

Assessing Oral Communication in GE (Guzley, Avanzino, Johns)

Background Information

With Executive Order #595 dated November 1992 oral communication became a requirement in the CSU General Education – Breadth Requirements. At CSU Chico, Oral communications is part of the GE Core, Area A-1 (See EM 99-05.) Students may fulfill the oral communication requirement with one of two courses: CMST131 Speech Communication Fundamentals or CMST132 Small Group Communication. Both courses are housed in the Department of Communication Arts & Sciences, Communication Studies Program. The framework for instruction differs in the two classes. In the CMST131 class a professor provides one lecture per week in a large class setting. This professor is also the coordinator/supervisor for the graduate teaching assistants who conduct the balance of weekly class meetings for CMST131 in sections of approximately 25 students. Each teaching assistant is responsible for teaching from one to three sections of the class. In contrast, CMST132 is taught predominantly by experienced part-time faculty although a few sections are taught by full-time tenured or tenure/track faculty. There is a coordinator of the small group classes to ensure uniformity of instruction. In both CMST131 and CMST132 the syllabi are consistent overall as is the curriculum across sections, though there is some variation in class activities.

In addition to fulfilling Oral Communications requirements in Area A-1, EM 99-05 specifies that “[i]n every course, relevant skills of the Core must be applied as essential to the process of mastering content and making applications.” This objective is further reinforced in the capstone requirement, which dictates that “[t]hemes will incorporate, build upon, and nurture skills from Area A...” As with Quantitative Reasoning, it appears that there has never been a serious attempt to ensure that Oral Communications skills are included in all GE courses, nor assess the effectiveness of these efforts. As part of the assessment process, detailed below, all instructors of GE courses in Spring 06 were contacted to elicit how Oral Communications skills were being “nurtured” in their courses. The response was disappointing and it quickly became evident that the mandate of EM 99-05 to incorporate oral communications across the GE curriculum was being honored in the breach, if at all. As with Quantitative Reasoning, a campus-wide discussion of the role of Oral communications in GE is definitely warranted.

Assessment Process

Initial stages. There were five tasks addressed by the task force fall 2005 in preparation for the actual assessment of oral communication in GE courses spring 2006:

- Review and revision of GE oral communication requirements
- Identification of spring 2006 GE courses containing an oral communication assignment
- Instructor agreement to participate in the GE oral communication assessment
- Development of oral communication rubric to assess three SLOs
- Review of rubric by participating GE instructors and Area A-1 class coordinators (CMST131 and CMST132)

There is no institutional memory of oral communication being systematically assessed at the GE level since it became a requirement in the GE curriculum. Thus, the GE Oral Communication Task Force began its task fall 2005 by reviewing EM 99-05, the most recent version of General Education requirements at CSU Chico, with particular attention to the oral communication (Sub-

Area A1) goals. The task force members found the four goals for oral communication requirements in EM 99-05 both vague and confusing in places. They revised the goals to more accurately reflect student learning goals, and also constructed student learning outcomes (SLOs) for each goal. (For a comparison of the GE oral communication goals appearing in EM 99-05 with the revised goals and newly developed SLOs, see Appendix B.) One goal and three student learning outcomes (SLOs) were selected for measurement spring 2006:

Student learning goal:

Students will demonstrate ability to effectively prepare for and deliver public presentations

SLO 1: *Students will effectively evaluate content for oral presentations*

SLO 2: *Students will effectively organize content used in oral presentations*

SLO 3: *Students will effectively deliver oral presentations*

The task force members constructed an oral communication rubric to measure these three SLOs (see appendix B). Rubrics from Mary Allen's Assessment Workshop were consulted along with rubrics from other departments on campus. The resulting oral communication rubric had three rating categories for each of the three SLOs to be assessed (organization, content, delivery). Those categories were *effective*, *adequate*, and *inadequate*. A complete description of each category appears on the rubric. The same rubric was used for the A-1 classes and the theme/upper division GE classes. (Note: The word "effective" in the student learning goal and the accompanying SLOs above is not intended to equate to the evaluation rating category of *effective*. Instead, the word "effective" is intended to signify that students are performing at or above a minimal acceptable level. That is, ratings of their oral communication performance for each SLO are expected to be either *effective* or *adequate*.)

