

Report on Oral Communication

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1. Background

Hamilton College has a long history of emphasizing public speaking, dating back to the well-known requirement from years past that every student make a stand-up speech in the chapel. More recently, oral communication has been emphasized in sophomore seminars and proseminars, but despite this history, we don't have a campus culture with speaking the way we do with writing. A gap remains between our claims of emphasizing oral communication skills and what we actually teach. Despite this gap, the College does recognize and emphasize the importance of oral skills, and many faculty members do include oral presentations in their classes.

A compelling argument for the intellectual aspects of oral communication was given in the 2007 Pokinski report on oral communication, which stated that oral communication “involves an immediate, dynamic relationship with ideas and the exchange of ideas; more directly engages an audience and promotes interactions; is public and, when effectively accomplished, engenders a unique degree of personal responsibility and empowerment; and is more [directly] group based and cooperative, engaging students' critical thinking skills in ways not generally offered through written work.”

Surveys of alumni, current students, and prospective students as well as our own assessments have emphasized the value of emphasis on oral communication. The 2006 Chambliss Mellon report included several telling conclusions: “students express a very strong desire to work on public speaking”; “recent alumni stated very strongly that public speaking is an important and valuable skill”; “students report that public speaking raises the level of engagement with learning”; and “students...want more of it in their classes.” Furthermore, a reputation of strength in integrated oral and written skills attracts prospective students, and that interest increases matriculation from highly rated applicants (2012 Arts & Sciences Consultants). Our own students think we do more with speaking than may be the case; Hamilton seniors rate themselves more highly in both public speaking and writing ability than do seniors from peer institutions (2012 CIRP College Senior Survey), although, as Dan Chambliss has pointed out,

this perception likely follows at least partially from our branding ourselves as a college that promotes speaking and writing.

In 2012, Dean Patrick Reynolds asked me as part of the Mellon Project to survey the landscape of oral communication at Hamilton and to make recommendations for improving students' speaking skills. My recommendations are embedded in this report. It is worth noting that a number of other studies have already reviewed oral communication here and have issued reports and recommendations (see the list below). The fact that the College has yet to find a good direction for oral communication attests to the challenges of the task. For the record, I am listing the sources I used to understand the issues involved. I list these documents at the beginning of this report to emphasize that the College has demonstrated continuing concern about what steps it should take. I hope that administrative decisions following my report lead to the College choosing the right steps to strengthen attention to oral communication in our curriculum – and that this report not become just another document in the files.

Sources

- a. 2005 Owen-Helmer report, “The teaching of oral communication at Hamilton”
- b. 2006 Chambliss report “Findings on Public Speaking from the Mellon Assessment Project.”
- c. 2007 Pokinski report, from an ad hoc committee on oral communication
- d. 2009 OCC Outside Review report
- e. 2010 Middle States Self-Study report
- f. 2010 Middle States Self-Study
- g. 2011 NSSE Survey
- h. 2012 Gentry-Hewitt report, “Academic Resource Services Review Report”
- i. 2012 CIRP College Senior Survey
- j. 2012 HEDS Alumni Survey
- k. 2013 Arts & Sciences Consultants
- l. Nov 1, 2012, Talking Teaching session on spurring discussion in classes
- m. Feb 19, 2013, Talking Teaching session on having presentations in classes

2. The Range of Oral Communication: What Are We Talking About?

With support from both students and alumni, and reflected in Hamilton's tradition in public speaking, we have wide agreement that effectiveness in oral communication is an important skill to be mastered. But different people focus on different aspects of what is meant by oral communication. While some alumni speak favorably of having to give stand-up speeches in the chapel, faculty often emphasize leading discussion in the classroom instead. As stated in the 2006 Mellon Assessment Report, “what constituted an oral communication assignment was broadly defined [by the faculty] to include activities as diverse as participation in class discussion, role plays, oral readings, as well as more formal presentations.”

