A Summary of the University Learning Objective (ULO) Oral Communication Assessment Project

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Background: The ability to communicate effectively will help students in academic courses, and also in their future workplaces. According to Dunbar, Brooks & Kubicka-Miller (2006), "Communication education is positively linked to academic and professional success for students" (p. 117).

The ***ULO Oral Communication Assessment Project*** began in September, 2009. The initial goal of this project was to both design and implement a plan for the direct assessment of oral communication skills in a sample of Cal Poly students. To that end, it was necessary to assemble an interdisciplinary committee which consisted of the following faculty: Lorraine D. Jackson, Professor, Communication Studies, (Chair); Alexander Dekhtyar, Associate Professor, Computer Science; Stern Neill, Associate Professor, Orfalea College of Business; Anurag Pande, Assistant Professor, Civil and Environmental Engineering; and Scott Vernon, Professor, Agricultural Education and Communication Department.

In the first year of the project the goal was initially to establish a benchmark of students' performance at the beginning of their academic studies. This involved: a) operationally defining oral communication, b) designing a comprehensive, yet practical, rubric to evaluate a sample of students' oral presentations, c) collecting data in the form of student speeches, d) training coders, e) scoring the speeches, and f) completing a 24 page report of the results (see Jackson, 2010). The project evolved in the second year to also include: a) reporting these findings to faculty through presentations and the web, b) making suggestions to faculty and administrators based on the data, c) training faculty on how to use the rubric to give valid feedback to students, and d) presenting ideas during a workshop on how faculty may encourage student development of oral communication skills across the Cal Poly curriculum.

The Cal Poly Oral Communication ULO Committee utilized an operational definition offered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) for the purpose of this assessment project. They define oral communication as follows:

> Oral communication is a prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors. (AACU Oral Communication VALUE rubric)

Method: After considering the AACU rubric on oral communication, the Cal Poly Oral Communication Consultant (in consultation with the Committee) designed a more user-friendly rubric containing the assessment categories: a) verbal delivery, b) nonverbal delivery, c) central message, d) organization, e) language use, f) the use of supporting material, and g) visual aid use (see Jackson, 2010 for the rubric). Oral presentations delivered by a sample of 102 freshmen were captured on video resulting in approximately 12 hours of student speeches being digitally recorded. Three faculty members from the Communication Studies Department at Cal Poly were involved in observing and evaluating the speeches. To make sure evaluators were inferring similar ratings for each category on the rubric, training sessions occurred wherein discussion, minor modification of the rubric, and clarifications occurred. After it was established that sufficient consistency of scoring was occurring between evaluators, each coder evaluated a block of speeches. The data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program for analyses.

Results: Results were obtained from 102 freshmen undergraduate students representing every college in the university. Fifty-one percent of the sample was female and 49% of the sample was male. The following table shows the overall scores for the rubric categories for this sample. The rubric categories are presenting in order from highest to lowest means (averages). (Note: a minimum score of 1 is associated with poor performance and a maximum score of 5 is associated with excellent performance).

An Overview of the Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
A. Supporting Materials	102	1.00	5.00	3.4216	.82578
B. Language	102	2.00	5.00	3.3333	.70827
C. Central Message	102	1.00	5.00	3.3137	.78325
D. Visuals	75	1.00	5.00	3.2667	.99095
E. Organization	102	2.00	5.00	3.2451	.69562
F. Nonverbal Delivery	102	2.00	5.00	3.0588	.75549
G. Verbal Delivery	102	1.00	5.00	3.0294	.82601

Freshmen students in this sample achieved average scores ranging from 3.02-3.42 in all categories of the rubric. The categories receiving scores on the higher end of average included students' use of _supporting materials_, their _language use,_ and their ability to develop a _central message_. Categories scoring on the lower end of average included their _verbal delivery_, their _nonverbal delivery_, and their _organization._ These data suggest that freshman students are meeting a basic level of competence but there is potential for further development, particularly in students' _verbal and nonverbal delivery_ where a quarter of the sample were able to achieve a good or excellent score. It should be noted that improvement in this area may occur over time as students receive further instruction, opportunities for speaking, and feedback. However, communication instructors might be well advised to spend additional time demonstrating to students _how_ to use the feedback they receive to make positive changes in their verbal and nonverbal delivery. For example, two areas that emerged as needing improvement in approximately one third of the sample concerns giving eye contact and avoiding reading their note cards during public speaking.

During the second year of the project, results were presented to the Associate Deans' Council, as well as to the faculty of the Communication Studies Department. Feedback was provided to faculty and administrators about students' strengths and areas in need of improvement concerning oral communication. Additionally, committee members planned a ULO based oral communication workshop and presented it to the campus community through the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). As part of that workshop, faculty from various disciplines were introduced to the rubric and given an opportunity to apply it by watching a videotaped "below average" speech, followed by an improved version of the speech considered to be "good." It is noteworthy that twelve faculty used the rubric for the first time to evaluate the two speeches, giving the first one an average score of 2.2 and the second speech an average score of 4.4. This indicates that the rubric was utilized in a meaningful manner and was able to detect faculty perceptions of quality between the two speeches. Faculty also participated in discussions with panel members about how to incorporate more opportunities for oral communication in their

courses. The workshop was well received by faculty; for example, one faculty member who attended the workshop sent a follow-up letter explaining that the rubric continues to help her to be a more objective evaluator, hedges against grade inflation, saves time, and provides a much clearer feedback mechanism for students than what she had used in the past. The articulation and identification of standards and expected outcomes regarding oral communication is useful for students and faculty alike.

Future Directions: The Oral Communication ULO Consultant and Committee accomplished important strides in the past two years (2009-11). These included: a) the formation of an interdisciplinary committee, b) the design of an oral communication rubric, c) the collection of benchmark freshman data from over 100 students, d) the preparation of a report detailing results, e) the publicizing of findings through presentations and web summaries, f) the training of faculty during a ULO-based campus workshop, and g) the testing of the rubric's application and validity with a group of faculty. Currently, funding for the ULO project is uncertain due to budgetary issues. However, it is important for financial support to continue so that further advances can be made within Cal Poly. Directions for future assessment could include: a) making the rubric available to a wider audience of faculty members, and b) collecting additional data to examine upper division student performance in oral communication.

In closing, according to Lucas (2010) "In a survey of 480 companies and public organizations, communication skills - including public speaking - were ranked first among the personal qualities sought by employers" (p. 5). Oral communication is integral to students' personal, academic, and professional success. As a result, there should be continued reflection on how to best support and improve the acquisition of oral communication skills and learning across the curriculum at Cal Poly.

References

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