

## *Developing a Senior Capstone and Portfolio Course*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Our purpose in this essay is to explain how the Speech Communication Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato developed a senior capstone and portfolio course. We describe how this course helped the department improve its curriculum and teaching, and helped its students enhance their learning of the discipline.*

### **Introduction**

As educators, we are interested in discovering if our students are learning what we are teaching, if they are able to apply that knowledge in a variety of settings, and if they are able to demonstrate knowledge of the discipline of communication. As William Bennett (Adelman, 1986), former Secretary of Education, argues “given the importance we place upon college education ... it is only reasonable that students, parents, government officials, and others should look for—and expect to find—evidence that they are getting their money’s worth” (p. 1). To help address these issues, the Speech Communication Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato developed SPEE 485: Senior Seminar. Senior Seminar is a three-credit semester-long undergraduate course. The course is the capstone experience for all speech communication majors.

First, we provide an overview of the principles of course design, second highlight the course rationale and structure for Senior Seminar, next address the intended learning outcomes for the course, fourth discuss the overall department student learning goals, then provide a template for our Senior Seminar Portfolio, and finally address the limitations and benefits of the course.

## Principles of Course Design

The department utilized the principles of course design proposed by Posner and Rudnitsky (2001) in *Course Design: A Guide to Curriculum Development for Teachers* to develop the senior capstone and portfolio course. The Posner and Rudnitsky model includes the following components. A course rationale is devised as the beginning of the process. Intended learning outcomes (ILOs) for the course, which incorporate cognition and cognitive skills, psycho-perceptual skills and affective understandings, are prepared. The actual course units and their titles are developed. ILOs are assigned to each unit. Course ILOs are a product of curriculum planning and initial course planning completed by the Speech Communication Department. The specific ILOs for each unit are part of the planning for the course. The instructor then gathers the tools needed for learning to take place. Again, Posner and Rudnitsky refer to these as instructional foci. A general teaching strategy is “developed around the foci for the accomplishment of the ILOs. These strategies are described at a level more general than daily lesson plans but more specific than a list of materials to be used” (p. 276). Finally, course and unit evaluation procedures are designated.

Not all students in the Speech Communication program complete the Senior Seminar course. Students completing the teacher licensure program in Speech Communication have a parallel program that assesses disciplinary knowledge. As a matter of fact, Senior Seminar grew out of a desire to emulate the capstone experience for non-education majors. “Capstone” in teacher preparation programs generally describes activities, experiences and/or courses that compose the final touches in the program (McCarty, McIntyre, & Prushiek, 2001). This description guided the course designed for speech communication majors as well. McCarty, McIntyre and Prushiek also note that “the university experience should consist of meaningful, relevant, rigorous experiences and products culminating in a student’s decision about choosing a job and the faculty’s decision regarding the students ability to succeed in the ... profession” (p. 704). Clearly such a program should apply to non-education majors as well as education majors.

## Course Rationale and Structure

Senior Seminar is designed to assess and showcase students’ accomplishments during their tenure as speech communication majors. The course also aids departmental assessment functions. The rationale for the course leads to individualized instruction based on student background and interest area in Speech Communication. However, the instructor must also include components that will allow for departmental curriculum review and evaluation.

The rationale for the course, as proposed to the University Curriculum and Academic Policy committee (UCAP, p. 4) in 1999, stated, “this course is designed to make sure that speech communication majors have attained competency in oral and written communication, are capable of conducting independent research utilizing critical thinking skills, and are able to demonstrate knowledge of the relationship of communication to an area of specialized study or a vocation.”

The format for this capstone course has its theoretical base in the recommendations of The Carnegie Foundation. The Foundation recommends “a portfolio, a senior thesis or project, and an oral presentation ...as the key instruments to measure achievement of outcomes at the capstone level” (Moore 1994, p. 164).

Wallace (1988) identified several advantages for a senior seminar course. “First, this format provides for close contact with faculty.... it provides practical career-related experiences ... offers the student a sense of accomplishment as they serve ... in a quasi-professional, practical capacity” (p. 35). For example, a senior project could be designed in collaboration with a job or internship. The collaborative effort could emphasize problem solving, critical business communication skills, developing a project that could benefit a place of business, or exploring interpersonal skills needed in a business setting.

