# Relational Communication as a Central Focus for the "Communication Across the Curriculum" Initiative

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**Abstract:** Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) programs are growing in number and in degrees of influence across the country. An exploration of the CAC national discussion indicates that the discourse shaping campus programs and faculty/course development practices is one of basic communication skills focused on outcome. The problem with reducing communication to basic skills is that it does not address communication as the foundation of complex social interaction. This essay argues that CAC program leaders and practitioners should advocate a relational communication approach to communication education across the disciplines by emphasizing the role of communication in the historical, social, and political realities shaping our experiences. A practical application section offers suggestions for how a relational approach to CAC can be implemented.

Since the early 1990s, Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC), as a teaching initiative, has impacted American higher education through both the number and the reach of emerging programs. Whether the emphasis of a program is on an interdisciplinary focus, or on ensuring that every student attending the university experiences one or two communication courses, CAC serves as an umbrella term for a variety of programs (CXC, SAC, OCAC). These curricula are designed to encourage and support the teaching and learning of communication for all students, regardless of major (Cronin, M. W., Dannels, D. P., Grice, G. L., & Tomlinson, S. D., 2001). CAC programs are predicated on the belief that communication is so vital to students' lives and future professions that some type of communication course work should be required of all students (Cronin, M. W., Grice, G. L., & Palmerton, P. R., 2000). CAC rationales, constituencies, and impacts have generated a wealth of scholarly discussions. These include the effect CAC has on the communication discipline, communication centers and labs, and post program implementation research and assessment.

CAC is seen as an umbrella for the various approaches to incorporating communication across the disciplines. Two recent additional approaches, Communication In the Disciplines (CID) and Communication Against the Disciplines (CAD), complicate and expand CAC by illuminating the necessity for dialogue between the disciplines and an increase in attention to creativity. Yet, in spite of this proliferation of programs and approaches, most CAC attempts remain stuck in a limited and outmoded model emphasizing transmission and basic skills, and minimizing the relational dimension of communication.

An exploration of the national discussion surrounding CAC indicates that the form of communication dominating the discourse is one of basic communication skills focused on outcome. The discipline of

Communication is not limited to basic skills, yet CAC literature often suggests that communication is simply about the transmission of ideas. It implies that by studying the components of a message, such as eye contact, clarity of information, body gestures and PowerPoint, students will be better communicators. What this does not take into account is the vital role communication plays in the development of relationships and communities. I would argue that current CAC thinking actually detracts from the dialogic role of communication in the co-construction of meaning (Arnett, 1986).

In this essay, I contend that current approaches to CAC limit communication education to basic communication skill development. Furthermore, the problem with reducing communication to basic skills is that it does not address communication as the foundation of complex social interaction. Current conversations in the CAC initiative continue to focus on *how* students communicate, on communication as an *act*, and on communication *outcomes*. Freire (1992) states that we cannot limit our education to "the technical training of the labor force" (p. 132); if we only encourage the skills of communication, we are limiting ourselves to technical training. This essay offers a relational communication approach as a viable alternative to the limited "skills development" model.

In order to interrogate the current approaches in CAC, this essay begins with a discussion of CAC in its overarching form. It includes a brief discussion of CID and CAD. Throughout this essay, the term CAC is used in relation to the umbrella teaching initiative and the use of CAC class or classroom. "S-I course" refers to any course outside of the communication department that is designated oral, speaking, or communication intensive. Finally, I will discuss how to implement a relational communication approach in course selection and development, and in faculty development and training.

## An Emphasis on Basic Communication Skill Development

CAC program leaders are charged with the responsibility of sharing fundamental insights in the study of communication across the curriculum. For several decades, faculty immersed in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative have performed a similar task. WAC program leaders experience challenges and successes similar to those currently facing CAC program participants. Their insights serve as a valuable resource in the development of CAC. Morello (2000) notes that CAC programs "unquestionably echo approaches taken by the scores of writing across the curriculum programs established earlier" (p. 99); both initiatives involve a general education requirement such as writing (W-I) and speaking intensive (S-I) courses. In order to facilitate the requirement, CAC programs have incorporated the formulas for faculty development and student support that have made WAC programs so successful. Some of the shared components include housing the programs in the English and Communication departments so there is a central support system, incorporating extensive faculty development and support agendas, and providing a center/lab space for students to receive assignment assistance.

