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Basic Course Forum: Adaptation

Embracing Social Media in the Basic Communication Course: Recommendations for the Digital Age

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For communication scholars, the “bread and butter” (Dance, 2002), or “front porch” (Beebe, 2013), of the discipline is the basic course. The basic course is “that communication course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates; that course which the department has, or would recommend as a requirement for all or most undergraduates” (Morreale, Hanna, Berko, & Gibson, 1999, p. 3). Most departments provide either a public speaking or hybrid course as their basic course (Valenzano, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014). Part of maintaining this “porch” is understanding what adaptations are needed. The basic communication course has undergone several transformations since entering the communication curriculum. In 2016, Morreale and colleagues issued a call for additional adaptations to the basic communication course to be made. The goal of these changes is to “prepare all students for contemporary and future challenges to communication across interpersonal, group, and public contexts”(Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016, p. 353).

One way in which to respond to this call is to examine how recent innovations in technology, like social media, have been applied to the basic communication classroom. Unfortunately, studies regarding instructors’ classroom social media is mixed. In some studies, up to 90% of teachers report that they do not use social

media for educational purposes (Bolkan, 2015). In comparison, other examinations (Morgan, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011) report that two-thirds of instructors have used social media as part of their lecture. One goal of this response is to encourage basic course instructors, directors, and administrators to adapt the basic course by more fully integrating social media into their programs. Reasons for this argument derive from two substantial changes: 1) a shift in how communication is practiced in the digital age and 2) the increasing diversity and specialization in the field.

First, the nature of communication is changing. In the advent of the internet, communication has become more instantaneous, accessible, and interactive than ever (Livingstone, 2003). That is, new media's wide connectivity has enabled more access to information and people to engage in communication with anyone around the world. As a result, communication has become two-way, blurring the sender-receiver distinction of mass communication (Rosen, 2008). In other words, those who used to be mere receivers in communication could now easily become senders by generating and distributing their own content (Bruns, 2008). Therefore, communication as practice may have a different meaning for today's individuals—we argue that the case can be made especially for communication students, who generally display more interest and dexterity in using media.

These developments have drastically changed different facets of communication, including self-representation (Thumim, 2012; Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009), public address (Bohman, 2004; Carroll & Landry, 2010), interpersonal communication (Himmelboim, Laricy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2012; Lingel & Naaman, 2012), group communication (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Rosenberry, 2010; Wu Song, 2009), and marketing communication (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Dafonte-Gomez, 2014; Holt, 2016). Scholars argue that communication education should embrace these changes. For instance, Engleberg (2016) argues that introductory communication instruction should be specified and broken down based on core competencies such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, group communication, and business/professional communication.

Integrating social media into the curriculum also strengthens current student learning outcomes in the basic course. In this response, we will focus on examining how a hybrid approach, which is used at our university, can integrate social media into its curriculum. In this course, students are encouraged to meet several goals, or student learning outcomes (SLOs). One highlight of our BCC is concentration selection. Students are introduced to an array of communication topics, skills, and careers that they can pursue in each area. Social media help to bridge all of the

concentrations. Three SLOs are relevant when considering how social media can benefit the basic course.

First, social media could help students choose and declare fields of study within communication. Functioning on the idea of online interaction, social media platforms transcend existing forms of communication (Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2015). In addition, communication on this platform has become a staple in students' everyday life. This means that students will be able to better relate to different areas of communication when thinking about them in association with social media. Some may argue that social media, due to their virtual nature, will take away the importance of basic forms of communication such as interpersonal or group communication. However, researchers have found that social media users still practice these forms of communication online, just that their behavior occurs more quickly and in larger scale (Himmelboim et al., 2012; Konijin, 2008; Wu Song, 2009). On the other hand, students learn to appreciate basic forms of communication by critically thinking about their own social media usage. For example, the first author teaches a communication research methods course; when students are coming up with research topics, a great majority of them initially turn to social media-related topics. However, as they analyze social media usage, they begin to appreciate how fundamental communication practices are prevalent (or adapted in usage) in social media. Therefore, the students begin by using social media to branch out into studies examining basic forms of communication. We believe that students' deciding majors/minors of study in the communication curriculum could also benefit from applying communication in light of their everyday communication activities on social media.

Second, implementing social media in the classroom could help students better understand the different fields of communication as interrelated realms of study and practice. Social media are a form of applied communication (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012) and to understand them better requires an interdisciplinary approach (Miller, 2011; Shirky, 2008). Social media feature several different components related to communication, including interpersonal relationships, group (community) communication, formal/informal language, literary language, rhetoric, images, sounds, videos, and much more. Social media could be used as a tool for adapting class assignments and activities to better suit the current media diet of students. As mentioned above, students are highly active on social media, and for many social media are a primary form of communication. Acknowledging this trend and incorporating social media for different areas of communication (e.g., self-

representation, argumentation, writing, image-analysis) could heighten students' interests as well as get their "feet wet" in each field (Ponnammal, 2016). Not only will social media examples enhance students' interests, they will also function as gateway for the basic course instructor to elaborate on different areas of communication.

