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The Oral Communication Competence Dilemma: Are We Communicating Competently about Speech Communication?

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THE last fifteen years of instructional communication research has become increasingly focused on defining and assessing "oral communication competency" among students in public schools, colleges, and universities. Part of the effort by instructional communication researchers to study oral communication competency stems from a general effort by educational systems to be accountable for their curriculum choices. Wolfe (1990) noted that "fifteen states require their institutions of higher learning to demonstrate student achievement. All six regional accrediting agencies, led by the Southern States, are requiring accountability" (p. 1). El-Khawas (1990) indicated that 82% of American colleges and universities are piloting formal assessment measures and that 63% have results from the measures they have taken.

Thus, in response to concerned administrators who question the value of the study of speech communication, communication specialists are providing definitions and assessment of oral communication competence (Allen & Brown, 1976; Chomsky, 1965; Larson, Backlund, Redmond & Barbour, 1978; McCroskey, 1980, 1982b, 1984b; Rubin, 1984; Spitzberg, 1983; Wiemann, 1977) in order to solidify the speech communication discipline's role in ensuring competence among students in higher education. Perhaps the most notable research on oral communication competence has been conducted in the development of assessment criteria and instruments (Arter, 1989; Backlund, Gurry, & Jant, 1982; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Rubin, 1982, 1984, 1985; Willmington, 1983), and programs of assessment (Aitken & Neer, 1992; Cronin, 1990; Cronin & Glen, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Cronin and Grice, 1991, 1993; Goulden, 1992; Hay, 1988, 1992; Roberts, 1983, 1984; Morreale, Hackman, Shockley, & Gomez, 1990; Morreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Whitney, 1993; Steinfatt, 1986; Weiss, 1986).

The positive result of these research efforts has been the formal recognition by state and regional accreditation agencies that students' oral communication competence is important to the overall educational effectiveness of colleges and universities. For example, in

1989, the Southern Association manual revised the wording of the oral communication competence mandate to reflect this perceptual change. Before 1989, the wording for this component stated that schools should provide courses designed to provide "skills" in oral communication as part of the undergraduate curriculum (SACS, 1987). However, beginning with the 1989 edition, the *Criteria for Accreditation* manual states that, "Undergraduate degree programs must contain a basic core of general education courses . . . *Within this core, or in addition to it, the institution must provide components designed to ensure competence in reading, writing, oral communication and fundamental mathematical skills*" (SACS, 1989, p. 24).

Although accreditation agencies have begun to acknowledge speech communication competency as a viable "requirement" for higher education students to "achieve," the harsh reality is that our discipline's role in bringing oral communication competency to college and university students is perceived as less and less viable by administrators and other members of the academy. Phillips (1984) stated that "In a time of runaway retrenchment, speech communication has been generally regarded as a frill. Few people outside the field know what it does" (p. 34). In the 1990s, we seem to be faring no better. Frentz (1995) describes "outsiders'" perceptions of speech communication as the "shadow" of our discipline, stating that our discipline is "still hunted and punished by a shadow continually held to us by our neighbors within the humanities and social sciences like a mirror whose reflections we cannot seem to escape" (p. 16). He tells us that our "shadow" accuses us of being a field of study having "no content, no subject matter, neither a knowledge base nor a theoretical foundation, that does not already exist in other fields within the social sciences and humanities" (p. 16). Surely, there is obvious truth to Frentz' statements given the fact that, currently, major universities are eliminating entire speech communication departments from their campuses, and more departments are awaiting their turn on the chopping block of educational expediency. In fact, there are few of us in the discipline who have not heard about or personally received pleas for help from "expendable" departments to "prove" to the powers that be that they should exist.

But this is old news. How dare I ask my colleagues in speech communication to listen to yet another rendition of "we have to get our act together and let 'them' know how necessary our discipline really is." However, I ask fellow colleges to listen because I am convinced that if we do not keep up the fight for recognition, more and more students will be deprived of the knowledge and use of a discipline that constitutes a crucial element of legitimate education, one that "may be suited to generate radical insights that transgress the self-imposed boundaries of more time-honored fields of study" (Frentz, p. 19).

