Millikin University
Oral Communication Assessment & Development Report
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Introduction

The Communication Department at Millikin University is committed to providing a distinct, challenging, useful, and high-quality oral communication learning experience to students of all professional and personal aspirations. We aim to empower our students and inform them about the most effective ways to craft and deliver messages adapted to a wide variety of audiences, as well as reinforce the values of critical thinking and public speaking in a dynamic, ever-changing society.

Communication in general and oral communication in particular is about the construction of meaning between people and various audiences: friends, families, professional colleagues, communities, and more. The study of communication focuses on understanding the symbols and the processes that construct those meanings, whether the symbol is a word, a gesture, a song, a performance, a website, or any other artifact of meaning-making in the social world. We also examine the relationship of those symbols to the people who use them (sometimes effectively, sometimes not).

Ultimately, we explore the pragmatic and ethical principles that guide people's communicative choices and apply this learning to our personal and professional lives. The overarching goal is that theory informs practice and our students complete our oral communication courses (CO 200- Public Speaking and CO 242- Business/Professional Communication) as better producers and critical consumers of verbal and nonverbal messages across contexts that are useful, relevant, and applicable to Millikin University and beyond.

Consequently, the University's goals of professional success, citizenship in a global environment, and facilitating a life of personal meaning and value are manifest in the Communication Department's goal to enable students to become effective problem-solvers, critics, and practitioners in their personal and professional communities. This is accomplished through classroom learning and practical application of communication theories, principles of effective and ethical communication, and presentation activities that help make these abstract ideas come alive. The University-wide goals also align well with the principle aims of the oral communication courses offered and the broader goals of the Communication Department.

The Communication Department has developed three learning goals for our students:

1. Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate in personal, scholarly, and professional contexts through appropriate verbal, nonverbal, and mediated formats before diverse and varied audiences.

2. Students will distinguish the theories pertinent to communication studies and demonstrate the skills needed to create, present, analyze, and evaluate messages in relevant contexts.

3. Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills when generating, consuming, and evaluating messages in relevant communication contexts.

It is with these three goals in mind (as well as the University goals, oral communication learning outcome goals, and state mandates) that we undertook a project of data collection, assessment, and recommendations to evaluate student performance in CO 200 and CO 242 courses offered in the Spring semester of 2011. This project involved constructing a 15-item rubric form (adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities), evaluating student speeches both together and separately, collecting performance artifacts from CO 200 & CO 242, coding and inputting the quantitative data from the forms, examining the qualitative data (comments and artifacts), and conducting analyses on the findings of this pilot study to make tentative recommendations about future directions for the oral communication curriculum.

This project and resulting report fulfills the deliverables outlined by the Dean of Arts and Sciences, namely:

(1) re-evaluate learning goals for oral communication requirement with CO200 teachers (and department senior faculty) to assure it meets Millikin's performance learning goals (integration of theory & practice)
(2) identify how learning goals are currently met through oral communication performances and theory artifacts
(3) construct a rubric for assessment of quality of student oral communication performances and theory artifacts
(4) pilot a process of collection of sample oral communication performances/artifacts

The final deliverable, "train faculty in use of rubric for evaluation of sample performances/artifacts," is an outcome of this project that will be implemented at the start of the Fall 2011 semester.

Research Method/Design

To facilitate our data collection, we visited CO 200 and CO 242 classes on speech days and used the 15-item rubric form constructed for evaluating individual performances. This scale was created from and informed by several sources. Not only was the scale adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, but other rubrics (such as the standardized rubric used at Eastern Illinois University) were taken into account and modified based on the three learning goals of the Communication Department at Millikin. State of Illinois oral communication mandates for public speaking were reviewed, as well as five learning outcome goals specific to the oral communication requirement offered by the Department (CO 200 & CO 242):

1. Students will be able to understand and demonstrate communication processes through invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation;
2. Students will be able to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize in a responsible manner material from diverse sources and points of view;
3. Students will be able to select appropriate communication choices for specific audiences;

4. Students will be able to use authority, point of view, and individual voice and style in communications;
5. Students will be able to participate effectively in groups with emphasis on listening, critical and reflective thinking, and responding.

From all of these sources we created a preliminary student evaluation form and analyzed the form for items corresponding to CO 200 and CO 242 learning outcome goals. After examining, synthesizing and modifying the instrument, we decided to put it into action to check for redundancies, ease of use and criterion validity.