Imposing deadlines on various phases of the senior project is beneficial for students. By imposing deadlines and checkpoints, even for the college senior, the professional concept of deadlines and personal and professional responsibility are enhanced. As Moore (1994) notes, “the integration of an internship-type experience can help the student learn contextual and adaptive competence and develop a professional identity” (p. 164).

The senior portfolio in Speech Communication is a method of documenting a student’s progress within their major. Orlik (1994) argues that portfolios are a long-standing tradition in the business world for demonstrating various abilities (e.g., artistic, design, research, writing). An assessment portfolio provides a holistic view of each student’s developmental educational experiences. The portfolio provides evidence of the depth and breadth of a student’s involvement in the major and in his/her experiences within the program and department. The portfolio becomes a “cumulative collection of a student’s work” (Davis, 1993, p. 247). The portfolio may include papers, videoclips/audioclips of speeches and/or presentations, journal entries, essay exams, and other representative examples of the student’s achievements over the course of study as a Speech Communication major. As a tool for departmental assessment, the portfolio provides a method for the department to determine if the program and course learning outcomes are being achieved by students (Orlik, 1994). The department can examine the student portfolios to determine where issues might exist in the scope and sequence of the curriculum. The department may also gain insight regarding concepts, theories, or skills that are repeated or introduced too early/late in the program.

### **Intended Learning Outcomes**

The following objectives and outcomes were developed by the MSU, Mankato Speech Communication Department and are required outcomes for Senior Seminar: “Following the completion of this course, students will be able to: 1) demonstrate competency in oral communication; 2) demonstrate competency in written communication; 3) demonstrate the ability to use the research process utilizing a critical, humanistic, or social scientific approach.”

The course goals are further refined and written as Intended Learning Outcomes. The ILOs for Senior Seminar are:

1. To review experiences in the Speech Communication major, comparing and contrasting prominent perspectives in the discipline, assessing strengths and limitations of the curriculum, and to prepare documentation summarizing those experiences.
2. To provide students the opportunity to produce an independent research project in their area of interest and expertise, and to present the project in a public forum.
3. To assess student competencies in areas such as cognitive knowledge, personal affect, and behavioral skills pertaining to the discipline.
4. To reflect upon the discipline and what it means in terms of the student's overall educational experience, and the anticipated impact it will have on one's career and life experiences.

### **Department Student Learning Goals**

The Senior Seminar portfolio is based on department-wide student learning goals. The goals are made available to all students on the department website ([www.mnsu.edu/spcomm](http://www.mnsu.edu/spcomm)). Driving the goals is this statement: "Speech Communication is a field of study inviting students to engage in the theoretically-informed practice of communication in their personal, professional, and public lives. Students who succeed in Speech Communication can expect to meet the following goals:

1. *Presentations*: Increased confidence and competence in public presentations.
2. *Relationships*: knowledge of the manner in which communication creates, maintains and transforms relationships, and the ability to engage in effective and productive relational communication.
3. *Contexts*: knowledge of the crucial role communication plays in community, professional and civic contexts, and the ability to use communication behaviors ethically and effectively in various contexts.
4. *Diversity*: Knowledge and respect for the role of culture and diversity in communication, and the ability to effectively communicate within and across cultures.
5. *Influence*: Competency in reflective construction and analysis of arguments and discourse intended to influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices.
6. *Technology*: Ability to effectively use communication technology and to critically evaluate how technology affects communication.
7. *Research*: Competency in systematic inquiry, including the process of asking questions, systematically attempting to answer them, and understanding the limitations of the conclusions reached.

## Senior Seminar Portfolio Template

The department student learning goals form the foundation for the Senior Seminar portfolio project. Each of the seven goals forms a primary component of the portfolio. The primary areas require students provide documented evidence/artifacts of involvement in the seven goals in both lower-level and upper-level courses. The lower-level/upper-level requirement is included so students may demonstrate growth in the seven areas as they progress through the curriculum.

Students are required to provide reflection statements for each artifact signifying how the artifact demonstrates competency in each goal. The requirement of the reflection component insures students move beyond a simple catalog of activities to a reasoned discussion of the place and function of the artifact in their overall program in speech communication.

