure whether students understand the learning objectives for the ba-
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sic course, while 42.1% ($n = 16$) of respondents indicated that they were unsure if students enrolled in the hybrid basic course understand the learning objectives. This is an area that needs additional investigation in order to understand why a relatively large percentage of respondents are unsure as to whether students understand learning objectives. Given that learning objectives are often included in syllabi, grading rubrics, assignments, and oral explanations, this disconnect is worth additional consideration.

Another finding regarding the hybrid basic course is of interest. Respondents noted that only 45.1% of instructors ($n = 17$) pursue the same learning objectives for the interpersonal communication unit in the hybrid basic course, which is significantly lower than the learning objectives for either the public speaking or small group communication units. This difference suggests the need for additional inquiry into why learning objectives are more consistent for two components of the course but not for a third, the interpersonal component. What is it about interpersonal communication that does not lend itself to using the same learning objectives?

Comparative Observations

While all three orientations to the basic course share six common topics for learning objectives, the topics for the various orientations are, not surprisingly, somewhat divergent. Most particularly, the interpersonal communication orientation has fewer shared topic areas than the public speaking and hybrid orientations, although the interpersonal component of the hybrid orientation and the learning objectives for the interpersonal orien-
tation course are similar. This topical divergence points
again to a question frequently voiced in basic course lit-
erature and conversations regarding the nature and fo-
cus of the basic course. It appears that the issue of con-
sistency is not only a matter of concern across sections
of the course, but also for the basic course in terms of its
substance and content, in general. While each institu-
tion understandably has its own goals and reference
points with regard to the basic course, does the basic
course have or should it have some central reference
points across the discipline? Because of articulation and
transfer agreements, some states have developed state-
wide standards for learning in the basic course. For ex-
ample, students attending colleges and universities in
Ohio are now assured by both State law and Ohio Board
of Regents policy that the basic course will transfer from
one state-sponsored college or university to another
state-sponsored college or university—whether two or
four-year. Additionally, the emergence of such initia-
tives as the Spelling Commission raises additional ques-
tions about assessment and accountability, which are
related to discussions of learning objectives. Additional
research that explores these issues with regard to the
basic course should be considered.

Finally, in a comparison of Table 3 and Table 4, Sec-
tion 1, which focus on the topical content of public
speaking in both the public speaking and hybrid ori-
tentions, it is notable that the two orientations empha-
size the same list of topics but in very different rank or-
der. This difference once more suggests an interesting
research investigation, since one may anticipate a
greater symmetry in public speaking learning objectives
in the hybrid and the public speaking orientations. One
other interesting similarity between the data reported in Table 3 and Table 4, Section 1, should also be noted. The selection, creation, and use of PowerPoint are rated as the least important topical learning objective in both the public speaking and hybrid orientations. Given recent conversations at national and regional conventions and the review of many public speaking and hybrid basic course syllabi, the issue of PowerPoint in the basic course has created considerable discussion, as well as divergent views. Additional research that seeks to understand this particular issue should be pursued.

**LIMITATIONS**

One limitation of this study relates to the population from which the sample was drawn. Although the sample was taken from members of the Basic Course Division of NCA, their role in the basic course is not clear. For example, they may be basic course directors, graduate teaching assistants, department or college administrators, or interested faculty. Therefore, either a different sampling technique might be warranted or data identifying respondents' roles in the basic course, as noted above, should be collected in the future. A second limitation, already referenced, relates to the size of the sample for disaggregated data across the three approaches to the basic course. As in most studies of this type, encouraging sufficient responses is problematic. A larger random sample for the entire study would yield larger samples for the three approaches to the course.
CONCLUSIONS

The need for this survey is evident in the content of some of the responses to a final survey question that invited open ended comments about the use of learning objectives in the respondent’s basic course. Several respondents expressed a concern for achieving consistency and “monitoring the application of learning objectives” across sections, particularly given their extensive use of part time and adjunct instructors. This concern harkens back to consistency across sections of the course being identified as a top administrative problem in the seventh national survey of the basic course and the notion that commitment to common learning objectives is one viable approach to achieving greater consistency.

Other respondents to the last question on this present survey indicated that their instructors hold degrees from other disciplines and often have little communication background, perhaps as little as 12 hours of undergraduate speech courses. Yet other respondents to this question said they have written learning objectives but most faculty are not aware of them or choose not to use them. Commitment to implementing common learning objectives across sections of the course at these institutions would speak, at least in part, to these two problems.

It is the hope of these authors that this study will encourage more dialogue about the effective and appropriate use of learning objectives in the basic communication course as a strategy for ensuring consistency of teaching and learning across multiple sections. While the causes of a lack of consistency across sections may be multi-faceted and relate to variations in course con-
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tent, teaching styles, rigor, and other factors, we believe that well developed and effectively implemented learning objectives are a good start point for addressing these concerns. That said, we have learned that just having learning objectives in place is not enough. Rather all stakeholders—administrators and course directors, full and part-time instructors, and students—ust help to develop and support the implementation of common objectives for the course. In fact, instructors could consider inviting students to participate in the process by setting their own personal learning objectives in addition to those articulated for the course itself. If administrators and all course instructors, whether full or part-time, collaborate to develop, honor, and implement the course objectives, variations in factors such as teaching style may not be as much of a deterrent to consistency across sections.

Some time worn clichés come to mind. Perhaps it is time for those involved in the basic communication course at any given institution to consider “dancing to the same drummer,” and “singing from the same choir book!” The goal of such consistency of instruction and future research would be the continued enhancement of the communication competency of all of our students.

REFERENCES

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agents of social change: Engaging students in the basic course through service-learning. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 16*, 165-194.


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