Identification of Courses to be Assessed. Task force members concluded that both Area A-1 classes (CMST131 and CMST132) should be represented in the assessment and notified the coordinators of those classes they would be included in the assessment. To provide a measurement of oral communication skills beyond the freshman/sophomore level, task force members also agreed GE upper division and theme classes needed to be included in the assessment.

In December 2005 the task force sent an email to department chairs for all departments offering GE classes spring 2006 requesting confirmation of the names of instructors for these courses. Department chair responses yielded 20 classes (many having multiple sections). Subsequently, an email was sent to the instructors of these courses in late December 2005 and again in mid-January 2006 asking: 1) whether they had an oral communication assignment in the specified GE class they would be teaching spring 2006; and 2) whether they would be willing to include their GE class in the GE assessment. Ultimately, five instructors of GE upper division and theme courses agreed to participate in the oral communication assessment. One instructor withdrew from the assessment one week before the assessment began. The remaining courses represented a good mix of individual and group presentation assignments. A list of the participating classes appears in the section entitled "Assessment Data Collection" below.

All participating instructors/course coordinators were given the rubric for assessment of the three SLOs and asked whether the rubric was a good fit to their oral presentation assignment. All gave favorable comments about the rubric and agreed it would fit their assignment well.

Assessment Data Collection. Instructors/coordinators of each of the above courses identified the dates of oral presentations to be given toward the end of the spring semester and provided the task force members with the oral presentation assignment description. With these dates the task force members constructed a schedule for videotaping presentations and solicited assistants to videotape each class. Videotaping was conducted from April 27 through May 11, 2006. The instructors notified students in each of the effected courses of the purpose of the videotaping prior to commencement of videotaping. In addition, assistants responsible for the videotaping provided introductory remarks about the purpose of the videotaping upon request.

All videotaped presentations were transferred to DVD format and edited to remove irrelevant/extraneous comments occurring before or after each presentation. A few presentations were removed from the analysis for a variety of technical reasons (e.g., errors in videotaping). All videotapes were reviewed by one of two assessment team members to determine usability in the assessment. The final number of students assessed in each of the selected classes appears below.

Table 1: GE Oral Communication Assessment Spring 2006

GE Courses	Individual/Group Pres.	# Students Enrolled	# Students Assessed
Area A-1			
CMST131	Individual	410	70*
CMST132	Group	580	64*
Area E			
NFSC100H	Group (dyad)	14	14
CIVL495	Group	61	40*
Theme A			
RELS/MCGS324	Individual	47	22*
Theme O			
POLS/WMST324	Individual	38	20

*Students represented from multiple sections

Assessment Evaluator Selection. Fifteen faculty volunteered to be evaluators for the assessment team. While faculty were paired for evaluation sessions based primarily on their availability during June 2006, care was taken that no faculty member who was associated with a course included in the GE oral communication assessment was assigned to assess that class. For example, two evaluators were instructors of the classes being assessed and one faculty was the coordinator of one of the A-1 classes assessed. These three faculty were assigned to evaluate presentations in classes they did not instruct/coordinate.

Assessment Sessions. Evaluations of student presentations in the selected classes were completed in ten assessment sessions during June 2006. Evaluation sessions lasted approximately 6-7 hours and began with a norming session of approximately 45 minutes to an

hour conducted by a facilitator (member of the GE oral communication task force). The number of student presentations evaluated per session ranged from 15-34. In all but one session (Session #6) evaluators assessed presentations from only one course.

After viewing each presentation, evaluators discussed their ratings. In the event of differing ratings, the facilitator referred them to the rubric for clarification. Inter-rater reliabilities for the three oral communication characteristics assessed (organization, content, and delivery) appear in Table 2 below. Once all evaluation sessions were completed, the evaluations of student presentations were input into the STEPS system by one of the task force members to allow for analysis.