Three aspects of oral communication stand out. The Department of Communication views their role as representing the “theoretical, historical, and critical analysis of human symbolic behavior” (C. Casey, pers. comm.). Thus, the department emphasizes the intellectual side of oral communication, with communication as a scholarly discipline fitting in the liberal arts

within the social sciences. A second aspect is that of public speaking, which is the form of oral communication supported most strongly through the Oral Communication Center (OCC). A third aspect is that of effective interchange in the classroom, through leading discussion, debating ideas, or contributing effectively to group discussion. The wide range of overlapping activities covered by the umbrella phrase “oral communication” is one of the difficulties the College has faced in deciding how to emphasize communication skills.

Especially for students and alumni, public speaking is the most conspicuous form of oral communication, focusing more on the skills needed for delivering an effective public presentation. These skills include starting and ending one’s comments well, suppressing nervousness, speaking without reading notes, and using available technology effectively. Public speaking requires organization and clarity (J. Helmer, pers. com.). There are differences in the benefits and challenges in the different forms of oral communication, but all can be important parts of an undergraduate education, and effective public speaking is a skill that can be learned.

3. The Status of Oral Communication at Hamilton

Oral communication occupies an uncertain position in Hamilton’s curriculum. The College has a tradition of emphasizing both writing (emphasized currently) and speaking (emphasized strongly in the past), although our web page now mentions only writing (“A National Leader in teaching students to write effectively, learn from each other and think for themselves”; webpage, 28Oct 2012). The traditional role of speaking is made more explicit in the College’s education goals, one of which is “Communication and Expression — expressing oneself with clarity and eloquence, in both traditional and contemporary media, through writing and speaking, and through visual, aural, gestural and other modalities.”

Less emphasis on oral communication is apparent when considering the requirements for graduation. Besides completion of a concentration (major), Hamilton has specific requirements for graduation in writing, quantitative and symbolic reasoning (QSR), and physical education. In addition, we currently encourage students to take four proseminars, which are courses with intensive interaction in thinking, writing, and speaking. The catalog also states that “The College requires effective use of public and academic discourse as defined and appraised by the faculty and the College community.” These limited references show that oral communication currently plays less of a role in our curriculum than writing and QSR. One must be careful, however, about aligning writing, speaking, and quantitative abilities because they are not parallel skills and must be learned in different ways. Clear, correct, graceful writing, important in all disciplines, is a product of repeated emphasis and learned through multiple courses, whereas the skill of giving effective presentations is less complex and can be learned more quickly. The third skill, quantitative reasoning, is important in only some disciplines, and how it is best learned is outside this report.

A basic problem is that we do not have a culture of speaking as we do with writing (it is to Hamilton’s credit that we have such a culture in writing). We can take a few steps, however, to promote such a culture. I make several recommendations in sections below to do that. Hamilton students do gain diverse experiences with speaking and discussing because many

faculty incorporate presentations and evaluations of oral communication in some or all of their courses (2010 Middle States Self-Study). Our students already benefit from their classroom experiences in oral communication. “Most of the improvements students reported did not come from their taking Oral Communication classes (because most hadn’t), but instead come from their experiences leading discussions or giving presentations in class (which most students reported they had had). For most students, these experiences were few in number, but significantly bettered their confidence, comfort, and communication abilities in front of groups” (from the 2006 Chambliss Mellon Assessment Report). As is true for learning how to write well, the learning of effective speaking skills is best learned when it is integrated in regular coursework.

It helps to know how much attention to oral communication – as defined by the faculty – currently takes place in the classroom. Students can find some courses that incorporate oral presentation by looking in the catalog for courses with a notation of OP (oral presentation). There are no set criteria for this label; it means that the course includes presentations, with the designation resulting simply from an instructor asking to have that notation applied to a course. The actual experiences in the course may range widely, and while the courses may include presentations, students may not receive responses on how to improve. A total of 61 sections received this designation in 2012-13 (36 fall, 25 spring).

To assess further the amount of oral communication in our curriculum, I conducted a survey of faculty from 24 departments and programs, aiming for responses from diverse faculty members but without trying to cover all departments and programs (the departments covered included 8 math & sciences, 7 social sciences, 6 humanities, and 3 arts; the only area covered thinly was foreign languages, which I intentionally surveyed less because oral practice in those departments is a necessary part of learning a language but different from the skills of oral communication we’re considering here). The responses came from 70 faculty members across the curriculum (*available separately*) and pointed to the enormous range and depth of attention that already exists to oral communication. That is the first of three important observations I learned from this survey: we already give our students a lot of experience in oral communication. In support of that claim, Hamilton freshmen and sophomores report making class presentations more frequently than do students from peer institutions (2011 NESSE Survey). The second important observation is that most senior programs require oral presentation of each student’s senior work; thus, most students do give a traditional stand-up speech to multiple people at the culmination of their concentrations.

