

# ***The Communication Center: A Full-Service Academic Resource in the Heart of the Library***

*Jill I. Tyler and Sheril J. Hook*

## **Overview**

The foundation for a successful undergraduate experience is proficiency in the written and spoken word. Students need language to grasp and express effectively feelings and ideas. To succeed in college, students should be able to write and speak with clarity, and to read and listen with comprehension. Language and thought are inextricably connected and as undergraduates develop their linguistic skills, they hone the quality of their thinking and become intellectually and socially empowered. (Boyer, 1987)

Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation, illustrates the importance of oral and written communication competence as a foundation for every part of the academic experience. This literacy is key to an individual's success as both a student and a citizen, and is tied directly to the individual's ability to access, evaluate and use information.

Many academic programs, institutions, and departments

are directing attention and resources toward increasing a student's chances of success early in their college career (Leamson, 1999). Providing opportunities for students to "learn how to learn" has been a key dimension of many of these programs. A successful academic environment introduces new scholars to the tools that are available to them for finding information (research), and the tools they will need to put that information to valuable use (oral and written communication) (Brownell & Watson, 1984). Interdisciplinary collaborations produce the most effective and most accessible environments for introducing and practicing these skills. At the University of South Dakota, the departments of Research Instruction, English, and Speech Communication have created an academic resource for undergraduate and graduate students, which integrates one-on-one instruction in oral and written communication with institutional information literacy initiatives.

## **Planning and Implementation**

Interdisciplinary collaborations began between the librarian in charge of Research Instruction, and the coordinator

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*Jill I. Tyler is director of basic course instruction, University of South Dakota. Sheril J. Hook is fine arts and humanities librarian, University of Arizona.*

of the basic course in speech communication shortly after the basic course became a part of the regental requirements for general education. The librarian recognized the opportunity to integrate institutional initiatives in information literacy with the general education courses in Speech Communication, and to build on what Research Instruction staff was already doing in the basic course in English Composition. In addition to an ambitious information literacy assignment in the basic communication course, it became evident that formal training programs would benefit by being supplemented with an "on-call" opportunity for students to obtain assistance in three areas: oral communication, written communication, and research instruction-what we began to call The Communication Center.

Faculty from the Departments of English and Speech Communication were asked to be involved in the development of this new collaborative academic resource intended to build on individualized instruction, information literacy initiatives, and oral and written communication across the curriculum movements. At the initial meeting with the director of the basic course in Speech Communication, the librarian, and the coordinator of the English Department's Writing Lab, we identified the student and departmental needs that could be met by an interdisciplinary academic resource offering this assistance.

The Research Instruction staff at the I. D. Weeks library sought to provide a resource for students' course-specific needs in written and oral communication projects, recognizing that developing an effective message involves, to a large extent, a discussion of the quality, synthesis and incorporation of information. Research staff were already responding to a large number of student questions and concerns in academic coursework, and recognized that both students and research staff would benefit from course-specific (even assignment-specific) guidance in how the coursework was to be completed, as well as assistance in evaluating, selecting, synthesizing, and using the information they had discovered through research. The goal was to allow students to focus directly on what they needed to accomplish, and to make the task of the research instruction librarian more direct and relevant to the student's coursework.

The Department of English was already maintaining a highly successful Writing Lab in the department, across campus from the library. The Department's Writing Lab was open 40 hours a week, and served an average of 60 students per week, many of them working on language and cultural issues as they used English as a Second Lan-

guage (ESL). A significant number of students seeking tutoring from the Writing Lab were referred by classroom teachers for remedial work (Sjolie, 2000). The English Department sought to establish a "satellite" center more directly connected to student's needs, and operating on a voluntary basis, rather than course or instructor mandates.

The Department of Speech Communication was motivated to create a resource for students and faculty across the University who were incorporating oral communication into coursework at all levels. As SPCM:101 Fundamentals of Speech Communication, had just become part of the general education program, a great deal of attention was placed on all students' abilities to reason, persuade, argue, and present information effectively to a variety of audiences. Based on a highly successful model established at Butler University (Sandin, 2000), the director of the basic course sought to create a resource that would train, support and guide both students and faculty as they incorporated oral communication projects (speeches, presentations, and small group discussions) into their coursework in all academic departments.

Based on this meeting, the three faculty members committed to a pilot Communication Center program, beginning in February of 2000. The Communication Center would be open when and where student need was greatest: three hours a night (7:00 to 10:00 p.m.), five nights a week (Sunday through Thursday), staffed by two tutors at a time, one from English and one from Speech Communication. The Communication Center would be located in the library, for easy access to the Reference Desk, which was staffed with librarians who were available during this time. In the Communication Center, project-focused learners would be guided through the process of selecting topics, analyzing audiences, organizing information, engaging persuasive strategies, perfecting language, style, grammar, and delivery, and developing visual supporting material. Tutors also focused on the quality of information sources presented by the students, and on how those sources were being integrated. If the tutors perceived that the project was suffering because of a lack of information, they referred the students to the reference desk, where staff guided the students through the basic dimensions of information literacy: identifying necessary information needs, accessing the information effectively and efficiently, evaluating and selecting relevant and reliable information by thinking critically about sources and credibility, and then using information effectively in written and oral communication which fulfills faculty expectations and course requirements.