I ask it because I fear the false sense of security generated by abbreviated survey results, such as those appearing in the April, 1995 *Spectra* that would have us believe that speech communication is "alive and well" on university campuses. The study reports (in bold type) that 79% of all academic institutions surveyed indicated that speech communication is a general education requirement at their school – pretty impressive at first blush. However, instead of being soothed by the balm of these results, one would hope that we would pause and reflect upon how these results can have more than surface accuracy at a time when entire speech programs are crumbling.

Finally, I ask my colleagues to listen again because, perhaps one more article that presents concrete proof that general academia and the public at large do not know who we are or what we do, will provide us with the ammunition to attack more appropriately the "shadow" to which Frentz alludes. It is important, now more than ever, that we understand the nature of perceptions of speech communication by those outside our discipline because those perceptions are damaging, not only to the sometimes fragile egos of faculty members, not only to those students majoring in speech communication, but to all students subject to the general education and accreditation practices at the institutions of higher learning they

attend. True, members of our discipline fought for recognition within accreditation agency mandates such as those enforced by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – and oral communication gained the right to be included along side the more historically recognized disciplines of math and language arts. However, the *fulfillment* of the mandate requiring universities to “ensure” oral communication competency for all college and university students is being taken out of the very hands of those with the knowledge to accomplish the awesome task. Our discipline is not being asked, nor will it be asked, for its expertise as to how oral communication knowledge will be disseminated until we offer proof that we are the appropriate discipline to “ensure” the competency that is a crucial component of all students’ higher education.

SELF-STUDY DOCUMENT REVIEW ANALYSIS

The following information illustrates the severity of the problem we face in educating those outside our discipline about the nature of speech communication and oral communication instruction.¹ This author reviewed self-study documents from universities and colleges accredited by SACS after the change in wording of the oral communication mandate in order to determine what methods colleges and universities are implementing to ensure oral communication competency among students on their campuses. The documentary analysis employed went beyond the type of survey research reported in the April, 1995 *Spectra* in that it highlights the finer distinctions among the various ways institutions approach the study of oral communication. In addition, the study addressed whether or not universities’ and colleges’ perceptions of oral communication competence as stated in the mandate reflect oral communication competence as defined and assessed by the speech communication discipline. The findings of the self-studies reviewed not only give credence to our vague, uneasy feelings regarding inaccurate perceptions by those outside the discipline, the analysis indicates glaring misunderstandings that many have about the nature of speech communication and its role in higher education.

Unlike the survey results reported in *Spectra*, for example, the analysis indicated that, of the ninety-one self-study documents reviewed, only 29% of the schools required a speech course of all students in order to fulfill the SACS mandate, 25% fulfilled the mandate through English/Language Arts courses, 15% reported optional speech courses that students could take in order to meet the mandate, 5% fulfilled the speech requirement exclusively through opportunities aside from a required course or some component in a college course, 9% of the schools by including non-designated oral communication work in courses other than speech or English, 9% made *no mention* of the oral communication requirement, and 8% of the statements were so vague as to how the requirement was met that they could not be categorized (Fleuriet, 1993).

The actual oral communication statements the self-study documents included are as “telling” as the percentages reported. Although communication perspectives literature reveals a continuing controversy over the definition of oral communication competence (Larson, Backlund, Redmond & Barbour, 1978; McCroskey, 1980, 1982b, 1984b; Spitzberg, 1983; Wiemann, 1977), most current research has adopted a perspective that includes both a knowledge and performance component. For example, Spitzberg (1983) argued that competence and effectiveness are interrelated – that a competent response will also be an effective one. Therefore, he asserted, oral communication competence includes both the knowledge of what is competent as well as the skill to produce a competent oral communication outcome (p. 323). Self-study statements reviewed reflect no understanding of the nature of oral communication competence as outlined in speech communication literature. True, documents referred to “oral communication” in their general studies requirements in order to fulfill the SACS mandate. However, many schools’ interpretations of oral communication

competency clearly show a lack of understanding of the construct, as indicated from the following excerpts from the self-studies.

