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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

As you know, ILA President Andy Wolvin's son is eight years old. What you do not know is that Brad had not spoken a word for eight years--a long time for someone with both parents in the communication field. Not a word since birth. Well, last May his parents were surprised and overjoyed when Brad suddenly blurted out one morning, "'Hey, this toast is burned!" His mother, Dar, in tears of joy exclaimed, "Brad, Honey, you finally spoke! Why haven't you spoken to us all these years?" "Well," Brad answered, "Everything's been OK up until this morning." The conclusion to this story is that his father, amazed at such power of listening, set out to immediately write his third book on the power of listening!

Perhaps this story illustrates the state of communication instruction in our country. For most people life without communication instruction has been OK up to this point. And, now the American public is aware of the societal problems stemming from lack of communication skills. Suddenly, people are saying we need communication instruction in our schools. This response is reflected in the national reform reports and by SCA's efforts to provide guidelines to that response. Two items will be covered today: (1) what some of the national reports have said about oral communication competencies, with special emphasis on listening instruction, and (2) what the SCA competencies at both the elementary and secondary level convey about listening as a separate skill and as part of the communication process.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

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THE NATIONAL REFORM REPORTS

Before discussing individual reports, I would like to draw your attention to one of the most startling aspects of these reports--members of SCA, ILA, or ICA have not been part of the working groups of these committees. Rather, the leadership for the national reports has been people from the world of business, education, home, and the professions discussing education free from the constraints of department phobia about SCH or courses "that are mine to teach." Allowed to take a global perspective on what is needed in education, these people have tended to note the educational role that speaking and listening ought to play. It is important to be aware of both a tone that is willing to include communication skills beyond the study of grammar, Silas Marner, and MacBeth, and the specific skills recommended. Also, one should be well aware that the perspectives of any of the professional education groups has not been entirely mentioned in any of the specifics. Rather, it is the philosophy of leaders willing to say that speaking and listening ought to be included that we as communication educators need to parade at the first instance and then discuss the specifics. By reading carefully the qualifiers that come with these reports, one can also learn that no expectation exists that any district will implement the report exactly as written. Some reports have specifically kept a type of planned ambiguity in the reports in order to let the individual school district develop its own plans and

from that teachers will and are expected to develop their own plans.

A NATION AT RISK - The National Commission on Excellence in Education

In April 1983 we learned as a nation that "if an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." This distinguished group recommended that state and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened so that "all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics," which included four years of English. As part of the implementing recommendations, the National Commission recommended for English:

The teaching of English in high school should equip graduates to (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use that they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today's life and culture. (p. 25)

Of these four recommended divisions, oral communication skills of listening and discussing are clearly one-fourth of the goals. One could easily conclude that the Commission does not mean that coverage means a week on listening and two weeks on discussion out of the current 144 weeks of instruction (and one must remember that this group argued for an extended school year). Thus, it is safe to reason that at least a semester-long course or the equivalent in time is at the heart of this recommendation. One does not learn to

"listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently" without systematic instruction and practice.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION ISSUES

This report in the pamphlet "To Strengthen Quality in Higher Education," urged colleges and universities to work with state high school officials to establish at least a four-year equivalent in English for the high school degree. As to competencies the commission concluded:

that no student should be admitted to full participation in any baccalaureate degree program who has not demonstrated fundamental competencies in reading, writing, speaking, mathematical techniques, and reasoning.

While listening is not mentioned directly in this report, the significance of acknowledging the demonstration of a fundamental competency in speaking requires instruction and testing by performance. Such a course would be a natural place to teach listening.

It is interesting to explore the assumption in this statement that to do college work, one must have demonstrated an oral communication skill. Such a belief allows college instructors the opportunity to use oral activities in their classrooms. Since reasoning would be demonstrated in the speaking and writing implied in this statement, a strong, logical foundation to the high school speech course is brought forth by this statement.

ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE - The College Board

Since several hundred educational leaders were involved in the development of this report under "Project Equality," the large role that speaking and listening have in this guidebook to high schools is significant. Two important parts to this report are the Basic Academic Competencies which include speaking and listening as a single competency and the Basic Academic Subjects, which include speaking and listening as part of English instruction as a basic subject. The emphasis is clear--"Knowledge of what is expected is crucial to effective learning." This statement does not say it would be nice to have speaking and listening in the curriculum, but rather it is a fundamental part of the curricula.

Speaking and Listening as one of the six basic academic competencies has five key parts. They are:

- # "The ability to engage critically and constructively in the exchange of ideas, particularly during class discussions and conferences with instructors.
- # "The ability to answer and ask questions coherently and concisely, and to follow spoken instructions.
- # "The ability to identify and comprehend the main and subordinate ideas in lectures and discussions, and to report accurately what others have said.
- # "The ability to conceive and develop ideas about a topic for the purpose of speaking to a group; to choose and organize related ideas; to present them clearly in Standard English; and to evaluate similar presentations by others.
- # "The ability to vary one's use of spoken language to suit different situations."

One cannot help students achieve these five skills without training in listening. Some students reach such abilities without systematic instruction, but that is like saying many great writers did not have writing courses. But in analyzing these fundamentals one can see how systematic instruction in listening can help students master these abilities with a greater success rate and with greater speed.

In outlining the basic Academic Subjects, the College Board set goals in English for (1) reading and literature, (2) writing, (3) speaking and listening, and (4) language. Again, one can see a primary role for oral communication skills in this report. The six goals for this important one-fourth of the English curriculum are:

- # "The ability to engage in discussion as both speaker and listener--interpreting, analyzing, and summarizing.
- # "The ability to contribute to classroom discussions in a way that is readily understood by listeners--that is, succinct and to the point.
- # "The ability to present an opinion persuasively.
- # "The ability to recognize the intention of a speaker and to be aware of the techniques a speaker is using to affect an audience.
- # "The ability to recognize and take notes on important points in lectures and discussions.
- # "The ability to question inconsistency in logic and to separate fact from opinion."

Critical listening plays a major part in this development. One can look at this set of goals and smugly say that neither section treats listening in the comprehensive way that most communication teachers view listening. To do so is to miss the key part of the College Board project. The College Board

has given legitimacy to the instruction of listening with such force as to say that without such instruction in the high school, schools are preventing students from adequate preparation for college.

THE GORDON CAWELTI MODEL FOR HIGH SCHOOL GENERAL EDUCATION -
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

As Executive Director of the largest curriculum organization in American Education, Gordon Cawelti recommends curriculum experts give attention to speaking and listening. In the five-part model, the central fulcrum for the curriculum is the "Learning-Communicating-Thinking Skills." These skills are "Mathematics, Composition, Speaking, Listening, Reading, Reasoning, Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Computer Literacy, and Locational Skills." Any curriculum person that tries to locate these fundamentals in the curriculum cannot ignore the important role that speaking and listening have in this mode. His other four areas are: cultural studies, citizenship, science-technology, and health-recreation-leisure.

ACTION FOR EXCELLENCE - Task Force on Education for Economic Growth

This report was produced by a wide range of leaders: governors, legislators, corporate chief executives, state and local school board members, educators, leaders of labor, the scientific community, and others. When you have a group headed by the Governor of North Carolina in cooperation with the Governor of Delaware and the Chairman of IBM's Executive

Committee, you have a powerful group of people stating the speaking and listening competencies must be a part of the "deep and lasting change" in American Schools.

The speaking and listening competencies which they recommend for the schools are:

- # "The ability to engage critically and constructively in the exchange of ideas.
- # "The ability to answer and ask questions coherently and concisely, and to follow spoken instruction.
- # "The ability to identify and comprehend the main and subordinate ideas in discussions, and to report accurately what others have said.
- # "The ability to conceive and develop ideas about a topic for the purpose of speaking to a group to choose and organize related ideas; to present them clearly in standard English."