### Resources

The first steps necessary to establish the Communication Center were to 1) secure facilities and equipment; 2) train tutors and staff; 3) obtain financial support; and 4) publicize the Center to faculty, students, and staff (Sandin, 2000).

**Facilities and Equipment:** The I. D. Weeks Library devoted a large second floor classroom with a computer (offering access to research databases as well as presentation software), and chairs and desks to seat 30. Viewing rooms equipped with televisions and VCRs were just down the hall. This room offered plenty of space for two tutors to be working with students, individually or in groups, as well as space in which students who were waiting to see tutors could study and prepare.

**Tutors and Staff:** The logistical support for the Communication Center was incorporated into the regular responsibilities of the three coordinating faculty members (in English, Speech Communication, and Research Instruction). These individuals were in charge of budget, scheduling, and promotion. Tutors were recruited, interviewed, and selected by the faculty and consisted of graduate teaching assistants and advanced undergraduate students from the two academic departments. Training in tutoring pedagogy and Communication Center procedures took place over two evenings, and was supplemented with follow-up sessions throughout the pilot program. In the fall of 2000, when the Communication Center re-opened as a full program (no longer a pilot) new tutors received six hours of training led by both faculty and returning tutors.

**Budget:** Tutors are paid an hourly wage from funds generated from the English Department's Proficiency Exam. Total cost for a semester's payroll is only \$890.00.

**Promotion:** The pilot program was promoted primarily to students in ENGL:101 Composition and SPCM:101 Fundamentals of Communication. Participation was completely voluntary. Students heard about the center from faculty (or teaching assistants), or from posters, table tents, or campus publications. In the fall, when the Center opened, campus-wide e-mails to all faculty and staff, and to all students, promoted the Center, and prompted a great deal of enthusiasm and interest. A sign in the I. D. Weeks Library, along with posters, flyers, and campus publications, include information about hours and special workshops at the Communication Center.

### Evaluation

One of the primary tools for evaluating the Communication

Center has been the students' voluntary use (Hobgood, 2000). In the spring semester of 2000, 112 students visited with an average visit lasting 45 minutes. In the fall semester of 2000, based on increased promotion, and instructor-initiated programs (e.g., some teaching assistants encouraged their students and student groups to visit on nights the instructor was working in the Communication Center), usage rose to 225 students, with an average visit lasting just over 35 minutes. Repeat usage soared as well, with 35% of students visiting the Center more than once in the fall semester.

Student satisfaction with the Communication Center, as reported on randomly distributed evaluation instruments, and informal conversations with classroom teachers, has been high. Students recognize the value of working interpersonally, one-on-one, with experts in their fields of study (Sandin, 2000). Faculty report that the work of students who have visited the Communication Center has improved significantly, with anecdotal evidence pointing to increased enthusiasm and improved evaluation and use of supporting information. Each visit to the Communication Center is documented by the tutor, and reviewed by one of the Center directors (see *Appendix A*). The reports are then shared, interpersonally, with the classroom teachers, indicating which students have sought help, and in which course areas.

### Initiatives for Further Partnerships and Collaborations

Collaborations in instruction and coordination in the Communication Center have opened the door to professional relationships and activities that continue to enhance student learning throughout the University.

In the fall of 2000, the I. D. Weeks Library opened an Information Technology Learning Center, also on the second floor, which offers a state-of-the-art facility for computer-assisted research and communication. Tutorials are offered in several areas, including grammar, punctuation, keyboarding, and oral communication. As part of the institution's general education requirements, most students have completed a semester course in information technology, so are equipped to use the Technology Learning Center, although assistance is available.

Other educational models have been implemented as well. In the second semester of the Communication Center, directors have offered a series of workshops on issues of importance to college-level writers, speakers, and thinkers. These workshops are led by faculty from across the University, and include: *Critical Thinking*, *Topic Selection*, *Web-Based*

*Search Strategies, Word Choice, Audience Analysis, Punctuation, Evaluating Sources, Integrating Sources, Plagiarism and MLA/APA Guidelines, and PowerPoint and Presentation Software.* The Communication Center will be organizing a series of faculty panel discussions on topics such as *Critical Thinking, Information Evaluation and Synthesis, and Incorporating Oral Communication Across the Disciplines.*

**Conclusion**

The overwhelming advantages of the Communication Center are 1) enhancement of student learning; and 2) the relationships between faculty, graduate students and tutors in English, Speech Communication, and Research Instruction. It has become clear that the departments are complementary, and an individual tutoring session often grows to a discussion of the merits of various research and communication strategies. As these relationships continue to grow, we are confident that classroom pedagogy, co-curricular edu-

cational opportunities, and ultimately, student learning, will be nurtured, supported and enhanced.

**References**

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# ***Appendix I***

## **Communication Center Report**

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Tutor \_\_\_\_\_

Classroom Teacher's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Visit \_\_\_\_\_

Course Number \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Visit \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Your student recently worked in the Communication Center.

She/he requested particular help with \_\_\_\_\_

We focused on the following areas:

- Topic Selection
- Audience Analysis
- Research
- Organization
- Language and Style
- Argument and Critical Thinking
- Persuasive Strategies
- Visual Supporting Material
- Delivery
- Interview

Specific Work Included: \_\_\_\_\_

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