The Future of Communication Education: Communication as a Content Discipline

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I came to the field of Communication by way of the field of Speech. I was an undergraduate debater who also participated in contests in discussion, extemporaneous speaking, and after-dinner speaking. I also acted in many high school and college plays. I directed drama at the high school level. I coached high school debate and taught junior and senior high school public speaking classes for three years. I coached debate at the college level for three years and judged college debate extensively for another nine years. I taught public speaking at the college level for nine years. I have a book on public speaking which Allyn and Bacon is releasing in its seventh edition which is entering its thirtieth year in print. I have published many articles in journals relating to effective oral communication performance.

I do not begin my remarks with all of this self-description to boast about my past. Rather, I do so to establish that I am not an enemy of the traditional field of speech but rather a product of it. It is a background of which I am proud, not one of which I am ashamed or wish to hide. While the views I will express in these remarks will in some ways echo views expressed in *Communication Education* in 1989 by my friend, Michael Burgoon, I do not call for our field of Communication to divorce "Dame Speech" as he did. I do, however, find myself in full agreement with Dr. Burgoon when he states that extant "theory and research in communication have far outstripped what presently is being taught in Speech" (p. 303). Although seven years have passed since I heard him deliver those remarks on a panel at the Central States Communication Association, his comments are as accurate today as they were then.

As Dr. Burgoon has suggested, what we teach most of our students has little to do with what our scholarship has made available to teach our students. It is not an exaggeration to say that most of our scholarship is wasted effort. We teach public speaking much like it was taught at the beginning of the twentieth century. The ***absence*** of research to indicate that what we do is effective is overwhelming. In the process we ignore the rest of the field of communication. It is critical that we teach the next generation of communication scholars and professionals what is known about communication rather than simply "how to do it." The "how-to-do-its" rather consistently are not based in solid scholarship and the bad information is pushing out the good.

For most of us who currently see ourselves as members of a discipline we choose to call "Communication" or some similar title, the field of Speech is not our intellectual spouse, from whom we can effect a divorce. Rather, the field of Speech is our grandparent, someone from whom we have learned and who has helped us grow to where we are today. We are different from our grandparent. What our grandparent built should continue to be respected, maybe even revered, but it cannot be expected to be fully adaptable in today's realities. To understand where we are today, it is vital that we understand from whence we came.

Our ancestors who formed the National Association of Teachers of Public Speaking parted company with our friends in the field of English in

large part because of their primary concern with public speaking as an art—an applied art. They saw effective public speaking as the foundation for successful participation in the professions and as the entry to the seats of power in the society. They were carrying forth the noble cause of the rhetoric of Aristotle in the grand tradition of the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman culture. We were taught that through effective public speaking we would all achieve "freedom," "liberty," and "equality."

Unfortunately, too few of us appear to be aware that what these words meant throughout most of the last 2,500 years is not what we take them to mean today. Recognize that the people who were able to participate in the rhetoric of Athenian society of 300 or so B.C. (or most anywhere else in Europe, Africa, or the Middle East) were a very small proportion of the people of the society. They were virtually all male, non-slaves who owned considerable property, and were fairly well-educated. Much of the population was constituted of slaves, and of course over half of the non-slaves were women, people who had virtually no rights at all. The rhetorical system was designed for the elite few males who could participate in the governmental and economic systems of the culture.

The same basic pattern survived in the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman cultures of Western societies, including the United States, until very recently. Slavery was not abolished until the nineteenth century in the U.S. But even after that, neither former slaves nor their descendants were allowed to vote or fully participate in most of the aspects of everyday economic life or political life. Although women were finally given the right to vote in the 1920s, neither women nor the descendents of former slaves were granted the legal status of equality until the 1960s in the U.S., and they still do not have that status in most other countries. It should not be surprising, therefore, that few non-white or female scholars had an opportunity to make meaningful contributions to the study of rhetoric and public speaking until recent years. It simply was "not appropriate."

In the middle 1960s in the U.S., education as a whole, and particularly our own field of speech, began going through enormous change. Women, minorities, and white males of the middle and lower classes flowed into schools in enormous numbers. The interests of these individuals were not fully consistent with those of the former occupants of higher education, those representing the economic and cultural elite. This led to a revolution in the study of human communication which drew increasing attention to that communication which exists outside the infrastructure dominated by the cultural elite. The study of communication became open to those who had never had an opportunity to study it, and the questions these new students asked often were very different than those who went before them. They filed into our required public speaking classes and started asking why they had to study something as foreign to them as this strange behavior.

With the growth in student enrollments in colleges and universities, course requirements mandated massive numbers of faculty and/or graduate students for some offerings. With many freshman classes numbering between 5,000 and 10,000 students (and some even more) came a realization on the part of many university administrators that offering 200 to 400 (or more) 25-person sections of public speaking classes each year made no economic sense. People in our field were forced to reevaluate the nature of the basic course, and many courses were changed to "fundamentals" courses rather than pure public speaking. Since some of the skills being taught in these "fundies" classes did not require individualized presentations, enrollments could be increased to keep administrators happy.

