Application essays as an effective tool for assessing instruction in the basic Communication course: A follow-up study

Joseph P. Mazer[1], Cheri J. Simonds[2], and Stephen K. Hunt[3]

Abstract: The assessment of student learning in general education courses is of critical importance in higher education. This study examines the utility of a writing assignment (application essays) in a basic communication course as an effective assessment tool. The authors conducted a content analysis of student portfolios to determine the extent to which application essays provide evidence of student learning in the basic course. The present study extends the findings from recent assessment efforts (Jones, Simonds, & Hunt, 2005) to explore types of mass media events students address in application essays and assess the revisions made to the assignment based on findings from Jones et al. (2005). Results reveal (a) the various communication events that students write about in application essays, (b) the communication concepts that students address, (c) that students typically, but not always, make appropriate connections when they write application essays, and (d) after revising the assignment based upon data from recent assessment efforts, more students made appropriate connections between the communication event and concept. Implications for classroom pedagogy and course management are discussed.

Keywords: assessment, application essays, basic communication course

Accurate assessment of students' comprehension of course concepts is an essential component of the instructional process. Over the years, educators and scholars from a variety of disciplines have introduced and implemented diverse assessment methods in an attempt to produce a reliable procedure to assess instruction and student learning (Fallon, Hammons, Brown, & Wann, 1997; Sforzo, 2005; Sircar, Fetzer, Patterson, & McKee, 2009; Stefanou, Hood, & Stefanou, 2001). Recently, portfolio assessment has been used and evaluated through a wide range of disciplines including language arts (Black, Daiker, Sommers, & Stygall, 1994; Crouse, 1994; Gill, 1993; Reyes, 1991; Voth & Moore, 1997), math and sciences (Barrow, 1994; Chapman, 1996; Slater, 1995), and education (Farris & Fuller, 1996; Gipe & Richards, 1992; Patzer & Pettegrew, 1996; Vizyad, 1994).

The need to accurately assess classroom instruction and student learning was required of us as basic communication course administrators of a large (about 1,500 students a semester) multi-section, general education course focused mainly on public speaking skills. As part of our initial efforts in this arena, we examined whether or not the use of student portfolios in our basic communication course was an effective, authentic tool for assessment and concluded that student portfolios are an effective mechanism for gathering data with respect to student accomplishment of course goals and student learning (Hunt, Simonds, & Hinchliffe, 2000).

Emerging from this initial research, as a component worthy of further examination, is the application essay assignment. Application essays require students to apply theoretical concepts

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[1] Department of Communication Studies, Clemson University, 407 Strode Tower, Clemson, SC, jmazer@clemson.edu
[2] School of Communication, Illinois State University, Campus Box 4480, Normal, IL 61790, cjsimon@ilstu.edu
[3] School of Communication, Illinois State University, Campus Box 4480, Normal, IL 61790, skhunt2@ilstu.edu

they learn in the basic communication course to communication events they experience in the "real world." This assignment asks students to write a one-page paper, describe a particular communication event in their life, link it to a communication concept from the course material, and analyze how the event is related to the communication concept (Hunt et al., 2000). Typically, students are instructed to complete a series (three to five) of these theoretical application essays—focusing on a variety of course concepts—over the course of a semester.

Arguments have been advanced which support the use of application essay assignments as an effective tool for assessing instruction in the basic course. First, the application essays from our course have been used previously to assess critical thinking. Hunt et al. (2000) found that the application essay promotes student classroom participation by helping them apply concepts learned in the classroom to their own personal experiences. Hunt et al. (2000) conclude that application essays "allow teachers to assess each student's level of critical thinking by judging the description of the application essay, the link to the specified concept, and the analysis of each communication concept" (p. 93). It is reasonable to assume that if the application essay can be used to assess student critical thinking, it may also serve as an effective measure of student learning.

In a recent study (Jones, Simonds, & Hunt, 2005), we extended our initial assessment efforts (Hunt et al., 2000) to explore and solidify both the strengths and limitations of the application essay as an effective tool for assessing student learning in the basic communication course. In this recent assessment effort, we designed a coding instrument to record communication events (e.g., mass media, public speakers, one-on-one encounters), concepts (e.g., communication process, ethical communication, nonverbal communication), and appropriate or inappropriate analysis of the event and concept in 369 application essays. In our analysis of communication events, we found that the vast majority of application essays ($n = 155$, 42%) analyzed communication in the mass media. This was followed by one-on-one encounters ($n = 61$, 16.5%), public speakers ($n = 34$, 10.6%), classroom examples ($n = 35$, 9.5%), and the students' own speeches ($n = 31$, 8.4%).

