

ASSESSMENT REPORT: COMMUNICATION 491 SPRING SEMESTER 2004

Conducted by John Wittmayer, associate professor of Communication

An assessment of written and spoken communication skills was conducted in Communication 491, CURRENT ISSUES IN COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY, a capstone course required for Communication majors in their senior year. Students from other majors may also take this course.

One of the objectives of the Communication program is to develop students' abilities to communicate effectively on current issues. These are fundamental skills not only for Communication professionals but also for all citizens who wish to play an active role in democratic societies. These are also on the University of Guam list of objectives for the General Education Program:

"1) To be able to speak, read, write and listen effectively."

(and)

"5) To be able to interpret current events and issues."

The communication modes selected to test the success of the objectives were public speaking and opinion writing for mass media. All university graduates, and especially communication majors, should be able to deliver an effective speech or write an op-ed article on current issues.

Of the 14 students who enrolled during Spring Semester 2004, all but one were Communication majors. Two students dropped while the course was in progress. Twelve students completed the Spoken Communication Pre-Test and Post-Test. Eleven students completed the Written Communication Pre-Test and Post-Test. One student submitted his second essay too late to be considered in the assessment procedure.

I. ASSESSMENT PLAN

The Pre-tests have a dual purpose:

- 1) Post-stimulus assessment of some of the GE and the Communication program's learning objectives and
- 2) Pre-stimulus assessment of CO 491 course objectives.

The Post-tests assess the success of CO 491 in its goals as a capstone course: consolidating prior educational experiences and applying all towards effective communication on current issues.

Hypothesis: *The review of writing and speaking skills and the research assignment will help the students score substantially higher on the second speech and essay. Since the grading criteria will be the same as that used for the first speech and essay, an increase in average scores would measure the success of the capstone course.*

In Class Written Pre-Test:

Students will be assigned to list (without prompts) all the current issues they are familiar with in the prescribed categories: Local, National/International, Communication Professions, and to write a sentence or two summarizing the controversy or problems associated with the issues. This is primarily a nominal scale measure.

Take-home Written Pre-Test:

Students will be assigned to write an essay on one of these issues. They would be reminded to apply what they have learned in previous Communication and GE classes.

Evaluation of Written Pre-Test:

Students would be evaluated on their writing and critical thinking skills as well as on their general knowledge of current issues. People from outside the program will assist in the evaluation.

Public Speaking Pre-Test:

Students will be assigned to give a 5-10 minute speech on the issue.

Evaluation of Public Speaking Pre-Test:

Each of the students should have taken CO 210 and each Communication faculty member teaches this course and routinely evaluates public speeches. This is an opportunity for faculty to compare notes and come up with a common evaluation instrument.

Stimulus:

Students will given the graded-copies of their essays with critiques from each of the evaluators. Instructors and guest lecturers will review the process of formulating a thesis and developing it into an essay. Sessions will be conducted on writing op-ed pieces for mass media and reviewing the public speaking skills students should have learned in CO 210, Fundamentals of Communication. Several sessions will be given on research methods, and students will be assigned to write a research paper on the topic they chose for their first essay and speech.

Post-Test:

Students will repeat their essay assignment for the written post-test and repeat their public speaking assignments as the oral post-test.

(Summary of Major Assignments Attached)

II. PRE-TEST PROCEDURES:

Solicitations were sent out to the University community for advice on developing test instruments and for volunteers to be evaluators for the written tests. Professor Samantha Ragan provided the essay grading guidelines that she and her colleagues in DEAL had developed for composition classes. Other faculty members sent grading instruments used at other universities. Some aspects of these instruments were integrated with those developed for grading papers in journalism classes. The template for the speech-grading instrument was a scoring sheet used in Fundamentals of Communication (CO 210) classes. This was adapted into the instrument used in the assessment process.

The essays were graded by three professors in the Communication Department: Professor John Wittmayer, Dr. Lilna Beth Somera and Professor Tom Howe. Two outside-the-department evaluators also volunteered their time, Dr. James Sellmann, associate dean of CLASS, and Maureen Maratita, editor of Guam Business News and a graduate of the UOG Communication program. The speeches were graded primarily by Dr. Somera and Professor Wittmayer, since Professor Howe was acting Administrative Chair and not always available to attend the speech sessions. The scores for the essays were the result of averaging the grades assigned by the five evaluators. The speeches were graded using a consensus method. *(Evaluation instruments are attached)*

Pre-Test Results:

The pre-test scores for both speeches and essays were lower than expected. The average score on Essay One was 67 and Speech One, 73. The essay scores would have been even lower had not an adjustment been made on the averaging method. In hindsight, it appeared that the evaluators should have been given more specific instructions.

The following is taken from a memo sent by Professor Wittmayer to the evaluators after he had analyzed the grades on Essay One:

"Although we were all using the same criteria, there was no consensus as to the numerical value of an inadequate paper. One evaluator's default low grade was 75 while another went all the way down to 12 in one case. The rest of us were in between the extremes.

