Running Head: ORAL COMMUNICATION 2014-2015 ASSESSMENT REPORT

Fall 2014 – Spring 2015 Oral Communication Assessment Report

Brandon Hensley (Communication Faculty) and Nancy Curtin (Chair)

Millikin University

Fall 2014 – Spring 2015 Oral Communication Assessment Report

[B]ecause the stakes associated with institutional performance are so much higher for policy makers today, it is imperative that we make much more progress in collecting and using assessment results to improve and in communicating what we are doing more effectively to external audiences. (Ewell, 2009, p. 2)

Introduction

The Communication Department at Millikin University is committed to providing a diverse, distinct, challenging, useful, and high-quality 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 perform in effective ways to craft and deliver messages adapted to a wide variety of audiences. The Communication Department also strongly reinforces the values of performance learning, critical thinking, research, and ethical public speaking in a dynamic, ever-changing and globalized society. In our Oral Communication classes, we also strive to align our curriculum with the Millikin University learning goals, namely that (1) Millikin students will prepare for professional success, (2) Millikin students will actively engage in the responsibilities of citizenship in their communities, and (3) Millikin students will discover and develop a personal life of meaning and value.

Oral communication in particular is about the construction of messages and meaning between communicators and various audiences—it is performance learning in action. 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, an utterance, a performance, an argumentative speech, 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.

With an emphasis on performance engagement, 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 learning goals established by Millikin University, Arts & Sciences, and specifically the Communication Department, while also drawing from exemplars of rubrics and instruments measuring performance learning in the context of public speaking. Ultimately, we use the theoretical frames and principles of our academic discipline to inform our instruction into the pragmatic and ethical principles that drive 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 Millikin University life, students' personal lives, and beyond to the global economy. The University's goals of professional success, citizenship in a global environment, performance learning, 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. Stated simply, the oral communication courses are performance-learning in action.

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.

Specific to the oral communication requirement are the following 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.

In terms of evaluating speech performances, these 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 (see Appendix A for evaluation form).

For the performance learning goals of content and delivery, 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).

Another 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.

Crucial to performance are 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. The Communication Department and Oral Communication learning goals all orient to three main areas: content, delivery, and organization (geared to context, audience, and purpose). Critical thinking and personal reflection intertwine throughout.

Overall, we want to see the students presenting a credibly informed, well-researched message that indicates critical thought going into what they are saying/performing. 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

In summer 2015, two faculty members, one regularly teaches CO 200 and one who

teaches other Communication courses, collaborated on a project of data collection, assessment,

and discussion of concerns and recommendations to evaluate student performance. This project

involved a 12-item rubric form (adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the

Association of American Colleges and Universities). The scoring of the 12 rubric items was

based on a 5-point scale: 4=Exemplary, 3=Advanced, 2=Competent, 1=Basic, 0=Deficient. To

make the form more descriptive, the instrument was expanded to include space for comments

(see Appendix A).

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 distinctions were kept from the prior instrument to reflect goals of MU in terms of

University objectives, departmental goals, and CO 200-specific goals.

The highest score of 4=Exemplary was 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

distinctly 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.

The two faculty viewed speech videos from multiple sections (via the goreact.com program). In terms of inter-rater reliability, faculty members watched speeches together and discussed their scores, rationale, and overall feedback. This generated many useful qualitative comments on student performance, which augmented the quantitative data. Each evaluator filled out the evaluation form independently. Overall, faculty members identified and agreed on the strengths and weaknesses in the speeches. In addition to the quantitative data, a faculty member analyzed qualitative data gathered from student reflections on what they have learned and transferrable skills for their future careers.

The authors coded and entered the quantitative data into Excel, examined the qualitative data (student artifacts), and conducted analyses on the findings of this study. We feel strongly that we can make recommendations and suggestions about future assessment and directions of the oral communication curriculum. This project and resulting report fulfills the following:

1. Re-evaluate learning goals for oral communication requirement with CO 200 teachers (and department senior faculty) to assure they meet 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. Evaluate, revise, and implement a rubric for assessment of the quality of student oral communication performances and theory artifacts.
4. Facilitate a process of assessment that can be refined to meet current and future demands of performance learning initiatives at Millikin.

The scale was adapted from the *Oral Communication VALUE Rubric* of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and the Secolsky and Denison (2011) handbook on

assessment and Suskie's (2009) guide were consulted throughout the project. From all of these sources and faculty feedback, the form was analyzed for face validity and for items corresponding to Department and University performance learning outcome goals. After examining, synthesizing and modifying the instrument, the data collection process consisted of watching informative and persuasive speeches. The informative speech is typically the first major speech in Oral Communication classes, and the persuasive speech is typically follows the informative speech. Examining these two speeches provides useful data points of degree of progress toward learning goals.

In using the form, we found the adapted rubric to be effective and straightforward as far as scoring the 12 items and eliciting speaker-specific comments (there is intentionally space between each item and at the bottom of the page for qualitative evaluator feedback). All told, evaluators felt they had adequate time and space to comment during the speech videos, occasionally going back in the video to catch students' words.

After the completed forms were gathered, the total number of speeches evaluated was n=10, specifically 5 informative and 5 persuasive speeches. To reiterate, each faculty member (there were two) independently evaluated each speech. The scores were calculated and entered into Excel for purposes of data collection and statistical analysis (specifically, descriptive statistics and analysis of variance). The overall average from each speech was inputted into the Excel datasheet and the actual forms (as well as other artifacts, such as student reflection papers) were kept in a locked and secure place to ensure confidentiality.