In order to simplify our analysis of communication concepts, we collapsed student responses into the five major units of the course: immersion, message clarity, message responsiveness, persuasion, and synthesis. This allowed us to identify points in the semester where students wrote the majority of application essays. Students wrote 123 application essays (33.3% of the total) addressing topics (e.g., communication process, critical thinking, and ethical communication) in the immersion unit—a unit in which students begin to identify critical elements present in most communication situations and begin to establish criteria for recognizing communication competence.

In the message clarity unit, students practice creating messages, develop skills in producing concise, well-formed, and listener-adapted messages, and practice skills in listening for the main points of messages to separate the content of the message from biases of the speaker. Students wrote 121 application essays (32.8% of the total) addressing topics (e.g., audience analysis, language, delivery) in this unit.

Students wrote 35 application essays (9.5% of the total) addressing topics (e.g., group communication, cultural diversity, listening, and managing conflict) in the message responsiveness unit—which emphasizes the related functions of perspective-taking, empathy, seeking and providing comfort and social support, managing conflict, and moving competently through the various group roles that facilitate the decision-making process.

The persuasion unit is designed to help students understand the persuasive process, both as speakers who wish to influence others and as listeners who wish to resist persuasive attempts when necessary. Students wrote 32 application essays (8.7% of the total) addressing topics (e.g., ethos, pathos, logos) in this unit. Students wrote two application essays (.5% of the total) addressing topics in the synthesis unit, a segment of the course that provides students with the opportunity to synthesize and reflect upon what they have learned and experienced throughout the semester.

We found that students typically, but not always, made appropriate connections between the communication event and concept in their application essays. We found that some students established no clear link in 22.8% ($n = 84$) of the application essays. More importantly, our analysis revealed that some students advanced an incorrect/inappropriate link between the communication event and course concept 6.5% ($n = 24$) of the time. Indeed, this was a troubling trend. We argued that one possible reason this trend began to develop was due to the application essay assignment instructions being unclear and inconsistent for the students throughout the semester. To rectify this apparent problem, we made significant changes to the instructions for the application essay (See Appendix A).

The students in this sample focused the bulk of their attention on the first two units of the course (immersion and message clarity). This finding was troubling for several reasons. Initially, less than 10% of the application essays dealt with the concepts presented in the message responsiveness unit. This was problematic because it is in this unit that students read about, discuss, and develop an understanding of cultural diversity, listening, and conflict management. The fact that fewer students wrote application essays on these topics did not necessarily mean that they did not develop an appreciation for these topics; however, it did suggest that many students were possibly missing a valuable opportunity to extend the learning occurring in the classroom. This pattern also held for the persuasion unit. Again, it appeared that students were not taking full advantage of the application essay as a vehicle for extending learning opportunities regarding persuasive communication. To address this issue, we revised the instructions for the application essay assignment (See Appendix A).

We argued that because so many application essays were concentrated at the start of the semester instructors might not have been doing enough to reinforce to students that they should be writing application essays. Specifically, instructors may have been focusing on the importance of the application essay assignment early in the semester and then turned their attention to other course assignments such as the group and persuasive speeches. This finding suggested a need to better train instructors in terms of having the students write application essays on all of the major units of the course. As course directors, we encouraged instructors to make specific application essay assignments during these units and explain the assignments using the instruction sheet (See Appendix A).

The present study extends our most recent assessment efforts (Jones et al., 2005) to explore the types of mass media events students address in application essays. We also assess the revised assignment instruction sheet that encourages students to complete application essay assignments throughout the course units and explain how to go about making stronger connections between course concepts and communication events. The following research questions guided our efforts in this study:

RQ$_1$:   What communication events do students write about in the application essays?
RQ$_2$:   What types of mass media do students address in the application essays?
RQ$_3$:   What communication concepts are students addressing within the application

essays?

RQ$_4$:   Are students making appropriate connections between communication events and communication concepts in the basic communication course?