As is the case in WAC, CAC has generated a body of rhetoric that examines, explains, and influences the perceptions of, and the decisions being made about, these programs. A thematic analysis of several rhetorical pieces (including scholarly articles and program Web sites) that reflect and influence CAC program development across the country illuminates two overarching visions guiding the initiative. First, that "Communication Across the Curriculum will increase communication competence," and second, that "Communication Across the Curriculum enhances students academically, personally, and professionally" (Gunn, 2002).[1]

The CAC literature and sites explored clearly espouse a shared belief that through an emphasis on basic communication skills such as delivery techniques and organizational patterns, students will be more equipped to compete both academically and professionally (Gunn, 2002). The message in CAC

literature that suggests that communication in the classroom can improve a student's academic success is based in part on the belief that an engaged student will encounter the course content differently than the student who sits back and does not participate. This vision illuminates the important discussion in pedagogy around educational practices that involve students in their own learning. Again, CAC leaders claim that students in S-I courses will learn the course content at a deeper level as a result of the required oral engagement and that, simultaneously, the students' communication competencies will improve (Cronin & Glenn, 1991; Morreale et al., 1993; Smith, 1997). The repeated claim is that improvement in communication competencies will aid in finding a job and in future professional advancement. CAC program leaders note that being prepared for the workforce is a benefit and a central goal for those developing S-I courses.

These claims seem harmless on the surface and reflect an important benefit of CAC programs. What is problematic is the obvious, and simultaneously limited, emphasis on *skills for success*. This is an approach that is predicated on the idea that a student engaged with the material will be more *successful* in his or her academic pursuits, and that students who learn communication competencies in the classroom will be more *successful* in the professional environment. A closer look at the literature also exposes a disproportionate focus on what I will from here on refer to as *basic skills*. These include delivery and organizational skills such as eye contact, gestures, and outlining that are designed to improve the performance of the communicator. The attention to basic skills for the purpose of achieving a *successful outcome* has infused both teaching and literature on CAC. A cursory look at faculty development literature and S-I course descriptions, coupled with my own experiences, suggests that the limited discussion of basic skill development *is* shaping practice in the CAC classroom.

Dannels (2001) argues that "basic public speaking skills oftentimes are the ones that bring faculty and students across campus to CXC" (p. 145). She goes on to claim that an attention in CXC programs to issues surrounding "mallspeak eradication" through skill development "seems to be the tail wagging the cross-curricular dog" (p. 146). The connection in CAC programs of academic and professional success to learning basic communication skills reinforces, and perhaps results in, the product orientation that Morello (2000) notes as a central goal of CAC programs. It is an approach that places the emphasis on outcome and how well the student performs, which in and of itself is not inherently problematic. Again, the problem is in the *limiting* of communication to basic skill development in the CAC discourse, and ultimately, the classroom.

In recent years, two alternative approaches have surfaced that complicate CAC and add depth and nuance to the basic skills approach. The first is a model originated by Dannels (2001), Communication In the Disciplines (CID), in response to what she considers limitations of the current CAC initiative. CID, as an approach for including communication education in non-communication disciplines, positions learning about, and listening to, the differing "communication lives of the discipline" as the impetus for program development and practice (Dannels, 2005, p. 3). The second approach offered by Fleury (2005), termed Communication Against the Disciplines (CAD), positions "liberal education" at the center of CAC intentions. Fleury states unabashedly that the goals of liberal education, specifically, "its goal of citizenship, should be the center of the CXC project" (2005, p. 73). CID makes an important dialogic addition to the CAC discussion. Dannels moves members of the Communication discipline from focusing on *what* we have to share as a discipline to *how* we share. CAD adds an important perspective that connects communication to large public commitments of democracy and citizenship. Though Dannels and Fleury's expansion of the CAC discussion increases the complexity of the initiative, both approaches continue to focus on communication as a *tool* for desired outcomes.

