

Communication Skills as the SACS-QEP

Submitted

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The written word is the mechanism by which we know what we know. It organizes our thought. We may wish to understand the rise of literacy both historically and logically, but history and logic are themselves the products of literate thought. (Gleick, 2001, p. 29-30)

Teaching communication skills is not just about training students in a discipline, but rather it is about “educating them more broadly for life beyond college and instilling within them an inquisitive curiosity that will serve them throughout their lives” (Duck & McMahan, 2012, p. *xxi*). If communication skills are to have an important and major impact on increasing student learning, then the goal of an institution of higher learning must be to assist students in achieving analytical awareness and giving them the wherewithal to express it. The college should make instructional standards and learning objectives more uniform and build them into communications course plans. Furthermore, the college should develop specific methods of integrating writing more effectively into non-English courses to support writing across the curriculum. These two encompassing steps are part and parcel of advocating that communication skills become Brevard Community College’s Quality Enhancement Plan’s *raison d’être*.

Defining Communication Skills

Moneyworth (2011) described five communication skills that all college students should “attempt to master before and during college” (§ 1). The first skill was reading, followed by

writing, writing Email, speaking, and listening. The author found that these essential communication skills formed the opportunities for succeeding in any given profession. Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens (1985) found that “effective communication skills were tantamount to the success of an organization” and concluded chief executives and other senior leaders placed the highest value on “effective interpersonal communication because they know that productivity depends on effective communication” (p. 21).

Murray (2010) used research from authors Canale and Swain’s 1980 study to define communication skills as being composed of four components:

Grammatical competence (concerned with the well-formedness of language), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to be appropriate with language), discourse competence (knowledge of the connections between utterances in a text to form a meaningful whole), and strategic competence (the ability to compensate for imperfect language knowledge). ...Proficiency...in language...includes grammar and syntax, general listening skills, vocabulary development, general reading and writing skills, the development of communication strategies and...the pragmatics of communication and associated concerns with...implicature and inference. (p. 57)

Dykstra (2008) reinforced the idea that communication skills were paramount life skills in a study that concluded “communication skills, both written and oral, are the most important quality employers seek in the ‘ideal candidate’” (p. 920). The rationale behind this statement was the research that found written and oral communication skills helped develop general thinking skills, particularly critical thinking skills. Johnson, Buhler, and Hillman (2010) opined that the key

21st century skills were “communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, innovation, and information, media, and technology literacy” (§ 4). Finally, Mageau (2011) argued that “critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity aren’t just job skills—they are life skills” (p. 4).

Need

Educating students in achieving the various skills in communication is a continuing need, especially in the 21st century. The ability to learn, analyze, and decide in the information rich society of today is even more critical due to the sheer abundance of resources. College communication skills are the baseline methodologies that enable a learner to know how information is created, whether it is written or spoken, in any number of informational media. Therefore the learner must be able to “gather, evaluate, and use” it effectively (Marinara, 2006, p. 1). Furthermore, it has been promulgated that information “fluency” is vital for academic success, professional success, and continued success all of which contributes to the lifelong learning processes (p. 2).

In the MetLife Insurance Corporation’s latest annual survey of *Preparing Students for College and Careers*, the critical components of being college- and career- ready were focused more on higher-order thinking and performance skills than on knowledge of challenging content. In short, the respondents (teachers, parents, students and Fortune 1000 executives) rated problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and the ability to write clearly and persuasively as “absolutely essential or very important for a student to be ready for college and a career” (2011, p. 20). When the survey was broken down by base categories, Fortune 1000 executives rated

“problem solving skills absolutely essential at 99 percent, critical thinking skills absolutely essential at 99 percent, and the ability to write clearly and persuasively absolutely essential at 97 percent” (p. 21). While it would be expected that English teachers were most likely to opine that the ability to write clearly and persuasively was an absolutely essential skill (and they did at 99 percent), “92 percent of math teachers rated the skill as absolutely essential as well” (p. 22). The MetLife survey concluded that strong proficiency with literacy was essential to be career readiness.

Kay (2011) found that writing skills were one of the five most highly rated skills employers wanted in their employees. On background, one source stated that “being able to get your point across means the difference between success and failure” while another source in a major corporation stated that workers “must be able to communicate clear and concise messages and to investigate, analyze and report their findings in a professional manner” (p. 2E).