I. Method.

A. Sample.

We extracted 115 application essays from a set of student portfolios. The portfolios for this data set were collected at the end of the fall semester at a large midwestern university. We extracted from the portfolios a systematic random sample of student application essays for each instructor. Students voluntarily submitted their portfolios and signed informed consent forms.

B. Category Definitions.

To answer the three research questions, we utilized the same coding instrument from Jones et al. (2005). This coding instrument was used to record communication events, concepts, and appropriate or inappropriate link analysis. We scanned each essay and generated a list of every possible category for communication events and concepts. For example, communication events included mass media (internet, magazines, movies, radio, and television), classroom examples, live entertainment, one-on-one encounters, public speakers, special events speeches, and self-analysis. Concepts included, but were not limited to audience analysis, communication apprehension, communication process, critical thinking, ethical communication, persuasion, small group processes, nonverbal communication, and visual aids.

C. Procedures.

We trained three coders who were graduate teaching assistants for the course. Each coder then independently analyzed 12 essays from the sample to assess intercoder reliability. Based on Pearson's R formula, overall reliabilities were .1. Upon completion of the coding for the entire sample, we calculated frequency counts and percentages to answer our research questions.

II. Results.

The purpose of this study was to extend our most recent assessment efforts (Jones et al., 2005) to explore the use of application essays as a formative assessment tool in the basic communication course. By using frequency distributions, we determined (a) the various types of communication situations that students in this study wrote about in their application essay assignment, (b) the concepts the students applied to these communication situations, (c) that students in this study typically, but not always, made appropriate connections when they wrote application essays, and (d) after revising the assignment based upon data from our most recent assessment efforts, more students made appropriate connections between the communication event and concept in the present study.

The first research question examined the communication situations that students wrote about in their essay assignments. Specifically, we were interested in what situations or events were commonly written about in the essay assignments (see Table 1). The vast majority of essay

assignments (n = 36, 31.3%) analyzed communication students observed in the mass media. This was followed by one-on-one encounters (n = 33, 28.7%), public speaker (n = 11, 9.6%), and the student's own speech (n = 7, 6.1%). We then extended the findings from Jones et al. (2005) by expanding on the mass media application essays (see Table 2). The second research question asked what types of mass media (n = 36, 31.3%) students addressed in the application essays. Of this 31.3%, we were interested in examining the frequency of each type of media. The vast majority of essay assignments (n = 24, 20.9%) analyzed a television show, followed by movies (n = 10, 8.7%) and magazines (n = 1, .9%).

Table 1. Application essay communication events.

	Frequency	Percent
Classroom Examples	6	5.2
Live Entertainment	4	3.5
Mass Media	36	31.3
Not Applicable	1	.9
One-On-One	33	28.7
Public Speaker	11	9.6
Small Group	6	5.2
Student's Own Speech	7	6.1
Other	11	9.6
Total	115	100.0

Table 2. Type of media used in application essays.

	Frequency	Percent
Not Present	79	68.7
Internet	1	.9
Magazine	1	.9
Movies	10	8.7
Television	24	20.9
Total	115	100.0

Research question three addressed the communication concepts students wrote about in their application essay assignments. We identified 29 different concepts students utilized throughout the course of the semester (see Table 3) and alphabetized the list to simplify the process for the coders. Analysis revealed that students tended to write more application essays in certain units in the course, $\chi^2(3)$ = 27.27, p < .05. Students wrote 48 application essays (41.7% of the total) in the immersion unit on topics such as the communication process (n = 10, 8.7%), perception (n = 9, 7.8%), and critical thinking (n = 7, 6.1%); 16 application essays (13.9% of the total) in the message clarity unit on delivery (n = 6, 5.2%) and visual aids (n = 4, 3.5%); 30 application essays (26.1% of the total) in the message responsiveness unit on topics such as small group roles (n = 10, 8.7%) and stereotypes (n = 6, 5.2%); and 20 application essays (17.4% of the total) in the persuasion unit on audience centeredness (n = 8, 7.0%), pathos (n = 4, 3.5%), ethos (n = 3, 2.6%), and logos (n = 2, 1.7%).

Table 3. Concepts used in application essays.