Fleury argues that we should be emphasizing the constitutive role of communication over the instrumental role of communication. Yet, a few moments later, he returns to an emphasis on doing this through offering a variety of "core styles" of speech. Fleury's references to style are in essence a reference to product or outcome. He finishes his piece by stating that students "will have been well served if they have had practice with the basic tools of communication construction, renovation, and demolition" (2005, p. 79). In Dannels' work on CID (2001), she continues to emphasize the importance of attending discipline-specific forms of communication. But again, hers is a language of style, performance, and outcome. Dannels references "context-specific audience," "what it means to be a competent communicator," and the goal of clarity of communication. Her claim that, "essentially, a CID model would tailor support and instruction to the oral communication events that are relevant to achieving the outcomes identified by the particular discipline" (2001, p. 154) clearly positions CID as a skill development and product focused model.

Although both approaches complicate the CAC initiative, they continue to emphasize basic skill development with a focus on outcome. Limiting CAC programs to skill development, style development, and the practice of communication does not address the complexity of communication as a meaning-making phenomenon. Fleury asks, "How do we, as CXC practitioners help students across the curriculum become liberally educated citizens?" (2005, p. 74) Dannels asks, how we, as CAC practitioners "do justice to and contribute to the theoretical complexity that characterizes our discipline" (2001, p. 146). In addition to these two questions, I propose we ask how we, as CAC practitioners, can create and sustain both discourse and practices that foster an approach to communication in the CAC classroom, placing the relational aspect of communication as central. Both scholars position the question, "what makes a good communicator" as central to their model. I suggest we ask how moments of connected communication look and feel to the people engaged in the communication act. In that interest, I now turn to my offering of a fourth approach.

## Relational Communication Across the Curriculum (RCAC)

Basic communication skills such as constructing a clear and interesting argument, supporting an argument with evidence, and articulating an argument through complex kinesthetic skills are certainly important to societal participation. Communicating ideas moves speakers from inside to outside as our thoughts become public knowledge. To articulate one's thoughts and ideas is in itself a participatory action that has the potential for developing a sense of community. However, a narrow focus on skillful communication limits our approach to communication in the CAC community to a means for achieving desired outcomes. Communication is the means through which we come to know ourselves as social beings. Communication is the foundation for meaning, relational knowing, and community long before we can begin to assess an audience, select a style of speech, and decide how we will connect with the audience through our delivery style.

Dewey (1916) argued eloquently that we live in communities by virtue of what we have in common and that it is in communication that commonalities emerge. CAC program leaders and practitioners can advocate an approach to communication education that emphasizes the role of communication in our co-constructed historical, social, and political realities. Relational communication education in non-communication classes can nurture classroom environments that offer students opportunities to experience the power of communication in co-constructing meaning through their own voices and the voices of classmates. Shifting the emphasis from basic skills and outcome to the role of communication in the construction of relational and social realities results in a CAC approach that looks quite different in a couple of significant ways.

First, a CAC relational communication approach places knowledge of self and other at the center. Focusing on communication *between*, versus *to* or *for*, shifts teaching attention away from the desired outcome or product (effective communication) and toward teaching about the process of relating with (an)other (Bohm, 1996). Second, a relational communication approach privileges informal modes of communication both in and outside of the classroom. As scholars such as Shotter (1993) have determined, the conversation is the foundation of communication. It serves as a steppingstone for all other communicative contexts. In a CAC classroom that is adhering to a relational communication approach, activities and discussions expand beyond the public presentation of ideas to include instruction on, and moments for, engaging in informal conversations. The purposes of sharing with, listening to, and learning from self and others becomes important. Third, a CAC relational communication approach emphasizes the importance of dialogic listening in the co-construction of meaning. As students engage in dialogue about their thoughts and feelings in and around course material, they can be encouraged to enter into a mode of paraphrasing and building that creates the space for learning the subject and subjectivity (Stewart, Zediker, and Whitteborn, 2005). By teaching a perspective of communication that privileges connection, we better prepare students to enter into any communication act, regardless of context knowledge and practice. The foundational principles of communication as constitutive will serve students far better than a limited set of basic skills. A student who witnesses the role of communication in shaping and constructing our social world is not merely learning how to present information in the context of a public speech, but also how to interrogate and explore the complex characteristics of communication in any context.

