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ABSTRACT
                 Many changes in job training and distance education have had
a negative effect on the traditional oral communication class, while the need
for better oral communication skills is increasing dramatically. Instructors
now face the challenge of convincing administrators that the need for oral
communication education is too important to be eliminated from the
curriculum. Instructors need to translate the theories of speech
communication into job-related skills, and they need to become involved in
community economic and workforce development groups. In developing oral
communication skills in workforce development programs, certain strategies
are needed, such as becoming involved, learning what training is needed,
developing professional expertise, and determining how to meet the needs of
students. (Contains a sample survey, "Oral Communication in the Workforce.")
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RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION

SKILLS IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

By

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Recognizing the Need for Oral Communication Skills in Workforce Development Programs

Since the mid-1990's, colleges and universities have become more focused on their roles as the providers of training for the development of the 21st century workforce. Businesses and educators alike have stressed the need for a better trained and better educated workforce. Federal and state legislation seeking to provide individuals with the skills necessary to obtain work and to remove them from welfare has mandated changes in the way institutions train individuals for new age jobs. At the same time distance learning and computer-aided instruction have emerged as new methods for reaching students not otherwise served. Now, in some instances, an entire degree can be earned without every setting foot on a campus. Many of these changes have had a potentially negative effect, either directly or indirectly, on the traditional oral communication class while at the same time the need for better oral communication skills is increasing dramatically.

For most of the past twenty-five plus years that I have been teaching speech communication, our primary focus has been on public speaking and interpersonal communication. There is no doubt that students can benefit from these courses, but now there is often the attempt to eliminate any and all courses that don't directly relate to a student's immediate requirements in a workforce related program. For example, if at the community college level a student is majoring in computer technology or interior design, the inclusion of many general education courses might be seen as unnecessary in reaching the goal of employment. Many state legislatures and some education officials have also seen the need to limit the number of hours in a degree program. In some cases associate degrees have been reduced from 66 hours to 60 hours and baccalaureate degrees reduced from 128 hours to 120 hours. This means courses have to be eliminated. Those schools accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) are

required to have a minimum of 15 hours of general education courses at the associate degree level and 30 hours at the baccalaureate level. If the oral communication courses are not designed to be included in the general education program they are likely to be eliminated or taught as part of other courses by the professionals in those areas. Now we face the challenge of convincing administrators that the need for oral communication education is too important to be eliminated from a student's curriculum.

In too many cases the communication professionals have not demonstrated the importance of our role or the necessity for having communication professionals provide the needed training and education. Several years ago at my own institution, the administration was able to convince a visiting team from the SACS that the reading aloud of a term paper in an advanced composition class met the requirement for demonstrating proficiency in oral communication. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most of us recognize that reading aloud is not the oral skill that business and industry are looking for when they include, "must have good oral and written communication skills" in their employment ads. Recently, Indiana University moved the traditional Business Speech course from the communication department to the college of business where it is now considered a business course. While the vast majority of us here are graduates of departments where we majored in communication theory, public address, performance studies, rhetoric, oral interpretation, mass communication, or interpersonal communication, our students are in need of theory and skills that relate directly to their being successful in their jobs and in their personal lives. We need to translate the theories we have explored and studied into meaningful courses for today's students. Also, we must demonstrate that communication professionals are in the best position to provide the leadership for and delivery of training and education in oral communication.

Speech professionals cannot sit in our "Ivory Towers" of higher education and wait for the world to come to us. We have to involve ourselves in community groups that are driving economic development in our communities. Graduate

programs have to accept that even the obtaining of a PhD is a form of workforce development. Ultimately we all must go to work. Not all professionals in our field are going to go to Research I institutions and carry on the research tradition. Far more, as we at community colleges can well attest, will go on to provide training and education at the nations community and technical colleges and in other undergraduate programs that are concerned with educating tomorrow's workforce. Further, we must accept that many decisions and much of the current training will take place outside of the traditional classroom.