Ways

Tinberg (2011) pointed out that “literacy instruction for faculty does not end at the point of hire, just as it does not end for students at the point of graduation” (p. 338). His study discovered that “many students are motivated to succeed, but that faculty may expect too little of those students” (p. 339). The author concluded that literacy instruction across the curriculum must be a definitive and an enforced requirement. The study received the following comment from one respondent who stated only the English faculty knew anything about writing:

Most teachers...who aren't English professors....give you an A because they don't know how to write either....I'll hand something in and after I'll get it back and I'll be reading

it...I'll be reading the teacher's comment and they didn't notice mistakes I made.
(Tinberg, 2011, p. 340)

Bearing this in mind, Bernstein (2011) believed college faculty should redefine the concepts of writing by accentuating its most positive features. Basic writing she opined, "would be...a series of opportunities for students" (p. 61). She suggested that if colleges accepted that writing is an opportunity to hold their commitment to public education accountable, then a basic writing course description would consider the following:

1. Basic Writing creates a space physical and/or virtual for students to develop as writers.
2. Basic Writing provides an opportunity for students to discover the kinds of writing they will encounter throughout college and in the workplace.
3. Basic Writing offers time to practice writing intensively and extensively. (p. 61)

Bernstein's hypothesis in creating the basic writing course description in three steps is that it would eliminate the requirement for student to enroll in "remedial" courses because "they have failed a writing placement test" (p. 62). The practice of remediation, which is expensive, restrictive, and consequential in nature, should be in her estimation, eliminated since it is "bureaucratic" and can constrict enrollment and lifelong learning involvement by students who believe they are failures (p. 62-63).

Faculty Involvement

The following ideas regarding the importance of communication skills were based upon recommendations garnered through an outcomes assessment project. The study was conducted under the auspices of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) Research Initiative Committee by authors Caldwell, DeRusha, Stanton-Hammond, Straight, and Sullivan (2011). A key finding of their research was the lack of published work focusing on outcomes assessment at the two-year college except for general discussions of an assessment philosophy and strategy. This finding opened their research further into the areas of improving teaching and curriculum especially in the area of involving faculty in enhancing communication skills. The authors developed the following as essential ways of ensuring communication skills were paramount in an institute of higher learning:

1. All professors teaching English should be required to assign a book that personally thrills them---and they should assign and teach this book for this reason only. We want to see professors assigning books that they personally enjoy tremendously. The idea here is that intellectual excitement can be modeled and communicated to the students.
2. At least one assignment each semester should focus on depth rather than breadth (one reading vs. multiple readings). We would like to see professors 'simplify' assignments in order to deepen them. Too many of the assignments we saw required students to engage three or four thematically related readings and students seemed to organize their essays simply by moving from one reading to the next. We would like to

challenge students to go deeper into the readings and to provide them with opportunities to organize their work in ways that do not simply follow what they've read or been assigned.

3. We would like to see one assignment each semester focus on a challenging reading or 'insurmountable text' --- a text that cannot be mastered or easily grasped and that obviously deals with abstract ideas in a sophisticated way. At least once each semester, we would like to see English professors take a complex reading like this and go deeply into it over the course of multiple class meetings. It is our belief that such a reading assignment would help develop students' ability to think more abstractly.

4. One assignment each semester should be designed to produce or create a kind of 'existential crisis' for students. This assignment should push them to the precipice and really challenge them to examine their beliefs and who they are (and perhaps who they wish to become). We would like to have samples of such assignments available for faculty. Again, such an assignment would invite students to think more abstractly and to engage ideas more deeply.

5. All readings in English classes should not be of the same complexity and difficulty level. Some should be challenging, and some should be easy and fun. Students should be exposed to a variety of reading levels and challenges. If we only give them hard readings, we wear them down and exhaust them. Pacing and rhythm are important here, we believe.