	Frequency	Percent
Immersion Unit		
Communication Process	10	8.7
Perception	9	7.8
Critical Thinking	7	6.1
Ethical Communication	6	5.2
Credibility	4	3.5
Communication Apprehension	3	2.6
Frame of Reference	2	1.7
Self-Concept	2	1.7
Self-Image	2	1.7
Nonverbal Communication	1	.9
Plagiarism	1	.9
Self-Esteem	1	.9
Subtotal	48	41.7
Message Clarity Unit		
Delivery	6	5.2
Visual Aids	4	3.5
Evidence	2	1.7
Language	2	1.7
Problem-Solution Order	1	.9
Main Points	1	.9
Subtotal	16	13.9
Message Responsiveness Unit		
Small Group Roles	10	8.7
Small Group (general)	7	6.1
Stereotypes	6	5.2
Listening	4	3.5
Cultural Diversity	3	2.6
Subtotal	30	26.1
Persuasion Unit		
Audience Centeredness	8	7.0
Pathos	4	3.5
Ethos	3	2.6
Monroe's Motivated Sequence	2	1.7
Logos	2	1.7
Persuasion	1	.9
Subtotal	20	17.4
Other	1	.9
Total	115	100.0

The final research question examined whether students were making appropriate links in their application essay assignments. Coders were asked to make these determinations given their knowledge of the course terms. We determined that any essay with a score over 80% did an adequate job linking the event to the concept. In our course, an 80% is a B grade (above average). We found that 63% ($n = 72$) of the participants in the present study made a direct link between the communication events and communication concepts. Strong and direct links are illustrated in the following application essay excerpts (see italics for language coded as a direct link):

Example 1:

We decided to play a game that Jason's little brother had gotten for Christmas: *Think Blot*. To summarize, the game incorporates inkblots that you would see if you went to see a psychologist. Each player has a minute to examine a picture and write down every possible person, activity, place, or item that they can see in the inkblot shown. After a minute, each player shares something he or she was able to see in the picture; if another person saw the same thing, each receives a point. If only one player sees an object, he or she has to get the other players to see it, and then he or she receives two points.

We all played the same game, the four of us using our imaginations to see as many different objects as possible in the same picture. This game relates to our discussion in class on Friday, January 25, concerning perception, and more specifically subjective perception. As stated in the text, "perception is the process of becoming aware of objects and events from the senses" (Lucas, 2004, p. AA-6). To add, perception is subjective because we interpret what we sense and make it our own; in turn, adding and subtracting what we see, hear, smell, and touch. More specifically, subjective perception is giving our own, uniquely constructed meaning to stimuli. *My experience playing Think Blot is an example of subjective perception, because we were each viewing the same picture, yet had our own interpretations of it. We did not just see a generic interpretation of the inkblot and say that we saw a spot on a page, but rather we also tied in the elements of closure and figure and ground to see figures. This could also make Think Blot interpretative stimuli, because it uses a blend of internal states and external stimuli to interpret the inkblot. The differences in our perceptions also deal with our backgrounds, experiences, and also our states of mind. For example, while we were playing, I kept seeing food (i.e. an apple), which could have been because I was hungry at the time. Also, I was the only girl playing, so the males would see more masculine objects such as guns and knives, and I would see them as a golf club or candlestick.*

Example 2:

In the middle of watching *Boston Public*, one of my favorite television shows, a commercial for The Gap came on the screen. Sarah Jessica Parker, an actress famous for her role in the television show *Sex and the City*, appeared in the commercial. She was dressed very nicely in khaki capris, pink tee shirt, and matching shoes. Her hair was curled, and when she smiled her teeth literally sparkled. In this commercial Sarah Jessica Parker was singing a new interpretation of the Broadway song "Enjoy Being a Girl."

While she was singing, Sarah was running up and down the aisles of The Gap store, picking up every item she could and dropping it into her cart. In an instant, many other girls joined her in the store, and started singing and shopping as well. The commercial finally ended with Sarah saying that every girl should shop at Gap.