Many of the schools fulfilling the mandate through English/Language Arts courses included initial statements in their documents explaining that the requirement is being met through "communication" courses.² The following excerpt illustrates that *speech* communication is not being addressed, even though the school's document indicates that the school thought it was addressing speech communication. "Students' competence in reading, writing, oral communication, and fundamental mathematics skills is addressed in courses listed in the completion requirements of the University. These include the completion of six semester hours in non-remedial English, rhetoric and composition, and six semester hours in mathematics and/or science" (School #23, p. 83).³ Clearly, speech communication is not one of the school's offerings to complete the oral communication requirement. In fact, course offerings in no way represent the concept of oral communication instruction as reflected in our discipline. These are perhaps the same schools that report on surveys that they require "communication" courses as part of the general studies requirement.

The statements of the vast majority of schools that reported fulfilling the requirement through language arts courses did not suggest that there is any problem in ensuring oral communication competence among students in this manner. In other words, it appears that the institutions believe that they are, indeed, fulfilling the mandate adequately. The next example reflects the addition of an "oral communication" requirement in an English course that only addresses listening skills. "_____ requires all students to demonstrate proficiency in the areas of writing and reading and quantitative skills. . . . The reading and study skills course offers methods of developing the reading and listening skills necessary for effective communications" (School #50, p. 21). Again, the misguided perception that reading and study skills can be equated with oral communication instructions is clear. These two examples illustrate that, perhaps 79% of all schools, as noted in the *Spectra* survey, *think* they are requiring oral communication competency as part of the general studies requirement. However, their interpretation of the nature of speech communication and how an oral communication requirement can be met in general studies courses differs vastly from our discipline's conclusions as to the nature of oral communication competency.

Approximately 15% of the institutions reported optional speech courses that students could take in order to meet the SACS mandate. This category included institutions that required speech in some departments, but not others. In other words, a speech communication class was not required of all students. Schools in this category could not possibly be addressing the oral communication requirement for *all* students; yet, if surveyed, these same schools may report that they do include a speech communication requirement in their general studies curriculum.

Eight schools (9% of the schools reviewed) meet the SACS mandate by including non-designated oral communication work in courses other than speech or English. For example: "Traditional-age freshmen are required to take one Freshman Seminar. Freshman Seminars are designed to promote active intellectual involvement by students. Skills in oral and written communication are emphasized and evaluated. . . . Continuing Education students with at least a 3.0 average have the option of taking directed studies, in which there is significant oral communication between the tutor and the student" (School #36, p. 33). This example points to grave misunderstanding of the nature of oral communication competency. However, the problem is that, although *we* know that tutor /student interaction does not constitute oral communication instruction, those monitoring and enforcing the mandate apparently do not know that this example does not constitute a method to achieve that goal.

Five percent of the schools fulfilled the speech requirement exclusively through opportunities aside from a required course or some component in a college course. The following excerpt confirms our worst fears about others' perceptions. "While the area of oral commu-

nication is not explicitly represented in the distribution requirements, small class size and the fairly large number of courses in which class discussion is encouraged contribute to the emphasis placed on oral communication across the curriculum" (School #18, p. 28). In this example, *no* specific component in any class is designated for oral communication instruction, yet this school met SACS criteria well enough that the lack of actual oral communication instruction by this school was not addressed by SACS. Clearly this school's interpretation is like so many outside the discipline who believe, "If we all just talk enough, surely we will become competent communicators."

Nine percent made no mention of the oral communication requirement but were still accredited by SACS. In some initial statements, for example, schools addressed the general mandate, but left out oral communication as part of that mandate. For example: "_____ requires basic courses in mathematics skills, reading skills, and writing skills" (School #14, p. 43).