HIGH SCHOOL: REPORT ON SECONDARY EDUCATION IN AMERICA,
by Ernest L. Boyer - Carnegie Foundation for the
Advancement of Teaching

Boyer's book does more for speech communication than any of the other reports in that he defines the central goal of education to be language mastery. Thus, he writes, "We recommend that high schools give priority to oral communication, requiring all students to complete a course in speaking and listening." He draws on both historical precedents for the instruction on observing how the first public high school required Declamation and also had an advanced course in Forensic Discussions. Since language defines our humanity, Boyer writes that "the advent of the information age raises to new levels of urgency the need for

all students to be effective in their use of the written and the spoken word."

Boyer develops a key perspective for this instruction since he argues, "speaking and listening should be something more than the mere exchange of information. Communication, at its best, should lead to genuine understanding." (p. 93) This stress on speaking and listening is developed further in his description of what should be covered in that required course.

The one-semester speech course we propose would include groups discussion, formal debate, public speaking, and reading literature aloud. Again, the goal is not just effective self-expression; it also is reflective thinking. Students' oral comments must also be accompanied by careful analysis and critique by teachers.

Listening should be included, too. Today's young people are bombarded by messages. They should be taught to evaluate what they hear, to understand how ideas can be clarified or distorted, and to explore how the accuracy and reliability of an oral message can be tested.

The Paideia Proposal - Mortimer Adler for the Paideia Group

In 1982 this work led the way in giving speaking and listening a major role in the curriculum. Adler wrote that the intellectual skills includes "the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, measure, estimating, and calculating." Mastery of these skills, in Adler's system, occupies one of the three major goals of education. For Adler, all classes should be able to use discussion, which would draw upon "the student's skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and uses them to sharpen

the ability to think clearly, critically, and reflectively."

(p. 30)

Adler believed that all teachers needed to be involved in the instruction of the intellectual skills since speaking and listening are taught "by helping the learner to do, to go through the right motions, and to organize a sequence of acts in a correct fashion." (p. 27) Faulty performance is corrected and the performance is repeated again and again; the teacher insists on repetition of the performance until a measure of perfection is achieved.

Adler, clearly, argues for systematic instruction in listening and speaking. Since he urges discussions in most teaching situations and a coaching atmosphere in the classroom, one can see that actual oral performance is central to Adler's frame-of-reference.

SCA'S COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

In 1978 Bassett, Whittington, and Staton-Spicer wrote for SCA "The Basics in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates: What Should Be Assessed?" The proposed competencies became the SCA's 19 competencies in four basic areas: I. Communication Codes, II. Oral Message Evaluation, III. Basic Speech Communication Skills, and IV. Human Relations. This same structure became the basis for the development by Rebecca B. Rubin of the Communication Competency Assessment Instrument. Rubin's research into the validity and reliability of the test created further support for this system.

In August 1984 SCA will release a set of communication competencies for the elementary student. These competencies follow the same format as the secondary guidelines with four general areas and 17 skills. The "Essential Speaking and Listening Skills for Elementary School Students (6th Grade Level)" incorporates these four areas: 1. Verbal and Nonverbal Communication Skills, 2. Functional Skills, 3. Interaction and Message Strategy Skills, and 4. Receptive and Evaluative Skills. These reflect four key concepts:

- # "The child employs spoken language and nonverbal behavior in order to communicate meaning.
- # "The child communicates for a purpose.
- # "The child interacts with others in situations ranging from informal one-to-one conversations to formal large-group settings.
- # "The child analyzes, responds to, and evaluates spoken messages."

These concepts translate into skills which are illustrated in the three areas of home, school, and the community.

Like the national reports, it is important to note the tone/philosophy of these statements as the overriding power of the statements and the specifics as guidelines and directions for the skills. While the language of the SCA competencies and the national reports varies in its terminology, the most significant aspect is the consensus that speaking and listening are part of a process. The power to teach them both exists in all of these statements. Reading and writing--the other part of the New Basics--do not share that luxury. Just as this conference on listening

requires someone to be speaking, my listening to you and others allows the speaking process to occur.

Now that we realize that something is wrong, let us work as teachers, researchers, and practitioners to further the cause of oral communication instruction in our schools.

NOTE - "Essentials of English"