The third important observation is that despite the frequency of speaking, presenting, debating, and discussing, students generally receive little guidance about how to improve in these forms of oral communication. That lack produces the largest gap between what we say we do and what we actually accomplish. Even the 2006 Mellon Assessment report noted that while more than a third of our students receive guidance about the organization of a presentation, only 16% received feedback about their effectiveness in speaking. It is in helping students improve in the oral presentations they’re already giving that we can provide the most immediate gains in oral skills. I return to this point later on.

4. Oral Communication at Other Institutions

To understand the position of writing and speaking in liberal arts colleges and universities, I surveyed the web sites of 38 different institutions (*available separately*). A survey like this is limited in usefulness because the results depend on the clarity and completeness of these institutions' web pages; however, the results do give some sense of what other institutions are doing. The survey included 6 Ivies, all 10 other NESCAC schools, 13 additional eastern small liberal arts colleges, and 9 western small liberal arts colleges. All 38 institutions support writing in one way or another, including writing centers, writing programs, writing projects, writing institutes, and writing through a learning commons. In contrast, I could find centers or programs for oral communication in only 11 of the 38 schools (all of them in the East), while an additional 8 institutions offer courses on public speaking but without a program providing curricular support. This survey suggests that Hamilton is not alone in having speaking remain a poor sister to writing.

5. Role of the Oral Communication Center and its Director

Oral Communication Center. The OCC was established to support public speaking: the standing up and presenting of one's thoughts cogently and convincingly. Despite this important educational goal, the 2012 Gentry-Hewitt report noted that "A substantial number of students do not use the OCC (65.7% of survey respondents), and this is surprising given the pervasiveness of oral communication across the curriculum." The OCC and the Writing Center are academic support structures that provide training and experience for the skills of public speaking and writing respectively. However, the OCC does not have the campus recognition or usage that the Writing Center has. Two factors play a role in the low usage: (1) the lack of a campus culture about speaking, and (2) limited advocacy of OCC services to the faculty, who consequently pay little attention to it. A recommendation from Arts & Sciences this past year was "strengthening the function of the Oral Communication Center to serve as the campus hub for helping students to effectively communicate, present, or perform." That broad goal is challenging to implement, but I make some recommendations in several sections below.

Director. The Director of the OCC works on daily tasks within the OCC, only occasionally asking for help from the Speaking Committee. In conversation, he acknowledged to me that the Speaking Committee could promote outreach to the faculty, but he has worked with them little, and that outreach has not happened. The Director should be responsible for reaching out much more actively to the faculty about student speaking and incorporate the Speaking Advisory Committee in this outreach.

Recommendation I: The Director of the OCC must serve as a regular and more vocal advocate for the use of the OCC.

6. Speaking Advisory Committee

Support for oral communication in the curriculum could be provided by the Speaking Advisory Committee, in coordination with the Director of the OCC. This committee is described by the Red Book as a subcommittee of CAP that "consults with the Committee on

Academic Policy, provides advisory support to the Oral Communication Center Director, and offers mentoring to those faculty who incorporate speaking assignments into their courses.”

There are several problems here, beginning with the fact that this committee rarely meets. The three appointed members decided from the beginning not to have a chair but to work as a triumvirate; consequently, no one has taken charge of the committee, and the committee meets infrequently. They view their role solely as supporting the Director of the OCC and responding to his requests, requests that have been infrequent. The limited interaction between the Director and the SAC is a main reason in why the committee hasn't been as active as it could have been. The committee should look outward to the faculty more to promote oral communication in courses throughout the curriculum. Both the SAC and the Director of the OCC must take more active, conspicuous roles.