Third, and most importantly, social media will help students acquire and assess skills they will need to develop in order to succeed in their chosen area(s) of communication. Students' knowledge and skillsets required to succeed in the field of communication are becoming increasingly detailed and subdivided (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015; Lucas & Rawlins, 2015; Murranka & Lynch, 1999). Among such knowledge and skillsets is the ability to handle social media communication. Anecdotally speaking, the authors estimate that seven out of ten students who approach them for career advice mention that the jobs they seek require the use of social media. To adapt to this trend, social media are used more and more in communication classrooms, with numerous courses designed specifically for utilizing and mastering social media (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Social media potentially raises the user's digital competency as well as skill levels in multimedia editing (Silvia & Anzur, 2011), communicating/writing in short, impactful language (Choi & Park, 2014), backing up claims through web research and hyperlinks (Sellnow-Richmond, Spence, & Bevins, 2015), branding for marketing communication (Holt, 2016), and verbal communication (Burgess & Green, 2009). These skills could easily be weaved into a basic course via social media-related examples and assignments, which will help students identify and understand them effectively and efficiently.

Moreover, social media may be useful for enhancing (or addressing) another key ability that is gaining importance with in the digital environment: media literacy (Cramer, 2015; Hedges, 2009; Tornero, 2010). Critically thinking about the origin of the message, how it is presented, and how others might comprehend it in the social media setting could help students and better understand how to analyze communication and its potential influences in society (Vlieghe, Vandermeersche, & Soetaert, 2016). Such abilities becoming more and more crucial for communication professionals to succeed in an era of information overload.

While social media is a necessary adaptation for the basic course, introducing it should be done with care. For example, communication educators should skillfully practice "safe tech" (Westerman, Daniel, & Bowman, 2016) in their basic communication courses rather than an "abstinence only" perspective. Moreover, privacy should be of utmost concern on these open, accessible platforms. With this

in mind, we provide several recommendations on how social media can be adopted in the basic course:

First, social media can be used as the virtual platform on which the course is administered. On the National Communication Association's website (www.natcom.org), several instructors discuss ways in which social media applications such as Facebook or Pinterest could be used to make announcements, share course materials, and facilitate class discussion. Furthermore, students could perform group work using the connectivity and wiki-like features (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2015) of several social media sites. We argue that the familiar setting of these social media platforms eases the students' access and navigation through course content. In addition, incorporating social media materials for instruction could be streamlined for quicker and more efficient learning. There is one caveat, however: The authors found in a recent roundtable discussion between teachers and students at the 2016 New Jersey Social Media Summit that students feel uncomfortable using their own personal account space to submit assignments (e.g., posting class-related activities on their personal pages). Therefore, we recommend that these pages be maintained so access can only be allowed for students and that they engage with class materials only on the designated class pages.

Second, social media can be used for students' analysis and critical thinking activities regarding class materials. For instance, the hybrid basic communication course at our university features "communication theory week"; providing applied examples on social media could help students understand the theories better as they can better relate to the communication occurring in social media. Furthermore, social media and their diverse nature could help students learn how communication can be practiced for different audiences. This in turn could lead to analyzing messages for enhancing media literacy skills as well. We recommend that recent and influential examples on major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat be used as such materials.

Moreover, employing social media could bolster students' sense of political and civic engagement. As noted by Papacharissi (2009, 2010), the digital environment facilitates the sharing of individual opinions; coupled with interactivity and active participation, these "private spheres" potentially enhance the public deliberation process. By thinking about the possibilities and influences of social media in society, students can better be guided toward engaging with social issues on social media platforms (Penney, 2015).

Finally, social media can be incorporated to enhance various communication and technological skills of students. By learning how to write for different audiences and to present messages in different formats, students can strengthen their skills to better prepare them for future studies and careers. We recommend using social media websites such as YouTube, as its creation process comprehensively requires the student to utilize skills such as writing, speaking, video/sound editing, performing, presentation, and design (Dumenco, 2014). If using the commenting/discussion function of social media for such assignments, we recommend that the content be restricted only to the class members and not made public.

While the basic communication course should adhere to fundamental principles first and foremost, we argue that their students and their understanding of communication is in a state of flux. The “basic” in communication is increasingly being intertwined with social media; therefore, we argue that the basic communication course could better adapt to these changes when embracing social media for areas such as course administration, critical thinking, and enhancing communication-related skillsets.

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