We evaluated students during informative speeches, persuasive speeches, group presentations, and sales presentations (CO 242). Both evaluators were present for at least one day of each of the speech types, in an attempt to gauge inter rater reliability and identify patterns across all areas of student performance (organization, verbal/nonverbal delivery, use/citation of academic sources, etc.). The scoring of the 15 rubric items was based on a 5-point scale: 4=Exemplary, 3=Advanced, 2=Competent, 1=Basic, 0=Deficient.

This scale was informed by Schreiber's (2010) "Deconstructing Oral Communication Competencies for Campus-Wide Assessment," which consists of a 5-point scale and 11 items for individual performance (please see attached). However, important changes were made to reflect goals of MU in terms of university studies, departmental goals, and CO 200/242-specific goals. It was agreed that the highest score of 4=Exemplary be changed from Schreiber's (2010) score of "Advanced," instead making 3=Advanced (For Schreiber 3 is "Proficient"). These semantic changes in scoring criteria reflect the Millikin ethos well: We strive not just for advanced performance, but exemplary performance. "Exemplary" distinguishes the aims of MU to offer a distinct, competitive, and high-quality education. We felt that in aiming higher, we could better evaluate the successive approximations of oral communication aptitude in our students and target particular areas for increased instructional attention and supplemental resources (reference librarian and Communication scholar Rachel Bicicchi, The Writing Center, etc.)

During the first round of student speeches, we found the adapted rubric to be effective and straightforward as far as scoring the 15 items and still having time to add speaker-specific comments to each form (there is intentionally space between each item and at the bottom of the page for qualitative evaluator feedback). We identified a few changes in wording to make the rubric applicable to any type of oral communication presentation (such as a group presentation), but no other substantive changes were made to the form for the duration of data collection, which spanned from the first week in February to the last week of school in May.

After each round of speeches, the forms were given unique ID numbers—in the order of presentation— that would make the speech type (and in some cases the speaker) identifiable over the course of the data collection. This was done to gauge progress or development of performance over the semester for the sample. The scores were calculated and entered into an Excel Spreadsheet for purposes of data collection and analysis. The overall averages from each evaluator were inputted into Excel and the actual forms (as well as other artifacts such as peer evaluations and grade forms) were kept in a locked and secure place to ensure confidentiality. On days when both evaluators were present, the mean scores for presenters were placed in the spreadsheet side-by-side to check for covariance and the degree of difference in evaluation

scores. For example, after the informative and persuasive rounds of speeches in CO 200 section that both evaluators observed throughout the semester, the scores were:

Informative Student ID	Evaluator 1	Evaluator 2	Persuasive	Evaluator 1	Evaluator 2
1	2.6	1.93	201	2.33	
2	2.4	1.47	202	2.9	
3	2.87	2.27	203	2.8	
4	3.07	2.63	204	3	
5	1.67	0.87	205	2	2.27
6	2.53	1.67	206	1.8	
7	3.6		207	2	1.27
8	3.13		208	2.2	2.2
9	2.93		209	2.73	
10	2.47		210	1.6	2.47
11	2.73		211	2.06	
12	2.47		212	2.93	
13	2		213	2.13	1.83
14	2.6		214	2.8	3.1
15	2.47		215	2.13	
16	2		216	1.7	
17	1.57		217	2.26	
18	1.47		218	1.97	

The ID Numbers corresponded to the same speakers from the previous speech; the only difference was the first number. For example, speaker 5 and 205 were the same person. As aforementioned, this was done to examine the relative progress of students in classrooms that both evaluators were able to be present at during speech days. In addition to the above, group presentations (CO 200) and sales presentations (CO 242) were also scored. In all, the sample size of presentations evaluated was n=80. Of those, 28 were observed and scored by both evaluators.

After all data were collected, both evaluators examined the spreadsheet, performance artifacts, and individual forms to determine recurring areas of weakness and patterns of effectiveness for each of the 15 items of the rubric form.

Results

The average score of all the presentations was 2.4. The average of the CO 200 student was slightly higher than the CO 242 student averages, but it should be mentioned that only the CO 242 sales presentation was evaluated, whereas the sample from CO 200 consisted of informative, persuasive, and group speeches.

The overall average of 2.4 falls almost halfway between "Competent" and "Advanced" on the rubric piloted in this project. This suggests that while students are meeting some of the benchmarks, fewer are demonstrating advanced and exemplary performances on all measures of oral communication effectiveness. The traditional Bell curve model would argue that this is the norm— that most people fall in the middle. At Millikin, consistently improving student

competencies is the *modus operandi*, so it is crucial to take a look at what students are doing well when performing, what areas are lacking or problematic, and how to bolster student-centered instructional attention to those areas where patterns indicate widespread support and resources are needed.

