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The Importance of Communication Skill Instruction
and Research in a Changing Society

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The development of communication skills has been a prime objective of communication research and pedagogy for centuries. Humans have been and continue to be interested in how to communicate effectively, appropriately and ethically. Contemporary books that prescribe how to enhance communication skills (e.g. *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*, Chapman, 1992; *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Cargegie, 1936) continue to appear on bestseller book lists. Ancient Greek and Roman philosopher/rhetoricians suggested that the study and practice of rhetoric should emerge from philosophy, the search for truth, and human virtues of goodness and ethical thought and action. Anchoring the rhetorical process in philosophy was, in part, a reaction to sophists who emphasized more behavioral elements of rhetoric

rather than cognitive-philosophical perspectives. Today communication instruction de-emphasizes the philosophical underpinnings of communication in favor of the cognitive, behavioral and affective domains of learning.

Contemporary study of communication in the U.S. emerged from early 20th Century academic departments that taught English literature and composition. The study of written English and literature was among the first specialized areas of study to gain department status. Embedded within early departments of English were educators who emphasized spoken rhetoric. By the late 1800s, it was not uncommon for faculty members interested in elocution to form sub-groups within English departments. By the early 1900s it became clear that several teachers of elocution were growing increasingly uncomfortable teaching elocution and declamation in academic departments that primarily emphasized written messages. The Eastern Public Speaking Conference in 1910 was the first organized effort to establish a network of public speaking and elocution teachers in the United States; at their second meeting, the members approved the first journal, *Public Speaking Review*. The first national effort to organize a professional association of public speaking teachers occurred on November 28, 1914 at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference when a group of 17 public speaking teachers met to form a new association. The new national organization was first a division within NCTE for teachers of “Oral English.” The 1914 meeting, and the subsequent organization which was established, grew and evolved into what is today the National Communication Association, the oldest and largest national communication association in the world. The Eastern Public Speaking Conference continues today as the oldest regional communication association known as the Eastern Communication

Association.

With a national network of speech teachers established, the study of “oral English” soon became a more robust fixture in U.S. colleges and universities. The early focus of the association was to develop greater legitimacy and prestige for teaching public speaking; the group sought to distance itself from “elocution” and focus on more than the delivery of messages. Leaders in the speech movement believed that in order to gain academic respectability, speech teachers would need to do more than teach speech; they would need to develop a research agenda to fully join their colleagues as a full-fledged member of the academic community (Cohen, 1994). A Research Committee was established to develop a list of appropriate research topics for study. The ten topics identified in their 1915 reported were:

1. Elocution and expression
2. Public speaking and oratory
3. Debate and discussion
4. Expressive reading and reciting
5. Reading and literature
6. Teaching each of the foregoing subjects
7. Physiology and psychology
8. Psychology of social groups
9. Sociology of communication (interpersonal communication)
10. History of each of the foregoing subjects (“Research in Public Speaking,” 1915, 28 cited by Cohen 1994, p. 41).

Cohen (1994) noted that the list of titles “. . . suggested by the committee gave a clear

picture of how the discipline was received at its outset and presented us with a taxonomy which may be compared with the perceptions of divisions [in the National Communication Association] in the 1990s.” (p. 40).

These early areas of study can still be found as echoes in contemporary communication curricula in the United States. The focus on early “speech” education was on how to improve speech and reading performance. The skills of speaking and listening also have their roots in the humanities and social sciences. Charles Woolbert, an early leader of the association, from the outset that suggested the study of speech was interdisciplinary. In 1916 he identified the disciplines of education, sociology, political economy, political science, law, history, English, physics physiology and anatomy, psychology, and philosophy as disciplines that could add to the study of speech (Cohen, 1994). The influence of Woolbert’s interdisciplinary vision is evident in contemporary communication curricula.

The conceptual shift from a study of speech performance (a focus on skill development) to communication processes (a focus on cognitive, intellectual, cultural and communibiological processes) frames the conceptual domains of both the current foci of the communication discipline as well as how it is investigated. The evolution of the contemporary study of “communication” from an historical focus on “speech” epitomizes the importance of identifying the core conceptual domain (skills and processes) of the discipline.

Macke (1991) argues that the contemporary communication discipline has evolved from the study of speech, or more specifically, a focus on “teaching the body”—vocal and physical communication skills. Starting with the Greek sophists and embodied

by European and American elocutionists who broke away from English teachers to focus on public speaking and performance, the communication discipline has a long-held tradition of studying and teaching how to enhance the effectiveness of human expression by emphasizing speech delivery. Macke (1991) notes that some educators and scholars view the contemporary study of communication in a negative light because of its perceived overemphasis on skills and mere performance. Communication researchers such as Burgoon (1989) have castigated those who focus on skill development at the expense of theory development. During the past one hundred years the study of speech has evolved to focus less on “teaching the body” to a focus on “teaching the mind” by investigating theoretical and conceptual explanations to help enhance our understanding of human communication. Although public speaking classes and other skill development courses such as discussion, voice and diction, and conflict management constitute elements of contemporary communication curricula, there appear to be fewer courses that teach primarily skills, with the notable exception of courses required for general education. Contemporary communication research has a stronger theoretical focus with an emphasis on how the meaning of messages is created and interpreted.

