

Fall 2011 & Spring 2012 Oral Communication Assessment & Development Report
Brandon Hensley (Communication faculty) and Jeffrey Brand (Chair)
Millikin University

Introduction

The Communication Department at Millikin University is committed to providing a diverse, distinct, challenging, useful, and high-quality oral communication learning experience to all students that enroll in our courses. We aim to inform and empower our students so that they can successfully prepare and demonstrate the most effective ways to craft and deliver messages adapted to a wide variety of audiences. The Communication Department also strongly reinforces the values of critical thinking, research, and ethical public speaking in a dynamic, ever-changing and globalized society.

Oral communication in particular is about the construction of messages and meaning between people and various audiences: friends, committees, families, professional colleagues, communities, clergy, and other groups. The study of communication focuses on understanding the symbols as well as the processes that work to 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).

With an emphasis on academic integrity and “scholarly conversation” (bringing in credible sources and citing them in presentations and other activities), the Communication Department is committed to facilitating and furthering students’ abilities to reason effectively, research a topic or issue, adapt the message to the audience, and deliver an informed, critical,

ethically sound presentation in line with the various goals and mandates established from the State, University Studies/Arts and Sciences, and the Communication Department.

Ultimately, we use the theoretical frames and principles of our academic discipline to guide our instruction into the pragmatic and ethical principles that guide people's communicative choices. We encourage and challenge students to apply this learning to their 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 MU and beyond.

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 of enabling 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 principal aims of the oral communication courses offered and the broader goals of the Communication Department.

The Communication Department has developed three learning goals for students in all courses of the major:

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.

In terms of evaluating speech performances, these three goals act as a guiding framework for how well students “do” public speaking, given the context of an informative, group, or persuasive (or sales) speech. These three goals can be used to evaluate other artifacts from the course in addition to speech performances.

For the first learning goal, an advanced or exemplary speech (scored 3 or 4 on the assessment instrument, see Appendix) would have an effective balance of personal experience and citation/integration of academic source material. The student would deliver the speech effectively in a verbal manner (with enthusiasm, adequate volume and emphasis, minimal fillers, smooth articulation, etc.) as well as nonverbally (making eye contact, using appropriate gestures, managing nervous movement, etc.). In addition, the tone of the speech would be professional (or adapted to the audience accordingly).

The second learning goal can be interpreted differently, but as it pertains to public speaking and business communication, one of the key elements is *organization* of the speech. This deals with the introduction, body, and conclusion of the speech and how effectively the student forms content that communicates each part well. Generally, introduction should catch the audience members’ attention, establish a thesis or central message, and preview upcoming points to some extent. The body should have transitions and the conclusion should summarize and provide closure or a memorable ending. The main idea is to look at the organization of the parts and the speech as a whole. The application of specific and appropriate organizational patterns consistent with theories of speech structure may also be evaluated.

The third learning goal concerns critical thinking skills, which are vital in researching and selecting the best *supporting material* to back up speech ideas. This involves citing diverse and scholarly sources (including library database articles and Staley resources) and connecting those

to the speech in meaningful ways. Overall we want to see the students presenting a credibly informed, well-researched message that indicates some critical thought going into what they are saying. Students may also demonstrate this critical thinking in the process of speech evaluation through self-evaluation of performances, peer critiques of speeches, or evaluation of speakers outside of the classroom environment.

Research Methodology

Over the course of the Fall 2011 and Spring 2012 semesters, the Department faculty of CO 200 and CO 242 instructors collaborated on a project of data collection, assessment, and discussion of concerns and recommendations to evaluate student performance in CO 200 and CO 242 courses. This project involved revising a 15-item rubric form (adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities). To make the form more efficient and less redundant, the instrument was shortened to 12 items (see Appendix A). Faculty agreed to share their speech dates and their classrooms so colleagues could sit in and evaluate student speeches using the assessment form.