A much better model is illustrated by what happens in support of writing at Hamilton. The Director of the Writing Center meets regularly (once or twice a month) with the Writing Advisory Committee, and those four individuals actively pursue activities about writing at the College. They all have ongoing tasks. The WAC and the Director regularly schedule workshops for faculty about writing and the teaching of writing; they run a general workshop on writing every January and occasionally in May, and they also run divisional workshops and meetings on writing. The SAC could serve to promote similar events about speaking – workshops, meetings, providing advice.

Recommendation II: Appoint members to the SAC for staggered terms (one appointment each year, e.g., 2014, 2015, 2016, rather than all with the same term), with the longest serving member to chair the committee. Charge the SAC to work actively with the Director of the OCC to promote oral communication throughout the curriculum, with support provided through the OCC, and to work with CAP on curricular matters about speaking across the curriculum.

7. Courses in Oral Communication

Separate from the curriculum of the Communication Department, Hamilton offers two courses in oral communication through the Oral Communication Center: the full-credit Oral Comm 210 (The Rhetorical Act) and the partial credit Oral Comm 100 (Oral Presentations). The separation of these two courses from the academic Department of Communication reflects past personnel matters, but there is little sense in continuing a structure that lacks curricular reason. Furthermore, neither of these courses is taught by a tenure-track member of the faculty, so they both lack regular departmental oversight. The two courses are quite different, however, and must be considered separately.

Oral Comm 210, The Rhetorical Act. This course can offer both theory and praxis about public speaking, and as such, it can be an important part of the College's curriculum. The course should be offered from a liberal arts perspective and fall within the curriculum of the Communication Department. That means that Oral Comm 210 must have depth beyond simply requiring practice in giving speeches; it should have a serious theoretical basis from which practice in speaking may grow. Oral Comm 210 should be evaluated along these lines.

Moving Rhetorical Act to the curriculum of the Communication Department will require good will on the part of all involved since past problems led to the separation of the course from the department.

Oral Comm 100, Oral Presentations. The Oral Communication Center is a curricular *support* facility, and it is an anomaly that Hamilton offers (partial) credit-bearing courses through a support center. No other curricular support centers offer credit-bearing courses (Writing Center, QSR Center, Language Lab). Support facilities exist to *support* curricular needs, not to replace them. Because of past personnel issues, the OCC has established its own credit-bearing curriculum. I find no good curricular reasons to maintain this structure. The experience in speaking that students receive in Oral Comm 100 should be integrated in regular courses throughout the curriculum, ones that may be labeled “oral intensive” (see section 9, Alternative Curricular Options). If Hamilton didn’t offer regular courses with a speaking component, then one might argue for these partial credit-bearing speaking experiences; however, we do have courses with significant use of oral presentations. As I’ve already noted, the learning of effective speaking skills is best attained when integrated in regular coursework (the same is true with writing). And if the only way to get students to go to the OCC is to offer credit for doing so, then we need to reevaluate what the OCC offers. But the OCC does give valuable support (and I emphasize *support*) for public speaking requirements that exist in a number of courses throughout the curriculum. There is simply no curricular reason for the OCC to offer its own for-credit courses.

When I asked the Speaking Advisory Committee about the continued existence of the partial credit course, they said they supported it because it is useful for opportunity programs. Many of the students in such programs, as well as ESOL students, students who have a fear of public speaking, and students with low self-esteem, take the partial-credit course to practice the skill of public speaking. The advantage of the course is that students receive more one-on-one attention than they do in regular courses. Such close mentoring is certainly valuable, but we should not give academic credit for a non-academic class outside our regular curriculum.

Recommendation III: Eliminate partial credit courses in oral communication. Maintain The Rhetorical Act as an academic course and incorporate it within the curriculum of the Communication Department as Comm 210.