As a function of extended interactions with many of the "new" students in our environment, many of us in Speech began to reluctantly admit that what we were teaching might not be what the modern student needed. At about the same time, our research brought into question the usefulness of our skills courses in accomplishing one of two primary goals which they professed to meet—to reduce students' fear of speaking with others. Other

research indicated that in the new economic world the importance of public speaking was greatly reduced in the society, and people had new needs for understanding such things as interpersonal communication, organizational communication, political communication, mass communication, nonverbal communication, health communication, and intercultural communication—none of which had much to do with public speaking.

Our scholars responded to these needs, and continue to do so. But our pedagogy did not follow our scholarship. To this day, in most of our institutions the way students gain access to the content of the discipline is by passing through prerequisite—and sometimes required—basic courses which focus on oral performance skills. While the analogy is not perfect, this is something like Psychology requiring a performance course in therapeutic techniques prior to being introduced to the content of psychology—or the medical profession requiring a performance course in surgical techniques prior to being introduced to basic human anatomy.

It should not be a surprise to learn, as we do from several surveys that have been reported in our field, that the ***only*** course taken in our field by the overwhelming majority of students in most of our colleges and universities is a basic course in public speaking or an oral performance fundamentals course. This is the only picture of our field these students have, they find it of minimal value to them (or strongly aversive if they are communication apprehensives), and they want no more of it—ever. They can't get to the "good stuff" because they must take the performance course first, and/or they don't even find out that there is "good stuff" to be had in other courses.

Teaching performance courses to the cultural elite served us well as a field for the more than the first half of this century. We should continue to make such courses available to those students who want them and can benefit from them. But if we are to compete in the academic marketplace and attain and maintain a position of centrality in our colleges and universities, we must move these courses to the margin and bring the solid content of our discipline to central prominence. Instead of requiring a public speaking course prior to allowing the student to study basic rhetorical theory and/or the social scientific data related to persuasion, we need to turn that system around. We need to require that the student obtain a basic understanding of rhetorical and/or communication theory before being allowed to enroll in a performance course in public speaking.

My argument for Communication as a Content Discipline rests in part on my belief that becoming an effective communicator in today's society is far more dependent on what one understands about how and why effective communication occurs than on specific oral presentational skills. I am convinced that the only reason many of us cling to presentation as a core is because we were born with certain talents in this area and our academic self-esteem is riding on the alleged value of what we happen to be good at! But let's face it, the mind is far more important to effective communication than the larynx—although both are of importance in the larger scheme of things.

Beyond that, the goal of the entire instructional program in communication does not necessarily need to be directed toward making students more effective communicators. ***Understanding*** communication, like understanding history, psychology, or chemistry, does not necessarily have to lead to ***doing*** communication (or history, psychology, chemistry). This is a problematic orientation that we have inherited from grandparent Speech. The speech field has always claimed to be most concerned with ***application.*** There is absolutely nothing wrong with teaching students how to apply the knowledge about communication which we share with them. Unfortunately, the narrow and extremely limited application of our field's knowledge to the marginalized context of public speaking cannot be at the cutting edge of a discipline. The generation of knowledge must take that position. Producing students who have a solid understanding of what is known about communication and are challenged by the questions remaining to be pursued is the proper central focus of communication education. This is not accomplished in oral performance classes.

In addition, and at least equally as important, to be known for our performance classes is to be known as "skill providers." In today's systems of higher education, such a reputation will place us at a third-rate level in the system—one which is not seen as particularly important and certainly not central to the intellectual functioning of a quality institution of higher learning.

If we do not move the content of our discipline to the center of communication education, our discipline will be considered increasingly marginal in an area of shrinking budgets. The question of what content should be included, of course, is a difficult one. Not all of us necessarily would agree on everything to include, and that issue is an important one which goes beyond the scope of my remarks today. My suggestions would probably be obvious to those who have read my papers and books over the years, but I hardly expect that everyone hearing (or reading) these remarks would be in agreement with me. It is not immediately essential that we settle on one narrow definition of communication content and all teach that content as our basic course, although that is a direction toward which I think we should move with due haste.

It is time that our professional associations work to achieve disciplinary consensus on the nature of a content course (or courses) which can gradually supplant oral performance courses as the entree for students to our field. We must resist those both from within and without who sing the siren's song of public speaking or oral fundamentals as the foundational course in our field. Oral performance courses are the "Model T" of courses in communication. It was a fine car for its day, but hardly what we need for the twenty-first century! We have a very large Lexus hiding in our garage. It is time to polish it up and drive it with pride!