**Table 2: GE Oral Communication Assessment Spring 2006
Inter-rater Reliabilities (Kappa)**

Session #	Organization	Content	Delivery
1	.87	.94	.92
2	.93	.93	.84
3	.76	.79	.78
4	1.00	1.00	.83
5	.87	1.00	1.00
6	1.00	1.00	.74
	1.00	1.00	.88
7	1.00	1.00	1.00
8	.92	NR*	.92
9	.84	1.00	.92
10	.91	.71	NR*

**NR= unacceptable reliability. Results from these sessions are included in the frequency distributions below but have been excluded from comparison tests.*

Assessment Analysis

As indicated in Table 1 above, 230 student presentations were assessed by evaluators: 112 individual presentations and 118 group presentations. Demographic information about participants appears in the table below. Frequencies were calculated for the ratings of each oral communication characteristic. Table 4 below displays those frequencies in three categories: 1) overall for presentations assessed across all courses in the assessment; 2) for presentations in the A-1 courses included in the assessment (CMST131 and CMST132); and 3) for presentations in all other GE classes included in the assessment.

**Table 3: GE Oral Communication Assessment Spring 2006
Demographic Information**

Class Status		Transfer Status	
Freshman	53	First Time	180
Sophomore	30	Returning	1
Junior	69	Returning Transfer	2
Senior	78	Transfer	47
Total	230	Total	230

**Table 4: Frequencies for Evaluator Ratings
Three Oral Communication Assessment Characteristics**

Characteristics	Overall	A-1 Classes	Other GE Courses
Organization			
<i>Effective</i>	200 (43%)	156 (58%)	44 (23%)
<i>Adequate</i>	193 (42%)	94 (35%)	99 (52%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	67 (15%)	18 (7%)	49 (25%)
Total	460	268	192
Content			
<i>Effective</i>	129 (28%)	94 (35%)	35 (18%)
<i>Adequate</i>	274 (60%)	140 (52%)	134 (70%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	57 (12%)	34 (13%)	23 (12%)
Total	460	268	192
Delivery			
<i>Effective</i>	135 (29%)	95 (35%)	40 (21%)
<i>Adequate</i>	255 (56%)	149 (56%)	106 (55%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	70 (15%)	24 (9%)	46 (24%)
Total	460	268	192

As indicated in the table above, at the overall level, the frequencies indicate that a small number of presentations (12%-15%) fell into the *unacceptable* category for organization, content or delivery. The same was true when frequencies were calculated for the A-1 classes alone, with only 7%-13% evaluated as *unacceptable*. Approximately the same percentage of student presentations were evaluated as *unacceptable* in content for the A-1 classes (13%) and other GE classes (12%), however, this was the extent of similarities in evaluations between the A-1 classes and the other GE classes.

We would hope to see a positive shift in the frequencies for these courses across all oral communication characteristics assessed; that is, a higher level performance in the upper division and theme GE classes than in the A-1 classes. As indicated in Table 5, however, the percentage of presentations assessed as *effective* in all three assessment characteristics is noticeably less for the other GE classes assessed than for the A-1 courses. In addition, the percentage of presentations assessed as *inadequate* in the other GE courses is approximately triple the percentage in the A-1 classes for the assessment characteristics of organization and delivery.

In summary, overall in both the A-1 classes and the other GE courses assessed most presentation evaluations indicate students have at least an *adequate* oral communication skill level in the three characteristics assessed (organization, content, and delivery). Unfortunately, however, the evaluations also reflected there was little, if any, improvement in student oral communication skills from the time students took one of the two A-1 classes to the time they reached upper division/theme GE classes (predominantly juniors and seniors), and in some ways their skills appear to have decayed. To confirm whether the differences in evaluation ratings discussed above were statistically significant, the Mann-Whitney two-group comparison test was run (see Table 5 below). Across all three oral communication characteristics evaluated, there was a significant difference between the ratings for the A-1 classes and the other theme/upper division GE classes included in the assessment.

**Table 5: Nonparametric Comparison
A-1 Classes and Four Theme/Upper Division GE**

	Organization Score	Content Score^a	Delivery Score^a
Mann-Whitney U	15236.000	17404.000	15785.000
Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.005	.000

^aUnreliable rating sessions identified above excluded from comparison

Given that the two A-1 classes approach oral communication in different venues (individual versus group presentations), we computed frequencies for the evaluator ratings across the three oral communication characteristics for CMST131 and CMST132 to compare evaluator ratings.