Part of the problem here is the multitude of mandates that SACS teams must monitor for accreditation purposes. Oral communication is only one of these mandates. So, understandably, schools get by without fulfilling the mandate. The fact that many visiting SACS team members are often not knowledgeable in speech communication also limits their alertness to the lack of oral communication competency compliance. Perhaps one of the most interesting results of the self-study review was that, regardless of how schools fulfilled the oral communication requirement, almost half of the schools made statements indicating a lack of understanding of oral communication competence as defined by the communication discipline. The term "communication," for example, was given a variety of interpretations within the documents. These "skewed" interpretations appeared to have specific impact on the types of courses offered at various institutions. Often, designated courses to fulfill the requirement have nothing to do with *oral* communication. Therefore, although self-studies may have included a category entitled "Communication," a look at the individual courses offered reveals that the intent of the mandate, at least according to speech communication researchers, is not being met. Two examples follow: (1) "The general education requirements include course work designed to develop competence in the areas of reading, writing, and oral communication (Rhetoric and Composition, Literature and Composition) as well as in the area of fundamental mathematical skills (college algebra, etc.);" (School #5, p. 40). (2) "Required of all students: I. Communication—Purpose: To be able to read, write, speak, and comprehend standard English effectively. Courses: Eng. 101 and 102 or Eng. 146 . . . 6 hours, Theater 140, 3 hours" (School #26, p. 52). Neither of these examples shows course offerings dealing with *oral* communication.

Perhaps the statement moving farthest away from the presumed intent of the requirement included a foreign language class as a method to fulfill the requirement: "Competencies have been developed in reading, writing, oral communications and mathematics courses. Additional tests and other methods are being identified to assess the competency of students (School #26, p. 70). Under a table entitled "Communications," the following were the "communication" course options students could take: Eng 141 (Fresh Comp I), Eng 142 (Fresh Comp II), and six hours of Spanish, French, or German (p. 79). Not only was speech communication left off the list, but foreign language was included in the course offerings for students to become competent in oral communication.

A less glaring, but important misunderstanding was evident in documents' use of terms "skills" in relation to oral communication. As noted previously, although communication researchers differ in their various perspectives of what constitutes oral communication competency, they all agree that skill is not its only component. They agree that knowledge of what is appropriate in a wide variety of communication situations is essential for competence. This difference between these terms was acknowledged by SACS as indicated by the "must" statement word change from "skill" to "competence." The first problem, then, is

that the vast majority of documents did not address competence—they addressed “skill.” Here is an example: “Many classes require student participation in reports, presentations, debates, and group discussion for the development of oral communication skills” (School #10, p. 46).

More important is the fact that, in the vast majority of cases, the “skills” documents referred to are not oral communication skills. It appears that schools using these statements as “proof” of their fulfillment of the requirement clearly thought that appropriate measures were being taken. Two examples follow: (1) “The general education requirements include course work designed to develop competence in the areas of reading, writing, and oral communication (Rhetoric and Composition, Literature and Composition) as well as in the area of fundamental mathematical skills (college algebra, etc.)” (School #5, p. 40). (2) “Based on the results of freshman testing, students are placed in composition and, where appropriate, college reading courses to ensure that all students develop the communication skills they need to continue successfully in college and to graduate as effective communicators” (School #42, p. 100). In other words, students are placed only in reading and composition courses to become effective communicators.

In summary, institutions are engaging in practices to fulfill the SACS oral communication competency requirement that differ from those deemed appropriate by the speech discipline. Many statements reviewed reflect an understanding of terminology inconsistent with communication literature. In addition, many institutions perceive oral communication competency as an elusive construct, as indicated by the various interpretations and methods used to address the mandate.

The most frightening indication that perceptions of oral communication competency by those in the general educational system differ from speech communication experts is that class discussion, interaction between teacher and student, giving oral reports, etc. were often the kinds of “proof” documents contained to support the fact that schools were ensuring oral communication competency. It appears that participation alone, with no formal knowledge of the communication construct, is enough for some schools to conclude that their students are becoming “communicatively competent.”

The review of the documents provides an initial picture of some of the problems and misunderstandings connected with oral communication competency among schools required to “ensure” oral communication competence among their students. Because SACS is one of six regional accreditation agencies in the United States dealing with the oral communication competence issue, it stands to reason that there are misinterpretations also by schools belonging to the other regional accreditation agencies.