The relational approach to CAC I am suggesting intersects the importance of self and other in conversation for the purposes of connection and learning. Rather than asking what skills are required to ensure effective communication, a relational approach to communication focuses on questions about how moments of effective communication look and feel. It requires students to focus on the engagements of self *with* others (Stewart, 2006). This approach moves communication from a tool for control to a moment of being *in* communication. This relational approach to communication involves creating a space for conversation by encouraging students to share their experiences, to listen to the experiences of others, and ultimately to question the connection between their experiences and cultural realities (Freire, 1992). Through the authentic expression of their experiences and an open and equitable stance toward the experiences of others, students may move to a connected knowing (Belenky & Clinchy, 1986). Exploring the foundational principles that guide a relational communication approach to CAC is only one step in presenting it as an alternative. In an institutional environment of resource scarcity, the practical concerns regarding who will run such a program and how it will be run deserve direct attention.

## Practical Applications

As with any pedagogical initiative, there are contentions and challenges for CAC programs. The CAC movement overall has faced many of the same challenges as those experienced by WAC proponents. There are numerous questions about the time and resources such programs require. Common arguments against W-I and S-I courses include, but are not limited to: "there is not enough time to cover course content and writing and speaking instruction," and "faculty members across disciplines are not trained to cover these areas from an instructional standpoint," therefore requiring a great deal of time and resources for training (Cronin & Glenn, 1991; Cronin & Grice, 1993; Morreale et al., 1993).

I am not advocating additional training in regard to the number of hours; I am suggesting a change in the training programs that already exist to focus on relational communication and its possibilities in

the classroom. Regardless of the approach (CID, CAD, RCAC), CAC programs will require an extensive commitment from administrators and faculty.

## Course Selection and Development

CAC program leaders and practitioners are charged with encouraging the development of CAC classes across the curriculum. Some programs are designed to develop and sustain CAC classes in every major in the college, others are designed to develop and sustain the needed number of courses to serve the student population. Regardless of the model, a common responsibility of the CAC director is to locate courses and professors that demonstrate a communication connection, and then cultivate and support the development of that course into an oral/speaking/communication designation. The kinds of courses that are sought as suitable for S-I designations are often those that lend themselves to a skill development approach (Gunn, 2002). Rather than looking for courses that already have a public speaking component, an alternative is to seek courses that have a pedagogical and content propensity for relational interaction and knowing. For example, courses in sociology, anthropology, women studies, black studies, international studies, and queer studies with core content areas illuminating human interaction can include a relational communication emphasis through both instruction and assignments.

In the exploration of human interaction subject matter, students can be challenged to be mindful of the role communication plays in the co-construction of meaning. Classroom assignments and discussions can focus on how particular realities that surface in the readings are connected to the power of language and social interaction. Such courses are particularly suited for what Freire (1992) refers to as an intersection of a "reading of the word" and a "reading of the world." He suggests that the production of new insights and understandings of any subject matter results from combining lived experience (reading of the world) and conceptual critique (reading of the word). In the RCAC classroom, for example, through the students' expressions of their experiences and interpretations of the subject matter, in combination with a discussion of cultural expectations and theoretical explanations of the content, true knowledge is produced. The importance of a RCAC classroom that focuses on relational communication is that sharing in the moment creates the possibility of connected knowing, and thus a relational communication learning moment. For example, Education programs can illustrate the difference between a skills approach and a relational approach.