In computing the averages, I used 55 (F) as the default low grade since one evaluator's scores were so much lower than the rest. With that adjustment, the overall average grade given was 67.

It would be interesting to compare notes on grading, but it will probably give greater validity to the post-test if we try to use the same standards we did for the first set. I hope I didn't contaminate the process by sharing the averages.

In some cases the shoddy work was a result of laziness. Two students chose to ignore the assignment and tried to pass off some research they had done previously for another class.

In the case of three other students, the problem seems more difficult to correct. It appears to me that they do not have the intellectual capacity and/or general understanding of world events to communicate about the complex issues they have selected. They seem to lack the ability to understand what they are reading and so select random passages or inaccurate paraphrases out of context and spew them randomly unto their papers. They do not even seem to understand their own limitations. Is this how they have written academic papers in other classes?

All of our students seem to lack critical thinking skills when it comes to selecting and evaluating sources of information. They are randomly downloading from websites or library books and give equal credibility to all sources, sometimes not even distinguishing obvious statements of opinion from established facts."

The students were generally disappointed in and surprised by the low grades. Apparently, they were accustomed to getting much higher grades for such low-quality work. Some complained that they did not have adequate warning that the standards in this course would be higher than in their other classes and requested that the syllabus be adjusted so that the first speech and essay did not count as much towards the final grade.

CO 491 is team taught with the instructor of record rotated from year to year. John Wittmayer, who is the author of this study and the instructor of record during Spring 2004, did not accept the validity of the student complaints. He contended faculty should expect quality work on the first assignments and that students are responsible for bringing into a Senior-level class what they should have learned in prerequisite classes.

The pre-tests for this class were also post-tests of the undergraduate degree program. The grading weight of these assignments is justified by the nature of a capstone course. In many cases, the low grades were because the students ignored the instructions for the assignment or put out minimal effort. That behavior should not be rewarded. The students should have been able to do well on this assignment without much coaching. The fact that they did not or could not is a significant finding.

III. PREPARATIONS FOR POST-TESTS

The first essay and speech were post-test measures of skills the students should have developed in the baccalaureate program by the time they reached senior status. The same instruments were also the pre-test for measuring the success of CO 491 in its goals as a capstone course: consolidating prior educational experiences and applying all towards effective communication on current issues.

Students were given the graded copies of their essays with critiques from each of the evaluators. Instructors and guest lecturers reviewed the process of formulating a thesis and developing it into an essay. A session was conducted on writing op-ed pieces for mass media. Other sessions reviewed the public speaking skills students should have learned in CO 210, Fundamentals of Communication.

Several sessions were given on research methods, including instruction by Thomas Hodge, RFK Library Systems Librarian, on how to use the EBSCO Data base. Students were assigned to write a research paper on the topic they had chosen for their first essay and speech.

The hypothesis was that the review of writing and speaking skills and the research assignment would help the students score substantially higher on the second speech and essay. Since the grading criteria would be the same as that used for the first speech and essay, an increase in average scores would measure the success of the capstone course.

IV. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The good news is there was a gain from pre-test to post-test in both the written and oral tests.

The bad news is that the pre-test results were so low that the gain brought the scores up to a still very low level for graduating seniors. On the essay, students on average improved from “D” work to “C” work. On the speech, students’ average improved from a low “C” to a higher “C.”

Student averages:

Essay 1 = 67*,	Essay 2 = 75.5,	Change = +8.5
Speech 1 = 73,	Speech 2 = 77,	Change = +4

Averages to not reflect penalties for late papers.

*One grader submitted very low scores on Essay One. So as not to skew the results, 55 was used as a default minimum score in averaging this grader’s score. For example, an essay that was given a grade of 25 was calculated as 55 when computing the student’s average score.

All students improved on the essay with the largest gain being +17 (from 71 to 88), and the smallest gain being +2 (from 64 to 66).

Most students improved on the speech with the highest gain being +16 (from 55 to 71). However, the two highest scoring students on Speech 1, both scored significantly lower on Speech 2. One student dropped 10 points (from 85 to 75) and the other 7 points from 82 to 75.

Evaluator averages:

The following data are the average scores assigned by each of the five evaluators for Essay 1 and 2. In computing student averages, a minimum low grade of 55 was used. The evaluator averages do not reflect that adjustment.

	Ev-1	EV-2	Ev-3	Ev-4	Ev-5
Essay One:	36	78	64	77	67
Essay Two:	78	77	70	80	74
Change:	+42	-1	+6	+3	+7

Three of the evaluators had average scores that reflected a slight gain from Essay 1. The evaluator who assigned the highest average score on Essay 1 had a one-point lower average on Essay 2 while the evaluator with the lowest average on Essay 1 had the highest average on Essay 2, a gain of 42 points from 36 to 78.