After collecting forms and performance artifacts from CO 200 & CO 242, coding and inputting the quantitative data from the forms into SPSS, examining the qualitative data (comments and artifacts), and conducting analyses on the findings of this study, we feel strongly that we can make recommendations and suggestions about future directions for the oral communication curriculum. This project and resulting report fulfills the following:

- (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) (re)construct a rubric for assessment of quality of student oral communication performances and theory artifacts
- (4) Facilitate a process of assessment across classes for a broad sample of speeches

We also intend to train any new faculty in the use of rubrics for evaluation of sample performances/artifacts before the start of the Fall 2012 semester.

To facilitate our data collection, we visited CO 200 and CO 242 classes on speech days and used the revised 12-item rubric form based on faculty input. This form was originally constructed from several sources, and was shortened to maintain ease of use without any variables being lost. The scale was adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, but other rubrics (such as the standardized rubrics used at Eastern Illinois University and Illinois State University) were taken into account, modified based on the three learning goals of the Communication Department at Millikin. The Secolsky and Denison (2011) handbook on assessment was consulted throughout the project. State of Illinois oral communication mandates for public speaking were reviewed, as well as five required learning outcome goals of oral communication courses 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 and faculty feedback, we constructed the current form and analyzed the form for items corresponding to CO 200 and CO 204 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). Evaluators were present for at least one day of each of the speech classes, in an attempt to enhance the reliability and identify patterns across all areas of student performance (organization, verbal/nonverbal delivery, use/citation of academic sources, etc.). The scoring of the 12 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, Schneller and Shibley's (2010) "Deconstructing Oral Communication: Competencies for Campus-Wide Assessment," which conceptualizes a 5-point scale and 11 items for examining competencies in individual performance. However, important changes were made to reflect goals of MU in terms of University Studies, departmental goals, and CO 200/204-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 feel that through aiming higher, both symbolically and in praxis, we can better evaluate the successive approximations of oral communication aptitude in our students and target particular areas for increased instructional attention and supplemental resources.

In using the form, we found the adapted rubric to be effective and straightforward as far as scoring the 12 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 September to April of the current academic year.

After all the forms were gathered, the total number of speeches evaluated (N) was 126. The scores were calculated and entered into SPSS for purposes of data collection and statistical analysis. The overall averages from each evaluator were inputted into the SPSS datasheet 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. As data were collected, we examined the performance artifacts and individual forms to determine recurring areas of student weaknesses and patterns of effectiveness for each of the 12 items of the rubric form.

Results of 2011-2012 Assessment Project

Table 1 represents the demographic and descriptive information of the sample.

Table 1:

Descriptives from Informative and Persuasive Speech Assessment in CO200 & CO242

| Variable | N | Mean | Minimum | Maximum | SD |
|--------------------|----|-------|---------|---------|------|
| Informative Speech | 62 | 2.215 | 1.00 | 3.33 | .583 |
| Persuasive Speech | 64 | 2.598 | 1.83 | 3.45 | .397 |

Notes: N comes from all completed forms gathered in CO 200 & CO 242 classes. Incomplete forms were not used in the data analysis.

The average score of all the presentations was 2.406. The standard deviation was lower for persuasive scores, and the variances reported for the informative and persuasive evaluations were .34 and .16, respectively, indicating that students’ scores tended to vary much more in the Informative speech (usually the first major speech given) than the persuasive speech (often the last speech given). This suggests that over the course of the semester scores not only improved

(according to the mean) but also there were fewer outliers, or extreme scores. The overall average of 2.4 falls almost halfway between “Competent” and “Advanced” on the rubric employed in this project. This suggests that while students are meeting most of the benchmarks, fewer are demonstrating advanced and exemplary performances of oral communication effectiveness. At the same time, fewer students are failing to meet the benchmarks and standards reflected in the learning goals, especially in the later speeches. This is encouraging evidence of learning, improvement and performing adequately in terms of standard competencies (although more advanced and exemplary performances are always desired).

Other statistics were also run on the data. A *t* test was conducted to check for statistical significance of the difference between the two group means (informative and persuasive), reported in Table 2. According to the results, the difference between the informative and persuasive means is statistically significant ($p < .001$), meaning that the sample can be reasonably inferred to the larger population of students in CO 200 and CO 242 classes.