In an Education program, whether or not it is a department, as in the case at Denison University, or a professional school, such as the program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), CAC practitioners following a skill development approach can focus their attention on cultivating methods courses. Teaching methods courses are particularly suited to skill development as a result of the emphasis on performance. In such courses, pre-service teachers are taught how to analyze various audiences' learning needs and styles. They can put together a lecture or lesson plan through the organizational principles that are relevant in an oral context. Courses on pedagogical technology can focus on how to use Blackboard, PowerPoint, and various forms of media in instruction.

Each of these areas requires a combining of course content with communication knowledge and skills. In contrast, a RCAC approach would emphasize the relational complexity of educational institutions and teaching. For example, in educational foundations courses the course content includes an exploration into the historical, social, and political issues impacting education (Shapiro and Purpel, 1998). In these courses a relational approach can focus on conversations between the students and teacher that are designed to encourage dialogue and challenge those issues. A potential assignment in this kind of course could involve students in the class interviewing people in the larger community about how they experienced issues specific to the course content. Narratives and or case

studies addressing the experiences of people who possess the standpoints relevant to the course content can be shared and explored in an environment of dialogic listening. Future teachers will be faced with a multitude of relational contexts, such as teacher/student, teacher/administrator, and teacher/parent. A relational approach to CAC has the potential to offer insight into the complexity of being in relationship with others and the co-construction of meaning that results within diverse communities with diverse commitments.

Course selection and development are essential to the growth and success of CAC programs. The number of S-I courses offered impact the various administrative challenges addressed above. It is imperative that CAC practitioners are intentional in the courses that they cultivate for S-I designation. Countless content areas across the academy are suitable for a relational focus. A CAC director's job would be to cultivate those courses and to provide non-communication faculty with workshops and support materials that will aid in their success. The faculty development end of CAC is where the success of a relational approach lies.

## Faculty Development Workshops

Necessary for the success of CAC programs is the time dedicated to faculty development (Cronin & Grice, 1993). CAC programs are dependent on the role non-communication faculty play in the course offerings and the overall support of the initiative. On the other hand, the non-communication faculty involved in CAC is dependent on support from the administration and Communication department. In the interest of this relationship, communication faculty across the country are engaged in workshops for non-communication faculty that cover everything from what CAC is and the importance of the initiative, to theories and concepts of communication, and ultimately to classroom activities and assessment tools (Cronin, Grice, Dannels & Tomlinson, 2001). As with other pedagogical initiatives, the exact formula for the implementation of a faculty development program related to CAC is dependent on the institution and the resources available, the stage of development the program is in (creation/sustaining), and the strengths of the communication department members or consultants conducting the workshops. The director needs to have knowledge in and around the sub-discipline of relational communication in order to design and conduct workshops that place relational communication at the center.

In the interest of specificity, I offer what a relational communication workshop for non-communication faculty might look like, using listening as the communication content area. The workshop could begin with covering Stewart, Zediker, and Whitteborn's (2005) discussion on the three primary modes of listening. One mode, considered poor listening, is about limiting our listening to gain information for self-serving purposes. The second mode is labeled as empathic listening, wherein the listener focuses his or her attention on deepening the understanding of the other and remaining in the role of listener. The third mode, dialogic listening, is based on the idea that through mindful listening, paraphrasing and building on what is being shared, the co-construction of meaning takes place between the people involved in the communication moment.

Each of these three modes can be presented to non-communication faculty to discuss different views of the role of listening in communication. The next step in the workshop could involve a discussion on classroom activities and assignments. In the interest of emphasizing relational communication, the third mode, dialogic listening, would serve as the frame for exploring possible classroom activities such as discussion groups that require the students to participate in paraphrasing what they are listening to and then offering their additional thoughts. The specifics of classroom assignments that challenge students to (1) consider what they think and feel about a topic, (2) enter into discussion with their classmates about that topic, and (3) assess if their views change as a result

of engaging in dialogue could be discussed. Finally, questions and concerns regarding assessment could be addressed in the workshop through a discussion on learning outcomes and examples of assessment tools. This frame of offering communication content information, possible assignments and activities, and assessment options is a common approach to faculty development; what changes is the subject matter.