Five areas in particular were identified from the 15-item rubric where students consistently scored lower than on other evaluated elements. These areas centered on how well the student:

1. Established the topic effectively in the introduction- *All too often we noted the use of "my speech is about…" on our comments, pointing to the lack of creative opening and attention-grabbing methods.*
2. Cited diverse sources (books, journal articles, interviews, newspapers)- *Predominantly, students cited websites, both of the credible and questionable variety.*
3. Adapted the central message of the speech to the audience effectively- *Many of the presentations lacked a central thesis, proposition, or argument (in the case of persuasive speeches).*
4. Transitioned skillfully from introduction to body to conclusion- *Often students lacked a cohesive organizing scheme or clear transitioning from one main idea to the next.*
5. Concluded the speech by fully summarizing and ending memorably- *Frequently students concluded their speech with "That's it" or "The end" rather than providing adequate summation and effective closure.*

However, there were also several areas where students seemed to consistently score highly and progress/develop—this was specifically noted in the CO 200 evaluations tracking students over three speeches during the semester. Scores and comments indicated that students:

1. Demonstrated adequate volume and vocal variety
2. Demonstrated confidence in nonverbal delivery (eye contact, gestures)
3. Displayed enthusiasm and energy for the presentation
4. Worded the speech appropriately for the audience, topic, and context
5. Used visual aids effectively and creatively

We found that more students tended to receive higher scores in delivery- related areas than organization and *ethos/*source credibility areas. In CO 200, scores trended upward with regard to confidence, connection with the audience, and critical thinking. Unfortunately with CO 242 we were not able to analyze the scores across the semester because of only evaluating the sales presentation.

Limitations

The limitations to this pilot study were chiefly the sample size, the breadth of course sections that each evaluator was able to observe, the number of evaluators (2), and the instrument itself.

Out of the 218 possible students in CO 200 or CO 242 courses this Spring, only 80 were evaluated. And while coverage of CO 200 speeches was relatively robust (informative, persuasive, group), the only speech observed in CO 242 was the sales presentation. Although this was the lengthiest and most involved speech assigned in CO 242, observing earlier

speeches in that course would enhance the findings and validity of the scores for that course, especially in running comparative analyses with CO 200 and examining trends in scored items.

Another limitation was the lack of additional evaluators to sit in on different classes and on the same speech days. While two evaluators is better than one, three or four sets of eyes would certainly speak more to the reliability of the instrument and its ease of use for multiple instructors. We note that video-recording speeches could be implemented so additional evaluators could be incorporated virtually (as well as using the recordings for training purposes, to be explained in the next section).

The 15-item rubric was also not without limitations. Three different items referred to citing sources in slightly different ways. We determined this could probably be narrowed to two, while still maintaining the ability to measure diversity and credibility of sources as well as sufficiency in citing all of the source information.

As is the case with any pilot study on assessment, there is work to be done. Aside from re-examining the rubric and soliciting feedback from additional Communication faculty, we also must reflect on the areas that students are underperforming and form a plan.

Discussion/ Recommendations

As we continue to adapt and modify our assessment of the oral communication goals, standards, and performances of our students, we can generate valuable information that can be used by the department, the institution, and the students. We believe assessment benefits student learning and experience, but the assessment must be backed by longitudinal study (both quantitative and qualitative), and we must always be re-evaluating our efforts toward making both assessment and instruction more student-centered and meaningful. In this pilot study we were able to collaboratively form several recommendations for future directions of the assessment and implementation of oral communication curricula.

We recommend that training sessions be implemented in the Fall 2011 semester regarding the use of the rubric, reinforcement of the aforementioned goals, and identification of problem areas/patterns observed in future CO 200/CO 242 student performances. By training additional faculty on the use of the evaluation form we can continue to assess student performance gaps and developments across the rubric. This will also expand the assessment pool so that more trained evaluators can be brought into the assessment process, increasing the sample and reliability/validity of the rubric. Of course, this also invites suggestions for honing the instrument as well as additional instructional approaches to impacting student development in the courses.

As source citation, diversity, and credibility of supporting material were targeted as an issue in our student evaluations, we recommend increased contact with Staley Library (Rachel Bicicchi in particular) for research skill supplementation to the existing instructional support given in that area (unfortunately not as much as we'd like due to the breadth of course material and student speeches to fit into the schedule). Rachel has received a degree in Communication studies and has already reached out to CO 200 sections this semester and last semester on the topic of researching. She has offered to hold sessions at the library or come to classes and talk with the students about the library resources and avenues of research in addition to the Internet. We

are also actively exploring multiple documents to construct a resource that students can access on Moodle or in hard-copy form with guidelines for conducting library research.