By now most of us are now used to hearing about workforce development. The reason for the emphasis on this is really two-fold. First, the Workforce Investment Act, which was passed in 1998, took effect in July 2000. The law replaces the Job Training Partnership Act and stresses accountability in training programs. It is aimed at moving people from welfare to work and to encourage businesses and industry to provide upward mobility to existing employees through encumbered workers programs. The second reason is the need for a much better qualified workforce to meet the needs of an information and technology based economy. Among the skills that the new workforce will need are strong communication skills. In a recent "Your Opinions" column of the paper (*The Times Picayune*, Saturday March 31,2001, P.B-6) Laurie DeVecca, a kitchen manager in New Orleans wrote, "It seems that although America is finally beginning to accept racism within its borders, it shuts its eyes to the class distinction that still exists. ...As a kitchen manager, I have seen many bright young people who will never escape the service industry--or even move up in it-- simply because their communication skills (not to mention their math skills) are atrocious."

So then, once we recognize there is as need for developing oral communication skills in workforce development programs and that competent communication experts are needed to design and implement such programs, what are some of the strategies we can implement and pitfalls we can avoid? Most of my comments are based on many years experience as a professor of

speech communication, a member of a local economic development board, seven years as a community college president and five years of working with Metro-Vision, a regional economic development group in metropolitan New Orleans.

First and foremost get involved. Does your institution have representation on the local workforce development committee? If not, volunteer. If someone is representing your college, make sure they know what you have to offer. Several months ago, I was part of a Call Center Focus Group. There were representatives of nine call centers, several community colleges, service suppliers, employment agencies, Louisiana Department of Labor, and MetroVision. The purpose was to determine what training would be required to prepare individuals for a Call Center workforce. The thirty-one people were given a questionnaire to complete as part of determining training needed and the number of hours of instruction to be spent on each element. As part of the meeting, attendees were asked to prioritize training needs for their companies. The needs and the percentages of the attendees expressing a need for each are:

SKILL	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS*
Communication Skills	78%
Personal Computer Skills	44%
Work Ethic	33%
Negotiation Skills	22%
Problem Solving Skills	22%

*(Respondents could indicate first and second priorities needed by their companies)

Kerris Ramsey of Ramsey Enterprises facilitated the meeting and told the group that research from previous focus groups concerning call centers identified seven core competencies. These competencies are: Computer Literacy,

Competitor Knowledge, Professional Communication, Building Relationships, Negotiation Skills/Solution Selling, Problem Solving/Decision Making, and Multi-Tasking Skills. Four of the seven needed competencies are integral parts of many oral communication classes.

In the general discussion which followed, one lady representing a local cable company that manages its own small call center described how difficult it is in our area to find qualified people who can speak fluently on the phone and handle the pressure and stress of fielding mainly complaint calls for seven and a half hours a day. Others expressed concern over the typical New Orleans accent. By the time the meeting adjourned, it was clear that most of the training needed was directly related to the types of communication skills we teach in class. It was beneficial to my institution, and to me, to learn what communication skills business felt were needed. This training would not be provided in typical credit classes, but in specialized training sessions. Many of the companies want the training to be held at their workplace during or after regular work hours, depending on the situation. They also saw the courses/classes being taught on a typical work schedule, such as a twenty-four hour class being taught in three eight hour days or six half days. The idea of stretching instruction out over a 15-week period with only a few hours of instruction per week was not acceptable to most. In fact, many companies allow only six to eight weeks to train new workers and the feeling was this training would have to fit into that schedule.

Learn what training is needed, who can offer it and who will be the students. In What do employers want? (Techniques; Making Education & Career Connections, May97, Vol. 72 Issue 5, p22), interviews were held with employers and business executives to ascertain what skills are needed in the workforce today. Fred Paul, training manager for Rockwell Automotive Special Axels, Heath, Ohio and a member of the Licking County Pre-employment Training Consortium stated, "We are looking for the quality of the person, their work ethic, their ability to read for information and to **communicate**--to interface with

customers and to be able to talk with them. The only edge in any business--I don't care if you're in insurance or you're an online system or you're in heavy manufacturing--is your people. The key is finding people who come to you with **communication skills** and the ability and willingness to learn." In the same article, Jill Stephens, director of corporate outreach, America Online, Dulles, Virginia remarked, "I agree very strongly that communication skills are one of the strongest "soft" skills that are needed. Another is the ability to work in teams." Lois Snitkoff, director, new business development, Consumer Education Center, MetLife, New York City added, "I think employees need **communication skills** with a capital "C". If you cannot listen to other people, if you cannot negotiate, if you cannot write, if you cannot speak, you will lose in this world. I can't think of any skills more important, no matter how technically brilliant you might be. I have found in hiring over the years that many people today are coming out of school with a real lack of **communication skills**."