8. Structural Support for Oral Communication

Despite expanded outreach from the Director of the OCC and the Speaking Advisory Committee, we may need to do more. A significant help in building a culture of oral communication at Hamilton would be to appoint a faculty member as Coordinator of the Program in Oral Communication to oversee the recognition and listing of courses that qualify as oral intensive and to advocate for expanded faculty attention to of oral communication. The cost for this step would be little; a single course release (one per year or perhaps one per semester) would provide sufficient time. The Coordinator would interact with departments, focus on faculty development, meet regularly with the Director of the OCC, work on

programs of faculty development with the Speaking Advisory Committee, and maintain a list of speaking intensive courses. This position would provide support for oral communication outside the OCC. One of the most important contributions of this individual, with the assistance of the Speaking Advisory Committee, would be to help faculty learn how to strengthen speaking in classes – not just expand the number of speaking requirements but learn how to help students improve. Faculty generally know what to say to students about writing, but most faculty know little about how to evaluate or improve students' speaking ability. The OCC already has documents to help in this endeavor. The Chair of the Speaking Advisory Committee could serve, in addition, as Coordinator of Oral Communication.

Increased structure in support of oral communication doesn't necessarily translate into improvements in student experiences, however. It does take good people in the right places to encourage the development of a culture of oral communication; in following the recommendations presented here, the Dean must be careful in choosing who might fill these responsibilities. But having a Coordinator – someone with faculty status – could help develop a culture of oral communication on campus somewhat parallel to the culture of writing that already exists.

Writing at Hamilton does not have this form of structural support, but our writing program is already successful with extensive faculty support, whereas oral communication is not. This form of added support, with the Coordinator working with the Director of the OCC and the Speaking Advisory Committee, could help us move towards a culture of speaking.

Recommendation IV: The Dean should appoint a faculty member to be the Coordinator of the Program in Oral Communication, with a course release for the faculty member filling that position. The Chair of the Speaking Advisory Committee could fill this role. The Coordinator would be charged with promoting expanded attention to and the teaching of oral skills within our curriculum. This position would be limited to one or two years, after which the responsibilities would devolve to the Director of the OCC and the Speaking Advisory Committee (parallel to what happens with writing)

9. Alternative Curricular Options

Hamilton could readily enhance the oral communication skills of its students and develop a greater campus culture in oral communication. Outlined below are four alternative curricular choices to consider for the future (three of these options are similar to those raised in the 2007 Pokinski report). Courses with attention to oral communication would be labeled OI for oral intensive.

A. Status Quo

The first option is based on the status quo. The advantage of the status quo is that we would avoid spending the time and effort needed to change a curriculum that is already balanced within the divergent wishes of a very diverse faculty. The disadvantage is that the College would then claim to support oral communication without doing much and thereby remain open to criticism for claiming to do more than it does. However, we already allow faculty to ask for an OP notation for any course that incorporates oral presentations, and this current

procedure could be emphasized and expanded, providing greater attention to oral skills. Even the status quo is better than nothing.

B. Increased Faculty Development for Teaching Oral Skills

As described in section 3, many courses in our curriculum already require oral presentations in one form or another, but faculty often don't provide guidance to students about how to improve their presentation skills. This lack is mostly because faculty members don't know how to do it and aren't helped or supported to do so. Combined efforts by the Coordinator of Oral Communication (described in part 8 above), the Director of the OCC, and the Speaking Advisory Committee could provide support and encouragement for faculty to improve in their teaching of oral skills and to expand the number of courses labeled OP. The advantage of this option is that it would improve what we currently do but is decentralized and matches the philosophy of our open curriculum. The disadvantage is that student experiences would be diverse and the gains in student skills would be hard to assess. This option is really just the status quo (option A) with expanded attention to the teaching of oral skills in OP courses and an emphasis on increasing the number of OP courses.

C. Open Structure with Speaking Intensive Courses

In keeping with Hamilton's open curriculum, yet with recognition of the importance of speaking, another option would be to have an oral communication program of courses designated as "Oral Intensive" but without requiring students to take any of them. A defined structure for oral communication in the curriculum would be to establish an Oral Intensive (OI) program that would parallel Hamilton's Writing Intensive (WI) program. Courses so designated could be recommended by faculty advisors and chosen by students who wish to strengthen their experience in oral communication. Any courses so designated would have to meet a list of agreed-to structural requirements; that is, simple faculty declarations that their courses emphasize oral communication would not be enough. OI labeled courses would therefore replace the current system of OP labeled courses (which do not have to meet stated criteria). Without criteria, so much variability in student experience would take place that a speaking program would be vague. It is noteworthy that the 2013 Arts & Sciences Consultants also raised this curricular option: "the College could designate oral communications intensive courses, parallel to its writing intensive courses...to include specifying the parameters for designating courses as a part of developing strong oral communication skills." With this design, Hamilton would have a set of oral intensive (OI) courses in parallel with writing intensive (WI) courses. The difference, of course, is that students have to take three writing intensive courses (a course in three different semesters), whereas oral intensive courses would be optional. Speaking would take place in many courses in the curriculum, whether labeled OI or not, but the focus would be intensified in OI courses. This structure is parallel with writing, which takes place in virtually all courses, but with attention to writing intensified in WI courses.