Table 2:

One-Sample Test

| | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|-------------|--------|----|-----------------|-----------------|---|--------|
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Informative | 29.919 | 61 | .000 | 2.21565 | 2.0676 | 2.3637 |
| Persuasive | 52.495 | 63 | .000 | 2.59844 | 2.4995 | 2.6974 |

The traditional Bell curve model would uphold that the reported results are the norm—that most people fall in the middle. However, at Millikin University, 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. Examining both the scores and qualitative comments left by evaluators, four areas in particular were identified from the 12-item rubric where students consistently scored lower than on other evaluated elements. These areas centered on how well the student:

1. Cited diverse sources (books, journal articles, interviews, newspapers)- *Predominantly, students cited websites, both of the credible and questionable variety.*
2. Cited seemingly credible sources of information- *many of the presentations lacked clear and complete citations to sourced material (e.g. “according to Lexis/Nexis...”).*
3. 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.*
4. Presented a strongly supported message with evidence of critical thinking- *Students loaded their speeches with personal opinion and unattributed facts/figures rather than providing support for assertions.*

However, there were also several areas where students seemed to consistently score highly and progress/develop—specifically, scores and comments indicated that students:

1. Demonstrated adequate volume and vocal variety (mean score 2.9)
2. Demonstrated confidence in nonverbal delivery (eye contact, gestures) (2.8)
3. Displayed enthusiasm and energy for the presentation (2.8)
4. Worded the speech appropriately for the audience, topic, and context (2.7)
5. Used visual aids effectively and creatively (3.1)

We found that students tended to receive higher scores in delivery- related areas than organization and *ethos*/source credibility areas. In both CO 200 and CO 242, scores trended upward with regard to confidence, connection with the audience, and critical thinking.

Limitations

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

Out of the possible students in CO 200 or CO 242 courses this academic year, only 126 were evaluated. And while coverage of CO 200 speeches was relatively robust, only one evaluator was able to observe CO 242 informative and persuasive presentations. Another limitation was the lack of additional evaluators to sit in on different classes and on the same speech days. More than one set of eyes on the same speeches would certainly speak more to the inter-rater 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 12-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 continuing work on assessment, there is refinement and re-evaluation 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 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 before the Fall 2012 semester regarding the use of the rubric, reinforcement of the aforementioned goals, and identification of problem areas/patterns observed in future CO 200/CO 204 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 Biccchi 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. (para.1)

This is an oft-repeated finding 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 toward 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 (which is why we hope to work in conjunction with Rachel at Staley Library and the staff at The Writing Center), but our instructors are well-equipped and through training will be even more so when it comes to empowering students to use their voices confidently, ethically, and effectively.

Typically, our students in CO 200 and CO 242 are freshmen 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. The data, findings, and recommendations of this report also reinforces the realization that oral communication skills are not just the

responsibility of a single course, but must be improved upon in later coursework in the major and other areas of tutoring and presentation possibilities across disciplines. Public speaking and business communication are vital foundational courses, but they are only the beginning for most students. CO 200 and CO 242 establish the competencies and plant the seeds for students of various majors, aptitudes, learning styles, experience with debate, etc. In essence, they form a strong starting point for a collegiate career of *academic* performances that should enhance student's presenting skills regardless of major or interest as they progress in their studies and use oral communication as a vehicle to participate in a scholarly conversation.

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Appendix A

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:

1. Grabbed attention and 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. Demonstrated confidence in nonverbal delivery (posture, gestures)
6. Cited seemingly credible sources of information
7. Transitioned skillfully from introduction to body to conclusion
8. Concluded the speech fully by summarizing and ending memorably
9. Presented a strongly supported message with evidence of critical thinking
10. Articulated and pronounced the words of the speech effectively
11. Used visual aids effectively (if applicable)
12. Taking the three Communication Department learning goals into consideration, I would rate the speech:

Score

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