The email discussion among the evaluators on the grading of Essay One may have affected the grading on Essay Two, since there was much less variation in the second set of grades. However, both the quantitative evaluation and

the qualitative comments indicate at least a slight over-all improvement from the pre-test to the post-tests on both the speech and essay.

VI. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Both the quantitative evaluation and the qualitative comments tend to validate the primary hypothesis of this study: *The review of writing and speaking skills and the research assignment would help the students score substantially higher on the second speech and essay.* These results also tend to validate the value of a capstone course and of this assessment process.

The disturbing aspect of the results is that, even though the post-test scores showed improvement, they were, on average, far below the expectations of the faculty. The following is speculation on factors which may contribute to this result:

- 1) Grading standards may be too low. Many students seem to believe that if they do the assignment, follow format, and include the required number of sources, they will get at least a B.
- 2) Students do not bring skills and knowledge from prior classes into subsequent classes. They have no vision of education as a cumulative process but rather a series of hoops to jump through in order to get a certificate.
- 3) Some of our students are not motivated to do excellent work. Even after the shock of the low grades on the pre-tests, some put forth only slightly more effort on the post-tests. In some cases the shoddy work was a result of laziness. In other cases it was time management or over-extension problems. Some students work full-time and/or head families.
- 4) Most students lack knowledge of, or interest in, current issues and events. Very few have ever explored an issue deeply.
- 5) Some students do not have the intellectual capacity and/or general understanding of world events to communicate about the complex issues they have selected. They seem to lack the ability to understand what they are reading and so select random passages or inaccurate paraphrases out of context and spew them randomly into their papers. One student who chose the topic, "Cultural Imperialism," used as her primary source a book from the 1980s about American influence on citizens of the Soviet Union. She did not seem to realize that the Soviet Union collapsed more than a decade ago.
- 6) All of the students in this study seemed to lack critical thinking skills when it comes to selecting and evaluating sources of information. They randomly download from websites or library books and give equal credibility to all sources, sometimes not even distinguishing obvious statements of opinion from established facts.

The above speculation is based on this small study and informal observations of students over the years. Obviously, more systematic assessment projects are needed to validate this analysis.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION FACULTY

- 1) Repeat the assessment process in CO 491 during Spring Semester 2005. Make it an on-going project. Try to get all Communication faculty to reach a consensus on the aims and purposes of CO 491.
- 2) Refine the rubric to improve comparability across evaluators. Reach a pre-grading consensus on how the scores translate to traditional letter grades.
- 3) Reach a consensus on the grade for standard work. Is it B, C, D or F?
- 4) Try to get all Communication faculty involved. Attempt to reach consensus for evaluation criteria and standards for grading speeches in CO 210.
- 5) Consistently present students with a model of the Communication major as a sequence of related courses that lead to professional competency. Counter the prevailing student model of a series of hoops to jump through in order to get a degree.
- 6) In all courses with prerequisites, give assignments early in the course that require students to apply skills and knowledge that should have been learned in the prerequisite classes. There were several examples in this study of students who did acceptable work in previous classes such as Argumentation and Debate, Public

Speaking, Interpretive Journalism, and Fundamentals of Communication, but did not bring the same level of competency into the pre-test assignments in this class. There is a prevailing student mentality that every hoop-jump is a self-contained experience. There is little or no effort to transfer skills and knowledge to subsequent classes.

- 7) Make a collaborative effort to raise standards for papers and oral presentations. This study indicated that some students are accustomed to getting "A's" and "B's" for substandard work. There is a tendency in upper division classes to grade papers and oral reports on content only, ignoring the structural and presentation skills that should be transferred from Composition and Fundamentals of Communication classes. If professors do not require students to transfer these skills, most will not.
- 8) Students need guidance in evaluating the credibility and authority of sources especially those found on the Web. Require students to include as sources established, credible websites such as npr.org and pbs.org. Test information from obscure websites against related information on credible sites.
- 9) Consider adding a sophomore level course focused specifically on current events. Perhaps CO 211, "Understanding Current Events and Issues." This could be proposed as an interdisciplinary, team-taught general education course.
- 10) Conduct orientations for new Communication majors concerning the overall goals of the program. Present the concept of courses leading to the capstone as a way of countering or changing attitudes regarding the educational experience as "hoops to jump" versus a cumulative process (alternative metaphor: a toolbox that you keep filling with things you will need when you finish the program). Develop a handbook for majors in which these expectations are spelled out.

This study was designed and conducted by John Wittmayer, who was the instructor of record for CO 491 during Spring 2004. He was assisted by his colleagues in the Communication program, Lilna Beth Somera and Tom Howe. Dr. Somera is the instructor for CO 491 this semester and is continuing the assessment process. Special thanks to our outside evaluators: Dr. James Sellmann, associate dean of CLASS, and Maureen Maratita, editor of Guam Business News and a graduate of the UOG Communication program, for volunteering to read and grade student essays.