Oral communication covers a broader range of activities than does writing, however, and that difference makes it harder to develop and apply a set of requirements to speaking courses, even though writing is harder to master. Herein lies the real challenge in bringing a proposal like this to the faculty. We must specify "the parameters for designating courses as part of developing strong oral communication skills." I have proposed a draft set of criteria (**Table**

1) below. I developed these criteria from writing intensive criteria applied to the skill of speaking. This list began from an initial draft of criteria developed by Jim Helmer, followed by review by the Speaking Advisory Committee; I then broadened the criteria to cover a greater range of kinds of oral communication and incorporated a couple of requirements from the faculty's recently approved set of criteria for writing intensive courses. The St. Olaf College Oral Communication Requirement (*available separately*) was very helpful in this revision. Please note that I've taken parts of these guidelines directly from the St. Olaf statement.

Table 1. Draft Guidelines for Oral Communication-Intensive Courses

1. An oral intensive course must emphasize speaking and listening as principal and integral means of learning. Oral intensive courses may emphasize any of the modes of oral communication, including individual presentations, debates, student-led discussions, or interviews, that best support the principal learning objectives and disciplinary practices of the course.
2. An oral intensive course must provide explicit instruction in effective oral communication through assigned readings, lectures, class discussions, or other instructional features of the course. Oral communication instruction should introduce strategies that improve students' effectiveness as speakers and listeners.
3. An oral intensive course must provide a minimum of three opportunities for students to practice their oral skills in course assignments. Assignments using oral skills should be distributed across the semester.
4. An oral intensive course must provide students with specific and timely feedback on the development of their speaking and listening skills. The means of providing feedback to students may take a variety of forms, such as individual conferences, written comments on assignments, in-class discussion, oral or written self evaluation, or self-evaluation.
5. Instructors of oral intensive courses must include short statements on their syllabi that describe how their courses meet the above guidelines.
6. To facilitate the instruction of students on oral communication skills, oral intensive courses are limited to 20 students.

To assess the effectiveness of such an oral intensive course, Susan Mason volunteered to teach one section of her Education 100 course in the fall of 2013 with adherence to these draft criteria. She is also developing a set of learning objectives for the course. Evaluating her experimental course will have to be done next year (2013-14) through interviews with Susan and with students in the course. The outcomes of her well-designed pilot course should be assessed before finalizing any proposed system of OI courses for the faculty to consider.

It should be obvious that a program of oral intensive courses could begin with any number of courses so designated, and the program could grow from wherever it starts. A number of courses that meet the draft criteria already exist.

D. Required Structure with Oral Intensive Courses

A fourth option is based on the open structure described above; it would be to require students to complete a minimum number of oral intensive courses as a graduation requirement. As Dan Chambliss reported in his 2006 Mellon Assessment Report, “If the college wanted to, it could raise the average quality of students’ oral communications skills dramatically by, in some way, ensuring that every student took at least one or two classes that required presentations.”

A requirement couldn’t be imposed, however, without having sufficient oral intensive courses in place, and doing so could take time to develop and evaluate. A program of required oral intensive courses would have to begin as an optional program, as described in part C above, anyway. My sense is that an additional requirement for graduation would not be supported by the faculty; with an open curriculum, we have minimized the role of requirements, and our past history, such as with sophomore seminars, shows how difficult it is to begin a program of required courses. Because the College isn’t close to passing a program of required oral intensive courses, at least for the present, option C is more realistic.

Recommendation V: The Dean and CAP should work to implement either option B or C above or some modified form of these curricular proposals.