**Table 6: Frequencies for Evaluator Ratings for CMST131 & CMST132
Three Oral Communication Assessment Characteristics**

Characteristics	CMST131	CMST132
Organization		
<i>Effective</i>	65 (46%)	91 (71%)
<i>Adequate</i>	61 (44%)	33 (26%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	14 (10%)	4 (3%)
Total	140	128
Content		
<i>Effective</i>	34 (24%)	60 (47%)
<i>Adequate</i>	76 (54%)	64 (50%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	30 (22%)	4 (3%)
Total	140	128
Delivery		
<i>Effective</i>	44 (31%)	51 (40%)
<i>Adequate</i>	78 (56%)	71 (55%)
<i>Unacceptable</i>	18 (13%)	6 (5%)
Total	140	128

The Mann-Whitney two-group comparison test was used to determine any significant differences between the two courses on the three oral communication characteristics assessed. There were

significant differences in the evaluator ratings between the two A-1 classes across all three oral communication characteristics rated (see Table 7 below).

**Table 7: Nonparametric Comparison
CMST131 and CMST132 Evaluations**

	Organization Score	Content Score	Delivery Score
Mann-Whitney U	6641.000	6128.000	7801.000
Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.039

Conclusions

- This oral communication assessment provides us with the first view of our effectiveness in meeting our student learning goal and three related SLOs.
- For the sample of students included in this assessment of oral communication, we currently appear to be successful in meeting our goal and three SLOs. The majority of presentations evaluated achieved ratings of *adequate* or *effective* across the three assessment categories.
- The A-1 classes (CMST131 and CMST132)—which serve predominantly freshmen and sophomores—appear to be doing a good job of addressing the three SLOs evaluated in this assessment, with 87% -93% (depending on the assessment characteristic) performing at or above minimal acceptable standards.
- The CMST132 class had significantly more evaluations in the *effective* category and fewer in the *inadequate* category than did the CMST131 class indicating an examination of how each of these two classes address the three SLOs is needed to bring evaluations in future assessment into closer alignment.
- It is disheartening to see in this assessment that students at the junior/senior level are performing no better (and in some cases worse) than their counterparts in the A-1 oral communication classes, particularly given the importance of oral communication skills in their future careers, community, and family life. These findings indicate we need to know more about the extent to which oral communication is stressed in GE upper division/theme classes as well as in the various majors on campus.

Future Steps

- Work to refine the oral communication rubric for the student learning goal addressed in this assessment. It worked well for this assessment but a few comments from evaluators indicated additional clarification and extension of some rating categories would be useful.
- Work with coordinators of the CMST131 and CMST132 classes to ensure that clarified GE oral communication goals and associated SLOs are being addressed consistently and similarly in the two courses with the intent to raise the CMST131 evaluation level to that of CMST132. Integrate use of rubric developed by GE Oral Communication Task Force

into these courses. Use DVDs of presentations collected for this assessment as training tools for instructors in both courses.

- Explore with department chairs in departments where GE upper division and theme classes are housed the extent to which oral communication is a requirement in these GE classes, as well as the extent to which such requirements are consistent with the clarified GE oral communication goals and associated SLOs. Strive to identify a core of oral communication skills students build across GE and major classes while acknowledging variation beyond this core is inevitable and acceptable.
- Work with chairs, administrative bodies and other appropriate constituencies to develop a plan for how oral communication should be addressed in GE theme/upper division classes. Minimally, plan should include such things as which GE classes will address oral communication requirements, in what types of assignment (e.g. individual versus group presentations) it will be addressed, and use of rubric in assessing the assignment.
- Access from AURA and department/program chairs the number of majors on campus that have an oral communication student learning goal/outcome. Explore the consistency of those goals/outcomes with the GE oral communication goal/outcomes. Examine results of oral communication SLOs assessed spring 2006 to determine if comparisons can be made to GE Oral Communication Assessment results.
- Schedule a follow-up oral communication assessment in 2-3 years to examine the extent to which recommendations have been implemented and successful.
- Meet with GE Oral Communication Task Force members and others involved on the assessment team to debrief the assessment; specifically, develop a record of procedures that worked well in the spring 2006 oral communication assessment as well as those that need to be improved, and to identify how they might be improved.