Of what importance are these findings, then, to our discipline’s attempt to educate administrators, accreditation agencies, and even other disciplines on our university and college campuses about the nature of speech communication? The importance of these findings lies in the fact that they offer concrete evidence that we simply are not doing a good job. How can we be treated as integral to legitimate student education if we cannot communicate competently about our discipline? True, speech communication is not necessarily a forgotten subject in higher education; however, it clearly has not found a distinct place in the core curriculum as have the more established disciplines of English and math—and the fault is ours.

In the final analysis, educational institutions’ misguided perceptions of oral communication have a direct impact on speech communication departments throughout the United States. The problems illustrated in institutional fulfillment of the SACS oral communication mandate are symptomatic of the much larger problem of perceptions of our discipline as a whole. I submit that we are seeing the impact now where departments outside of speech communication are taking over communication instruction and where speech communica-

tion departments are being eliminated from campuses because they are no longer perceived as crucial, valuable components of the institutional structure.

The fact that eleven of the ninety-one schools studied did not even address the mandate for oral communication competency is telling. Why are schools being accredited without providing clear methods of meeting the oral communication competency requirement which is included as one of the "must" statements in the *Criteria for Accreditation*? Perhaps it is time that we accept some of the blame for the circumstances that allow this to happen and question our discipline's responsibility for the problem.

A crucial issue in the practical use of the speech communication discipline's knowledge of oral communication competency is for our discipline to come to some sort of agreement as to what constitutes oral communication competency. Can we honestly say that taking a course in oral communication will render students "competent"? Is taking a speech communication course more likely to steer a student toward competence than some of the other methods of fulfilling the requirement that were set forth in the statements made in the self-studies? Is there truly any possible way to "ensure" oral communication competency among all students? If not, should the mandate be changed or eliminated? It is time come to some agreement within our field of study so that we can provide answers for those who are questioning us. Isolation from other disciplines and the public at large will not further the cause of speech communication.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Our discipline must launch a massive effort to provide specific information to both the schools attempting accreditation and the accreditation agencies. The effort should involve the Speech Communication Association, regional associations, and individual departments in all accredited colleges and universities. Our first priority can be to communicate with university faculty and administrators who cannot understand the nature and importance of oral communication competency unless we provide them with that knowledge. As a result of understanding the integral part we should play in students' education, institutions will begin to search for ways to integrate oral communication instruction on their campuses. To begin this education, SCA should see to it that every academic dean and VPAA from an accredited school is provided each issue of *Spectra*, complete with headlines touting the importance of oral communication competency and our discipline's continuing role in developing instruction and assessment to ensure competency among students. At first blush the suggestion seems simplistic. However, in times of institutional accountability, higher administration may welcome the chance to prove institutional improvement through the speech communication discipline.

A major problem in monitoring the oral communication competency mandate, such as that required by SACS, is that the mandate is only a small part of what universities and colleges must fulfill in order to be accredited. Thus, little attention is given to oral communication outside the speech communication field. Blatant inconsistencies in self-study documents get by visiting team members who are not specifically trained in oral communication and have little understanding of the difference between what schools report and the intent of the mandate. Several studies have noted problems with the "visiting teams" method of assessment (Isom et al., 1982; Waggener et al., 1991; Wayner, 1979). Moore (1974) gathered reports from ten two-year institutions from the Middle States region in order to find areas of accreditation concern among persons in varied institutional roles (members of steering committees and institutional personnel). Recommendations to the Commission included: (1) improvement of the method of selecting visiting team members, (2) more emphasis on outcomes, (3) more information on the preparation of the written report of the

teams and (4) more research of the accreditation practices. Clearly these are issues pertinent to our discipline, and we must see to it that those who are in charge of making accreditation decisions understand speech communication and its role in higher education. Perhaps we can accomplish this task by asking all six regional associations to appoint representatives to visit accreditation agency executives and volunteer our help in training visiting team members to monitor the oral communication competency requirement.