Being involved with the community and knowing what business and industry need are important, but being involved in professional organizations is another way to learn what is working in other locations as well as a way to share your successes with others. Colleges in several states have formed consortiums for promoting training for workforce development. Three community colleges in northeast Alabama formed a consortium with local leaders and Chambers of Commerce in 1995 when they learned Fort McClellan would close. All worked together to plan for economic and workforce development to find solutions for the tremendous number of jobs that would be lost when the base closed. They were able to attract other businesses and industries to the area and lessen the impact of the base closure.

The more we develop our own professional expertise, the more we can contribute to the future of education and workforce development at the same time. Some twenty-odd years ago I was working for a consultant firm to create forty-four vocational-technical schools. In addition to the facilities planning, we were charged with the responsibility of developing the programs to be included in

each school. I was very interested in the failure to recognize the need for good communication skills. At the same time I was completing my doctorate. I chose as my dissertation project to study the communication needs of vocational-technical trained employees as perceived by educators, employers and the employees themselves. It is interesting to note while there were dissimilarities on the needed communication skills among the three groups, all three saw as the number one needed skill, the ability to listen and take directions. This information has been incorporated into my classes as appropriate. I often do in-class surveys and research to make sure that I am meeting the needs of current students as well as meeting the overall goals of the class. I recently surveyed the students in my classes and asked them to rate eleven skills on a scale of 1 to 5, with five being the highest score.

Most of these skills are covered in the basic course. I also asked the students to tell me what oral skills they feel will be needed in their career field at the start of their careers and which will be needed later. My colleague on this panel asked her classes at Xavier University to complete the survey. The results were quite similar even though the Xavier students were in a baccalaureate program and my students are in associate degree programs. As far as the open-ended questions, the students' responses were quite interesting. Even my students in the technical and trades programs recognized the need to be able to communicate with the people they worked with and the people they worked for. While they did not think public speaking was going to be very important to them on the job, they felt that managing conflict and interviewing skills would be. One carpentry student noted that finding out exactly what a customer wanted done and how much they were able to spend was closely related to interviewing. Several noted that early in their careers, being interviewed would be important, but later knowing how to interview would become more important. Many of the students saw the oral skills as being necessary throughout their careers. A copy of the survey follows.

Oral Communication in the Workforce Survey
March 2001

This is a short survey to determine what oral communication skills you think you may need in your chosen profession. Please answer each question as honestly and completely as possible.

1. What is your chosen major? _____

2. Do you plan to work in this field after you leave Delgado? _____
After completing an additional degree? _____

3. Do you plan to work in another field after graduation? If so, what is the field? _____

3. What oral communication skills do you feel will be needed in this job at the beginning of your career? (First year)

4. What oral communication skills will be needed later in your career? (After three to five years)

5. Rate each of the following oral communication skills on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest and 1 being the lowest score you can give for each item as it relates to your chosen career.
_____ Giving Directions
_____ Following Directions
_____ Interviewing Others
_____ Being Interviewed
_____ Telephone Manners
_____ Conflict Reduction
_____ Starting Conversations
_____ Listening Skills
_____ Salesmanship
_____ Public Speaking
_____ Computer Presentations

The average ratings of the eleven communication skills by students in the basic course are provided in rank order.

SKILL	AVERAGE RATING
Listening Skills	4.3
Following Directions	4.2
Conflict Reduction	4.1
Starting Conversations	4.1
Giving Directions	3.9
Telephone Manners	3.8
Public Speaking	3.6
Being Interviewed	3.5
Interviewing Others	3.3
Computer Presentations	3.1
Salesmanship	3.1

In the basic oral communication class that I teach, I attempt to meet the needs of students to be successful in the workplace as well as in higher levels of education. They gain needed experience in group and team work by preparing and delivering a PowerPoint presentation as a group activity that requires them to use good interpersonal communication skills. As a group, they must first select a topic of interest to the class, do all of the research and data gathering, create a common organizational pattern, and outline and prepare individual computer-aided presentations. This is a "pie speech" since each person presents a slice of the pie.