Four additional components are included in the portfolio. Three of the components are used to measure longitudinal development. The three longitudinal components are widely accepted standardized quantitative measurement instruments. The three instruments are the Basic Course Communication Competency Measure (BCCM), the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24), and the Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Majors are required to take the BCCM, PRCA-24 and the WTC in SPEE 190 (a required course for majors) and then in SPEE 485. A pre-test/post-test comparison of the scores on an individual and aggregate level may thus be performed to determine if the department curriculum is developing specific areas of competency with our students. The fourth component is an exit interview. The exit interview gathers demographic data, provides an opportunity for affective responses to the department and its curriculum, and includes an adaptation of McCroskey's (1994) instructional affect assessment instrument.

Thus, 11 specific components are in the portfolio, all of which are used to both allow the student to demonstrate what they have learned and the department to assess the degree to which student learning outcomes have been met. The 11 components are:

1. *Presentations*: Assignments demonstrating increased confidence and competence in public presentations.
  - A. Assignment demonstrating individual public speaking ability (Suggested assignments might include video recordings, audio recordings, manuscripts or outlines. Speech evaluations do not belong in this area).
  - B. Sample individual public speaking evaluation (Student must include with this assignment a statement (minimum 100 words) reflecting on how this assignment demonstrates individual public speaking ability).
  - C. Reflection Statements: Student must include with the assignments statements (minimum 100 words) reflecting on how the assignments demonstrate growth or competency as a speaker.
2. *Relationships*: Assignments demonstrating knowledge of the manner in which communication creates, maintains and transforms relationships, and the ability to engage in effective and productive relational communication.

- A. Assignment from a 100-200 level course:
  - B. Assignment from a 300-400 level course:
  - C. Reflection Statements: Include statements (minimum 100 words each) reflecting how the assignments demonstrate understanding of the role of communication in relationships, and your ability to engage in effective relational communication.
3. *Contexts*: Assignments demonstrating knowledge of the crucial role communication plays in community, professional and civic contexts, and the ability to use communication behaviors ethically and effectively in various contexts.
- A. Assignment from a 100-200 level course:
  - B. Assignment from a 300-400 level course:
  - C. Reflection Statements: Include statements (minimum 100 words each) reflecting how the assignments demonstrate understanding of the relationship between communication and context, and your ability to engage in effective community, professional, and civic-related communication.
4. *Diversity*: Assignments demonstrating knowledge of the role of culture and diversity in communication, and the ability to effectively communicate within and across cultures.
- A. Assignment from a 100-200 level course:
  - B. Assignment from a 300-400 level course:
  - C. Reflection Statements: Include statements (minimum 100 words each) reflecting how the assignments demonstrate understanding of the relationship between communication and diversity, and your ability to engage in effective communication with individuals of diverse cultures.
5. *Influence*: Assignments demonstrating competency in reflective construction and analysis of arguments and discourse intended to influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices.
- A. Assignment from a 100-200 level course:
  - B. Assignment from a 300-400 level course:
  - C. Reflection Statements: Include statements (minimum 100 words each) reflecting how the assignments demonstrate understanding of the relationship between communication and influence, and your ability to engage in effective construction and analysis of communication designed to influence others.
6. *Technology*: Assignments demonstrating ability to effectively use communication technology and/or to critically evaluate how technology affects communication.
- A. Assignment from a 100-200 level course:
  - B. Assignment from a 300-400 level course:
  - C. Reflection Statements: Include statements (minimum 100 words each) reflecting how the assignments demonstrate understanding of the relationship between technology and communication, and your ability to engage in and/or analyze effective communication through technology.
7. *Research*: Assignment demonstrating competency in systematic inquiry, including the process of asking questions, systematically attempting to answer them, and understanding the limitations of the conclusions reached.

- A. Senior Seminar Final Research Project
  - B. Reflection Statements: Student must include with this assignment a statement (minimum 100 words) reflecting on how this assignment demonstrates understanding of the research process, and your ability to design, implement, and write communication research.
8. Scores for the Basic Course Communication Competency Measure in 190 and 485.
  9. Scores for the PRCA in 190 and 485
    - A. Reflection Statement: (The PRCA is measure of your communication anxiety. Your scores should generally go down at the later stage of your major.) Student must include a statement (minimum 100 words) comparing, contrasting, and/or reflecting on how these scores demonstrate growth as a speech communication scholar.
  10. Scores for the WTC (Willingness to Communicate) in 190 and 485.
  11. Online exit interview