As data were collected, we examined the student 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 2014-2015 Assessment Project

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

Table 1:

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
INF	10	1.68	2.46	2.09	.3098
PERS	10	1.67	3.08	2.16	.4807
Valid N	20				

Note: Valid N comes from all completed forms. Incomplete forms were not used in data analysis.

Compared to last year, the scores have changed—positively changed. Granted, the assessment dataset is smaller than last year. However, overall, the scores and results are encouraging.

The average score of all the presentations was 2.13; this is compared to 2.05 last year. This year, the standard deviation was lower for informative scores than for persuasive speeches, indicating that students' scores tended to vary much more in the persuasive speech (usually the second major speech given) than the informative speech (often the first speech given). Last year, the opposite was true; scores varied more for informative speeches than persuasive speeches. However, overall, the mean scores for informative speeches and persuasive speeches increased compared to last year. This is encouraging and suggests that students are performing better.

The overall average of 2.13 falls just beyond "Competent" and on the rubric employed in this project. This suggests that while students are meeting some of the learning, 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).

At Millikin University, consistently improving student competencies and performance 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.

Areas for Improvement

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 of reported weakness centered on how well the student:

1. Cited *diverse and adequate* sources (books, journal articles, interviews, newspapers)- Predominantly, students cited websites and often did not meet the source requirements.

2. Cited seemingly *credible* sources of information- Many of the presentations lacked clear and complete citations to sourced material (e.g. "According to researchers from…").

3. Spoke with fluent articulation and few pauses or placeholders- Often, students peppered their speeches with "um," "like," and other filler words.

4. Presented a message with evidence of preparedness- Students seemed unprepared at times, as evidenced by problems with eye contact and pauses/fillers. Evaluators noted a lack of extemporaneous delivery in student speeches; students relied on notes too much.

Noted Strengths

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

1. Improvement in number and diversity of sources, even though still an area of improvement.

2. Displayed enthusiasm and energy for the presentation.

3. Introduced the speech creatively, grabbing attention and engaging the audience.

4. Presented adequate information and richly developed personal experience.

Scores trended upward with regard to confidence, connection with the audience, and content areas of information and personal experience. However, lack of adequate practice and rehearsal was a consistent issue. This is where we need to reexamine our instruction as faculty in the Communication Department and figure out how to better prepare students to perform at high levels, and to standards that align with University-wide and department-specific learning goals.

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 courses this academic year, only 10 different speeches evaluated by two faculty were the basis for this report. Another limitation is a faculty member with release time to coordinate assessment. For example, just this past year, the chair and one faculty member voluntarily worked on this assessment without pay or release time. To conduct assessment accurately and thoroughly, there must be a faculty member who can be more devoted to the task; this can only happen with adequate release time.

In the coming year we plan to coordinate assessment with all department faculty to ensure a wider sample, more raters for the forms, and additional eyes for improvement. We note there is a depository of hundreds of student speeches that department faculty have collected from

goreact.com (and we plan on using the recordings for training purposes, to be explained in the next section).

The 12-item rubric was also not without limitations. Different items referred to citing sources in slightly different ways—a possible multicollinearity issue. 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. We plan to reassess the rubric form as a department to aim for ease of use, validity, reliability, and ensuring that we are using performance measures that really get at student performance and takeaways from the class.

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 for continuing to assess and improve student learning and performance.

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 for new and existing faculty be implemented regarding the use of the rubric, reinforcement of the aforementioned goals, and identification of problem areas/patterns observed in future CO 200 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 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. We also need to recognize that more time needs to be devoted in class *by the instructor*, not just Rachel, to addressing this area for improvement.

In terms of the problem areas of writing effective introductions and conclusions, we propose increased contact and collaboration with the Communication faculty (with recurring

development workshops to be held) as a supplement to increased instruction in these areas. This could involve 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

There 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 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 staff at Staley Library, The Writing Center, and The Office of Student Success), but our instructors are well-equipped to continue delivering the course at a high level. Through training/development sessions, faculty will be more effective when it comes to evaluating and empowering students to use their voices confidently, ethically, and critically. Conversations about increased resources for training (DVDs of speeches, packets, sessions, etc.) would be fruitful to ensure that faculty development remains a priority.

Typically, our students in CO 200 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 reinforce 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 is a vital foundational course, but it is only the beginning for most students. It establishes the competencies and plants the seeds for students of various majors, aptitudes, learning styles, experience with debate, etc. In essence, it forms 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.

References

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU). *VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education.* Retrieved from:

http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/index_p.cfm?CFID=39066622&CFTOKEN=60636174

Ewell, P.T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment Occasional Paper,* 1-24.

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

Schreiber, L.M., Schneller, B.E., & Shibley, L.R. (2010). Deconstructing oral communication:

Competencies for campus-wide assessments. *Paper presented at The 2010 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis through The Office of Planning and Institutional Improvement.* Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, October 24 – October 26, 2010.

Secolsky, C., & Denison, D.B. (2011). *Handbook on measurement, assessment, and evaluation in higher education.* Taylor & Francis.

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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:

Score

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 overall performance into consideration, I would rate the speech:

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