Additionally, we must work on our academic credibility. One way to gain credibility with those outside the discipline is to continue to perfect our assessment methods. Essentially, speech communication experts should either find ways to educate faculty members on campuses as to our current methods of assessing communication competency or find better ways to explain that oral communication competency should not be assessed in the same way as other competence components are. SCA has already appointed a task force to address the assessment issue, and excellent assessment methods are being developed. Yet I fear that we are the only ones who are aware of these advancements. Perhaps SCA can appoint representatives to meet with faculty at universities facing accreditation and offer assistance in assessing oral communication competency.

Department chairs can also play a role in our effort to educate the "shadow" of our discipline. They can attend dean's council meetings and inquire about the oral communication needs of students in various departments across campus and discuss how speech communication instruction can meet those needs. In addition, they can make copies of articles such as "Why Communication? Why Education? Toward a Politics of Teaching" (Hart, 1993) and "The Unbearable Darkness of Seeing" (Frentz, 1995) to send to higher school administrators so that they are given the opportunity to understand the complexities of our discipline.

This polemic would not be complete if I did not also mention the role of the individual in sending our message. In the final analysis, it is the collective, individual efforts of members of the speech communication discipline that will preserve it – because we are the ones who understand that the knowledge of effective communication is more than can be measured. We understand that "Teachers of communication peddle freedom. And it is the best sort of freedom of all: Their students become all that *they* can imagine becoming. If teachers of communication err philosophically, they err in the direction of solipsism by implying that, through communication, the world can be created anew" (Hart, 1993, p. 102).

Spitzberg (1983) noted that "while our discipline begins to develop instructional objectives for communicative competency, it is important that our perspective of competence be precise enough to generate research and interdisciplinary respectability, and simultaneously broad enough to integrate diverse educational concerns" (p. 323). In 1996 we still have not fully addressed this issue. Yet, even as I write, I hear reverberating echoes of SCA cocktail parties where, interspersed with the chatter of the latest gossip, are the "misery loves company" groans of colleagues bemoaning our sad state of affairs and the lack of respect we receive from others in academia. The fact of the matter is that the people with the power to make changes in perceptions about our discipline do not attend our cocktail parties. Neither are they eavesdropping in our departmental hallways waiting to hear the "truth" about our discipline's importance to the educational community. Instead, the decision makers are often VPAs and university presidents holding degrees in chemistry, mathematics, and business – not speech communication. They are members of accreditation agencies who know little about the oral communication competency mandate they are monitoring. They are even sometimes the people who, when told you are a speech communication professor, reply "Oh, is that like speech pathology?"

We must become aware of if and how our research is being translated into practical use for those who are challenged to ensure oral communication competency for all students on their campuses so that we can become the appropriate messengers of our discipline. We

have an opportunity to perfect our own knowledge of oral communication competency and all of its many facets so that we may pass this knowledge on for practical use on college and university campuses. If oral communication competency were not essential to the student population, then we would not be studying it, and accreditation agencies would not mandate schools to attempt the task of ensuring it for all students. Frenz (1995) tells us that the trick in "hunting the hunter" is "to grasp our own integrity in relation to our shadow" and to "speak our shadow's name" (p. 17). It is time, then, for us to face our shadow, send our message, and take our appropriate place in academia.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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¹The primary data included in this essay were self-study documents from schools belonging to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Self-study statements were compiled in the dissertation entitled "The Oral Communication Competence Dilemma: A Documentary Analysis of the Fulfillment of the Oral Communication Competency Requirement by Universities and Colleges Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools" (Fleuriet, 1993). A documentary analysis incorporating two methods, a simple frequency content analysis and a modified case-survey aggregation analysis, were employed in order to answer the research questions posed in the original study.

²All self-study statements quoted and discussed were taken from the 4.1.2 section of the Commission on Colleges College and University Requirements. The cluster sample included self-study documents from School Levels II-VI institutions that were accredited after 1989, when the change in wording of the mandate occurred.

³The page numbers cited are the page numbers of the self-study documents from which the self-study statements were gathered. In the original study, school documents were listed by number only in order to protect each school's privacy. In some cases, because the mandate is included in the same sentence as math and English in the SACS "must" statements, statements concerning English and math are included.

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