### **Limitations and Benefits**

In developing and teaching this course, the department has learned some additional lessons. Students are still learning to recognize and realize the many and various ways they can prepare a portfolio. Second, faculty of other department courses need to help students identify and collect assignments and activities that allow the students to demonstrate knowledge and ability as portfolio artifacts. As students are instructed, directed, and made aware of the Senior Seminar portfolio requirements and options within the system, more students have artifacts that are readily available. Students are very careful to save and request videotaping of speeches and projects for inclusion in their portfolios. As students become more technologically competent, their portfolios have taken on far greater sophistication. This has had the added benefit of encouraging faculty to develop and use technology tools in the classroom.

Finally, departmental assessment has become more dynamic as a result of the exit interviews and portfolios prepared for Senior Seminar. The data is longitudinally analyzed and evaluated. Changes in the program and in specific courses are based on quantified data, rather than on the subjective feelings of department members and students. As noted in other institutions, “Departments of Communication ... are being called upon not only to make claims about the competencies they provide students but to evaluate the extent to which their program provides such competencies” (Decker & Lont, 1990, p. 54).

### **Conclusion**

The development of SPEE 485: Senior Seminar is a continuous and evolving process. As each instructor teaches the course it will become “his/her” own. However, certain elements are the foundation of every section. The objectives and ILOs remain relatively stable. The function

of the course—student demonstration of discipline knowledge and skills, and department assessment of student learning—is constant. Through the development, implementation and ongoing adaptation of Senior Seminar, the Speech Communication Department is able to address its limitations and celebrate its strengths with confidence.

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## Appendix Exit Interview

### Department of Speech Communication Exit Interview

#### SECTION I: DEMOGRAPHIC AND ATTITUDINAL

(Instruct the student to answer the questions as indicated. Remind them there is no obligation to answer a question if it makes them uncomfortable.)

1. Sex \_\_\_\_\_
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
3. Anticipated graduation date: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Major(s)/minor(s) combination \_\_\_\_\_
5. Why did you choose to go to college? Why did you choose XXX University?
6. What do you hope to be doing in 5 years? 10 years?
7. What do you want most in a job/career?
8. What do you want most from life?

#### SECTION II: OPEN-ENDED AFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO PROGRAM

1. What lead to your decision to become a Speech Communication major?
2. What was most valuable in your education in to Speech department? For example, what courses, activities or faculty did you find most useful?
3. What course was offered that you wish you had taken, but did not? Or, what course or opportunity would you like to have taken that we did not offer?
4. What was least valuable or missing in your education in the Speech department? For example, which were your least favorite classes, and why?
5. What have you sought to accomplish in your academic preparation as a Speech major? For example, making speeches, improving writing skills, etc. How well have you succeeded in meeting those goals?
6. Do you feel the Speech department has adequately prepared you for your post-college plans? Why or why not?
7. Were you involved in co-curricular department activities or other campus activities which enhanced/utilized your communication skills? Briefly describe your experience.
8. Did you feel a sense of continuity or connection between the courses in the major? Why or why not?
9. What would you like us to know about the Speech department?

#### SECTION III: INSTRUCTIONAL AFFECT ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT (McCrosky, 1994)

Using the following scales, please evaluate the speech department as a whole. (Coder: circle the number for each items which best represents the student's feelings)

I felt the program's content was:

1.	Good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bad
2.	Worthless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Valuable
3.	Fair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unfair
4.	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Positive

I felt the communication behaviors recommended in the department's content were:

5.	Good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bad
6.	Worthless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Valuable
7.	Fair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unfair
8.	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Positive

The instructors I had in the department were:

9.	Good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bad
10.	Worthless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Valuable
11.	Fair	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unfair
12.	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Positive

In real-life situations, my likelihood of actually attempting to engage in the communication behaviors recommended by the department are:

13.	Likely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikely
14.	Impossible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Possible
15.	Probable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Improbable
16.	Would not	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Would

My likelihood of using the content and applications I learned in this program is:

17.	Likely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikely
18.	Impossible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Possible
19.	Probable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Improbable
20.	Would not	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Would

If I had to do it over again, my likelihood of enrolling in this program--knowing what I know now--would be:

21.	Likely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unlikely
22.	Impossible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Possible
23.	Probable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Improbable
24.	Would not	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Would