6. We think it is very important to select readings that do not make basic writers feel stupid and that do not seem condescending.
7. Professors in English classes should meet regularly to discuss the following question: ‘What’s the most complex idea you invite your student to engage?’
8. The department should require all English instructors to post their assignments online at the department website. These assignments could be used as a resource for faculty and writing tutors. This would also allow the department chairs (and writing center tutors) to peruse assignments to help students as they work on drafts and revisions.
9. We believe that the department should be directive and concrete in terms of teaching structure. We should provide examples (from student work and written by us) of what we mean by an engaging introduction, a strong thesis, clear topic sentences that link to that thesis, effective transitions, and a strong conclusion.
10. Our department should provide students with models of great introductions (and great conclusions) to offset the mechanical five-paragraph model introduction and conclusion. We would like to see students move away from the mechanical, basic introduction toward more ‘creative,’ engaging, reader-friendly introductions. To help promote this process, our committee developed a new rubric for assessing introductions.
11. We are in favor of greater support and guidance for our part-time faculty. The summer seminar that we hosted on our campus last summer (2009), where we reviewed assignments with area high school teachers and discussed how to revise these

assignments to make them college-level, might be a model for how we can move forward with this.

12. It seemed very clear to all of us that assignment design is a crucial variable here in terms of student success. We recommend that the department spend some time discussing assignment design and produce a written document that contains recommendations and few sample assignments. What is a good essay assignment for an English class? What should the readings look like, especially in terms of length and level of difficulty?

13. We would like to see every paragraph in the body of English essays quoting from and analyzing assigned readings. We would like to see students build a strong foundation for their essays by using quotations from the texts they are working with, discussing and analyzing these quotations, and then working outward from there to broaden their discussion and analysis. (p. 372-374)

Improving Student Learning Outcomes Through Implementation

Student learning outcomes are defined in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students have attained as a result of their involvement in a particular set of educational experiences. The learning outcomes approach reflects a conceptual shift towards making learning more meaningful and effective. By explicitly building education experiences based on what students should be able to do with their knowledge, the learning outcomes approach helps the educational community understand the point of the activity. There are benefits to be gained by the implementation of a more aggressive and comprehensive communication skills

curriculum to include an increased student awareness of and involvement in their own learning; a common language and framework for discussions in other subject areas because every student will have taken ENC I and ENC II first; and, an important first step toward clear communication of expectations to students in these classes as to follow-on and follow-up classes. These benefits are not to emphasize making education more directly serve the short-term needs of the economy and demands of the business community, but rather, to develop a student's critical thinking, intellectual independence, and ability to communicate clearly and succinctly.

As a result of developing a program-level student learning outcome, the core abilities “think critically and solve problems,” “process information,” and “communicate effectively” as articulated by Brevard Community College are better engaged to accomplish the goal of preparing students to live and work in a dynamically changing world. In a diffuse and complex world of so many forms of communication, the ability to articulate critical thinking outcomes in writing and/or speaking or by other modes of communication is now all important. To wit,

The English language, spoken now by more than a billion people globally, has entered into a period of ferment, and the perspective available in... (*the*) venerable Oxford offices (*where the Oxford English Dictionary is composed, author added*) is both intimate and sweeping. The language upon which the lexicographers eavesdrop has become wild and amorphous: a great swirling, expanding cloud of messaging and speech; newspapers, magazines, pamphlets; menus and business memos; Internet news groups and chat-room conversations; television and radio broadcasts and phonograph records. (Gleick, 2011, p. 66)

Recommendations

Based on an analysis of the Quality Enhancement Plan Online Survey Results, released via Email by Dr. Laura Dunn on May 17, 2011, the following recommendations concerning communication skills, if followed, would allow Brevard Community College to create a stronger, more viable institute of higher learning:

1. Make ENC I and ENC II classes the first classes taken by a student in the first two semesters of enrollment or before taking any other Gordon Rule classes. This would represent the acquisition of the baseline skills to ensure critical analytical and thinking requirements necessary in any profession.
2. Make SPC I mandatory in the first classes taken by a student in the first two semesters of enrollment.
3. Ensure additional writing courses are available on every campus to include: mass communications, radio/television writing, creative writing, honors ENC I and II, and technical writing.
4. Reduce the number of “free” electives for the AA degree from 24 to 18 and require two additional Three Credit courses in a communications area from #3 above.
5. Create a mandatory second year of Speech, SPC II. Expand speech presentations in this course to 25 minutes in length and ensure the speaker uses appropriate and up-to-date technologies, software, and hardware.

6. Ensure behavioral science, business, education, health care, humanities, nutrition, physical science, social science and success strategy courses ALL have well taught, well thought out, writing and speaking component in the curriculum.

Summary

In summary, communication skill is a most consequential QEP topic. It is the baseline and solid foundation every student must possess in order for him/her to succeed not only in the lifelong learning journey, but in his/her chosen profession.

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