The separation of speech faculty from theatre faculty in academic departments in the U.S. in the past twenty years, coupled with dropping the word “speech” from the Speech Communication Association in 1997, changing it to the National Communication Association, were responses to the shift from a focus of the intellectual domain of the discipline from “teaching the body” to “teaching the mind. Because of the evolution from emphasizing body (communication skills) to mind (communication process), it is less surprising that scholars who seek to identify the conceptual or core intellectual domain of

the discipline focus on conceptual schema rather than speech performance.

Although there has been a shift from a focus on speech performance to communication processes, there are nonetheless core skills that help define the nature of an academic discipline. Three clusters of communication skill sets in unmediated settings emerge from studies that identify communication practices valued in the work place: Relating skills (interpersonal communication skills), collaborating skills (group communication skills) and presentations skills (public speaking skills). These three skill contexts are the most dominant communication skill clusters. Communication competence research that has been conducted in the last two decades has sought to assess specific communication competencies in interpersonal communication (Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987) public communication (Morreale et al., 1993) and small group communication (Beebe & Barge, 2003). The number of people involved in the communication process (e.g., interpersonal communication involves fewer people than group or public communication) and the complexity of the communication structure (e.g., interpersonal communication is less structured and public communication messages are more structured) typically differentiate these three contexts.

Rubin and Morreale (2000) developed a comprehensive classification of the most basic communication skills, specifically expectations for College Graduates. These skills are listed in Table 1. As noted by Rubin and Morreale (2000), “Basic skills are minimal competencies and represent abilities, core knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective functioning in society and in the workplace.” (p. 55)

Table 1

**Expected Student Outcomes for Speaking and Listening
Basic Communication Course and General Education**

- I. Speaking Competencies
 - A. Determine the purpose of oral discourse.
 - B. Choose a topic and restrict it according to the purpose and the audience.
 - C. Fulfill the purpose of oral discourse by:
 - Formulating a thesis statement.
 - Providing adequate support material.
 - Selecting suitable organizational pattern.
 - Demonstrating careful choice of words.
 - Providing effective transitions.
- II. Delivery Competencies
 - A. Employ vocal variety in rate, pitch, and intensity.
 - B. Articulate clearly.
 - C. Employ language appropriate to the designated audience.
 - D. Demonstrate nonverbal behavior that supports the verbal message.
- III. Interpersonal Skills
 - A. Demonstrate appropriate interpersonal skills for various contexts.
 - B. Display self-awareness as a communicator.
 - C. Select from a repertoire of interpersonal skills, those strategies that enhance relationships.
 - D. Use a conversational mode through self-presentation and response to feedback.
- IV. Listening competencies
 - A. Recognize main ideas.
 - B. Identify supporting details.
 - C. Recognize explicit relationships among ideas.
 - D. Recall basic ideas and details.
 - E. Attend with an open mind.
 - F. Perceive the speaker's purpose and organization of ideas and information.
 - G. Discriminate between statements of fact and statements of opinion.
 - H. Distinguish between emotional and logical arguments.
 - I. Detect bias and prejudice.
 - J. Recognize the speaker's attitude.
 - K. Synthesize and evaluate by drawing logical inferences and conclusions.
 - L. Recall the implications and arguments.
 - M. Recognize discrepancies between the speaker's verbal and nonverbal messages.
 - N. Employ active listening techniques when appropriate.

Source: *Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students* (1999). Annandale, VA: National Communication Association.

Regardless of which specific skill set or context is being considered, Masterson, Beebe & Watson, (1989) suggest that effective communication can be evaluated by three criteria: (1) a message should be understood, (2) a message should achieve the intended goal, and (3) the message should be ethical. This tripartite taxonomy is further developed by Beebe, Beebe and Ivy (2013). Students who are taught these criteria at the outset of learning communication skills learn that effective communication is more than just accurately “sending” a message or simple trying to persuade someone else to do something.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the importance of communication skill development as central to the communication discipline. In addition, additional theory and research is needed to support prescriptions for enhanced communication effectiveness. The paper presents arguments suggesting that improving human communication skills should be a critical element in communication curricula. Specifically, the paper reviews the importance of communication skill development in the past, the centrality of skill development in contemporary communication curricula and makes a case that communication skill and theory and research about communication skills are needed in the future.

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