More broadly, other workshops can emphasize the important role of conversation in the classroom as a means for hearing one's own voice and the voice of others, thus developing a comfort with participation. We can offer workshops that explore the constitutive nature of communication in relation to the various disciplines represented in the workshop. Ultimately, we have a choice about the way we communicate in and around the subject of communication in both course selection and in workshop development. We also can approach the initiative, the participants, and the processes from a discourse and commitment to relational communication education.

## Conclusion

When writing this essay, a colleague suggested that I "respond to our colleagues in engineering or political science who claim that the skills or processes their students need do not include those I am advocating." In this question lie both a challenge and a necessary clarification. What I am advocating is the inclusion of relational communication in the CAC initiative. I am not suggesting that the skills of group participation, conflict resolution, and presentational speaking are not important. What I am suggesting is that, by themselves, they do not reflect the complexity of communication processes, nor do they adequately prepare students for communication across and beyond the disciplines.

Conversation is the beginning of communication (Shotter, 1993) and conversations and relationships exist at the heart of all disciplines and professions. To teach a student to give a speech without sharing the entirety of the role of communication in the lives of our students is comparable to teaching a student the applications of a formula without a discussion of its origins or potential impact. There is not, nor should there be, one single formula for every potential CAC course to follow. Some classes may simply not be suited for a relational approach to communication. Other classes may already rely on an understanding of the possibilities of being in communication with others. A political science graduate who works for a county office may give a speech a day, or even two or three times a day. But, it is the human connections that surround those speeches that make up the workday for that individual. A student who is exposed to the relational nature of communication would be better equipped to be present in their communicative acts with others, and simultaneously recognize the presence of others involved.

The RCAC approach advocated here requires an enormous commitment and does not offer the same formulaic agenda that marks the landscape of current CAC programs focused on skill development. In pockets of the academy, we are witnessing creative approaches to pedagogy that place relationships and communities at the center through an increase in dialogue about the role a college education can play in the development of a sense of community. Service Learning and Leadership programs are taking off across the country with the intention of encouraging community responsibility (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Person, 2004). In the communication discipline we also are seeing an increase in funding for research into areas of community connections such as the "Communicating Common Ground" projects that are both encouraged and supported by the National Communication Association in conjuncture with the Southern Poverty Law Center (http://www.natcom.org/Instruction/CCG/ccg.htm).

The objectives of the overall Common Ground projects and Service Learning are to get college students out of the classroom and into the community, educating and working with others from a

connective stance. RCAC also provides a unique opportunity to create spaces and opportunities for students to develop a sense of the importance of relational communication for developing connections. Students can be engaged in the classroom, which many of us have witnessed. Students also can be challenged to bring their own humanness and voice to a space in which they are aware of the humanness of their classmates. Through the hearing of their own voices and the voices of others through conversation and dialogic listening, perhaps they will be moved to embrace the public speech, the group project, or the interview from a relational, connected and community perspective, rather than simply as an assignment to finish.

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## Notes

[1] The rhetorical pieces analyzed include three articles, written by recognized leaders in CAC, that have served as foundational pieces for developing programs in the CAC movement (Cronin & Glenn, 1991, Cronin, Grice, & Palmerton, 2000, Garside, 2002); the summative literature from an influential NCA short course on CAC that has been offered for several years (Cronin, Dannels, Grice, Tomlinson, 2001); along with three Web sites of prominent CAC programs. Cronin, Grice, and Glenn are considered pivotal members in the CAC community as a result of their impact on the development and growth of the initiative from its inception, and for their role in training and supporting CAC leaders across the country. The Web sites explored present the articulated missions and visions of three universities that are active in the national discussion of CAC. Although we cannot assume that written mission statements and visions are actually performed in daily operations, as articulated in scholarly articles and Web sites, they do provide the lens through which the outsider is introduced to the initiative. They also provide the shared symbolic ground, the "recurring communicative forms and patterns that indicate the evolution and presence of a shared group consciousness" (Bormann, 1996, p. 88).

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