In terms of the problem areas of writing effective introductions and conclusions, we propose increased contact and collaboration with the Writing Center as a supplement to increased instruction in these areas. This could include establishing a Communication Department Webpage with links to the writing center, handouts/pdfs, and other resources that have been vetted for their helpfulness and effectiveness in getting students to use them.

We also want to continue to refine the instrument and re-evaluate our oral communication learning goals in the context of changing student needs and competencies. This is the hallmark of communication—adapting to shifting communicative needs, proficiencies and deficiencies, in the hope of enhancing that skill which is of paramount importance to employers, relationships, cultures, and selves.

Re-Evaluating Goals and Oral Communication

As Timothy Mottet writes in the National Communication Association (NCA) publication *Communication Currents,*

> A recent Conference Board survey of human resource officials revealed that only 25% of today's college graduates enter the world of work with well-developed speaking skills. Both employers and educators acknowledge the importance of oral communication— 95% of HR officials rated oral communication as very important (the highest of 13 entry workplace skills), and other research reports that the majority of colleges and universities require students to take a course or instruction in public speaking. Obviously, there is a discrepancy between the number of students who have instruction in public speaking and those who excel at this communication task. [1]

This is a frequent finding reported in organizational studies, business reports, trade journals, magazines and newspapers—that communication skills are vitally important to employers and students are not communicating well enough. As we found in our investigation, most students in CO 200 and CO 242 classes were falling near the middle of our scoring standards, competent and perhaps slightly advanced but not exemplary. This is one reason why continued assessment and training geared towards improving all facets of students' oral communication—not just the problem areas identified—needs to be a main focus of the Communication Department in the future.

Our department, in reaching out to supplemental resources such as Staley Library and The Writing Center, is uniquely positioned to meet the deficiencies in student oral communication because communication theory and principles are the foundations of our discipline. This challenge of facilitating and enabling exemplary oral communication skills in our students is one that we are already well-versed in; ever since the Ancient Greek times there has been instruction on oration, invention, persuasion, delivery, *pathos, ethos*, and *logos*.

From our scholarly vantage point, enhanced understanding of all of these things can best be achieved when the focus is on performing, communicating, and connecting. The research and writing skills must also be honed but our instructors are well-equipped and through additional

training will be even more so when it comes to empowering students to use their voices confidently, ethically, and effectively.

Typically, many of our students in CO 200 and CO 242 are freshman and sophomores. We aim, through continued refinement of assessment instruments and instructional communication, to provide *every* student (whether an incoming freshman or a PACE student or someone in-between) with the tools necessary to build on their confidence, knowledge of theory and practice, and engagement with other communities and cultures. Sometimes it is not just the speeches in our classes that achieve something special and meaningful for our students. Sometimes it is the communication among students, in and out of class, as they cultivate a curiosity for using rhetoric in their lives at MU and beyond.

[1] Mottet, T.P. (2006). Proficient enough? *Communication Currents, 1*(1): www.natcom.org/CommCurrentsArticle.aspx?id=673&terms=Employer%20skills

Oral Communication Evaluation Form for Student Performance
Adapted from Oral Communication VALUE Rubric, Association of American Colleges & Universities

Performance Standard Scores

4	3	2	1	0
Exemplary	**Advanced**	**Competent**	**Basic**	**Deficient**

Student name / speech topic: _____

Please indicate your score (0-4) for the following areas of the student's performance.
   In this speech, the student:

	Score
1. Established the topic effectively in the introduction	
2. Demonstrated adequate volume and verbal enthusiasm	
3. Made sustained eye contact with all of the audience	
4. Worded the speech creatively and appropriately for the audience/topic	
5. Cited diverse sources (books, magazines, articles, interviews, web)	
6. Demonstrated confidence in nonverbal delivery (posture, gestures)	
7. Cited seemingly credible/reputable sources of information	
8. Adapted the central message of the speech to the audience effectively	
9. Provided adequate information when citing sources and quoting	
10. Transitioned skillfully from introduction to body to conclusion	
11. Concluded the speech fully by summarizing and ending memorably	
12. Presented a strongly supported message with evidence of critical thinking	
13. Displayed enthusiasm/energy for the presentation	
14. Used visual aids effectively (if applicable)	
15. Demonstrated an overall connection with and awareness of the audience	

Thank you. Please provide any additional comments on the back of this sheet