Another work-related assignment is the development of a resume and cover letter for a specific job or application to a university. From this information each student is interviewed for the position by a team of four interviewers from the class. In the evaluation of the activity following the assignment, students frequently report that serving on the interview teams is a valuable experience. They choose the questions to ask from a series of questions developed from a number of different sources and taken from actual interviews. The resume writers association has excellent lists of questions. Often college and university placement offices will have sets of questions. Local newspaper articles often contain information on new businesses in the area and the skills required for

positions. These will assist in updating the questions. Group problem solving activities and listening exercises are also related to actual on the job situations. Many of the conflict reduction strategies can be taught through role-playing problems that occur in work environments.

To further support the necessity to identify and provide training for the needed communication skills, one can look at studies done by others. F. S. Wayne and R.B. Mitchell (Vital Communication Skills and Competencies in the Workforce of the 1990's, *Journal of Education for Business*, Jan/Feb92, Vol.67 Issue 3, p141) sought to identify the value of interpersonal skills needed for success on the job. Thirty-one specific skills were identified and then each of these skills was rated for its importance in three areas—verbal, nonverbal and group interaction. Employment recruiters/human resource personnel who represented 76 national and international organizations did the ratings. The study grew out of the concerns of many business professionals that graduates of American business schools were deficient in communication skills.

The results of the study indicated that the highest rated verbal skill needed is "gives clear directions/information to others." Second was "resolves conflict with others." Of the nonverbal skills, "demonstrates attentiveness and enthusiasm in interacting with others." Lowest rating was the use of audio visual aids. This writer thinks that the in the time since this study was done, the use of computer aided presentations may have changed this upward slightly. Finally in the group interaction category, two items rated higher than the others. These were, " communicates effectively to internal groups of six or fewer people" and "communicates effectively to external groups of six or fewer people." There was no statement in the thirty-one used by Wayne and Mitchell that specifically asked about listening skills. It is assumed to be included in the statements concerning effective communication. The chart which follows list all thirty-one statements according to their mean rankings.

Overall Ranking of Thirty-One Communication Items from Wayne and Mitchell Study

1. Gives clear direction/information to others.

2. Resolves conflicts with others effectively.

3. Speaks in an assertive, confident manner.

4. Asks appropriate questions when needed to clarify information.

5. Follows directions without significant guidance.

6. Makes points to others clearly and succinctly.

7. Demonstrates attentiveness and enthusiasm in interacting.

8. Speaks naturally and expressively.

9. Enunciates clearly.

10. Is sensitive and timely in delivering verbal messages.

11. Demonstrates objective and fair tone in speaking with others.

12. Plans and organizes ideas and remarks before speaking.

13. Provides and receives feedback (verbal and nonverbal).

14. Perceives and reacts positively to verbal and nonverbal cues.

15. Demonstrates appropriate nonverbal behaviors.

16. Communicates effectively to internal groups of six or fewer.

17. Restates and summarizes main points to confirm understanding.

18. Draws conclusions and inferences from verbal information.

19. Verbal and nonverbal information compliment each other.

20. Communicates effectively to external groups of six or fewer.

21. Shows appropriate sense of humor in speaking and reacting.

22. Uses appropriate vocal variety—rate, volume, and pitch.

23. Speaks without using vocal and physically distracting mannerisms.

24. Responds effectively to audience questions and concerns.

25. Communicates effectively to internal groups of seven or more.

26. Communicates effectively to external groups of seven or more.

27. Uses colorful, descriptive, and interesting vocabulary.

28. Uses audiovisual aids to reinforce speaking when appropriate.

29. Plans and organizes conferences.

30. Demonstrates knowledge of parliamentary procedures.

31. Dictates to secretary or other office staff.

A very recent study was the one conducted by Vincent R. Waldron and Melissa R. Lavitt ("Welfare-To-Work": Assessing Communication Competencies and Client Outcomes in a Job Training Program, Southern Communication Journal, Vol. 66, Number 1, Fall 2000. They looked at the success of a welfare-to-work program that had a communication-intensive job-training program. The results indicate that communication skills are significant factors in predicting the client outcomes and success on the job.

I hope this information is sufficient to demonstrate how important your role as a communication educator is in the development of the workforce for the twenty-first century. With these facts, approach your administration and let them know that you are ready to help your institution and the people it serves by building the skills that will better prepare the workforce at all levels.

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