This commercial frightened me because it was so corny. After watching the advertisement, I noticed that the commercial had many different fallacies in it. The first fallacy I noticed was the bandwagon fallacy. The bandwagon fallacy "invites you to join the group and do something because everyone is doing it" (Lucas, 2004, p. FF-84). *The Gap used this fallacy by including many different girls at the end of the advertisement. By adding in so many girls at the end of the commercial, a teenage girl watching the advertisement may be compelled to drive to The Gap and buy some clothes. She would feel the need to do that because all the cool girls on the commercial were doing the same thing.* In addition, I also noticed this commercial had the appeal to authority fallacy. The appeal to authority fallacy "occurs when a person offers information that is outside his or her area of expertise" (Lucas, 2004, p. FF-85). *The Gap commercial used this fallacy by having Sarah Jessica Parker tell every girl to shop at Gap. Sarah Jessica Parker is an actress, not a fashion consultant, so it is ridiculous that she is telling other people what clothes to buy.*

Application essay assignments with a score less than 80% and all essays without scores were analyzed as to why an appropriate link was not made. That data indicates that students in this study typically, but not always, made appropriate connections between the communication situation and the course concept (see Table 4). We found that of the 49 students who scored 79% or lower, some students (*n* = 24, 21%) established no clear link between the communication situation and concept (see Table 5). This finding highlights an important improvement from the Jones et al. (2005) study, which revealed that 25% failed to link the communication event to the course concept. A weak link is illustrated in the following application essay excerpt (see italics for language coded as a weak link):

This past weekend I went home for my sister's sixteenth birthday party. At the party, my three year old cousin, Sam, was just discovering that people have last names. He went from person to person asking, "What is your last name?" Then he would stand there and repeat it and say, "neat." Finally my grandma asked Sam what his last name was. He said, "My name is Samuel Boeckman-get-over-here-right-now!" Everyone thought this was hilarious, but Sam was confused. After all, your "last" name was the one someone said last when they addressed you, right?

Actually, this is not true, but to three year old Sam, this was what he understood the term "last name" to mean. Last Tuesday, September 29th, we had a class discussion about the meaning of words and discussed how meanings were in the minds of people. Sam's confusion is a perfect example of what we discussed. *In class, we talked about how words have different meanings for different people. Since Sam is only three, the word "last" to him means something different than it would to an older person. Based on Sam's experience as a little boy, the term "last" has different meaning.*

Table 4. Application essay scores.

	Frequency	Percent
60	3	2.6
65	2	1.7
68	1	.9
70	7	6.1
73	2	1.7
75	4	3.5
78	1	.9
80	13	11.3
83	1	.9
85	6	5.2
88	2	1.7
90	16	13.9
93	1	.9
95	6	5.2
98	2	1.7
100	25	21.7
No score	29	20.0
Total	115	100.0

Table 5. Reasons for poor application of concepts in application essays.

	Frequency	Percent
accurate link	9	18.4
poor link	24	49.0
format/grammar	5	10.2
citation/reference page	6	12.2
instructor preference	1	2.0
missing definition of term	4	8.2
Total	49	100.0

Additional low scores (i.e., scores less than 80%) reflected other problems such as: an accurate link but no score to determine this ($n = 9$, 18.4%), incorrect citations/references ($n = 6$, 12.2%), formatting/grammar errors ($n = 5$, 10.2%), inaccurately defining the communication concept ($n = 4$, 8.2%), and issues related to instructor preference ($n = 1$, 2%).

III. Discussion.

Since our initial investigation of student portfolios in the basic communication course (Hunt et al., 2000), we were able to analyze the effectiveness of various course assignments, including application essays (Jones et al., 2005). In the present study, we were able to determine the various communication events that students wrote about in application essays, the concepts that students addressed, and that students typically, but not always, made appropriate connections when they wrote application essays. Although students wrote about a wide range of communication events, the majority of them addressed communication in the mass media. This finding is not surprising given the pervasiveness and accessibility of the mass media. Although

this finding is not inherently problematic, it does raise a level of concern in terms of context richness. In other words, we feel that students should grow to develop an appreciation for a wide range of communication contexts. If they devote too much attention to the mass media, they may not develop a full appreciation for other contexts. On the other hand, we found that students often critically reflect on their mass media experiences. This can be interpreted in a positive light given course goals that ultimately ask students to be more critical consumers of the information they are exposed to. This suggests that instructors should consider monitoring the contexts that students write about in the basic course to ensure that they capitalize on the potential for this assignment to have students critically reflect on multiple contexts of communication.

Our recent assessment efforts (Jones et al., 2005) revealed that approximately 18.2% of the application essays focused on concepts from the message responsiveness and persuasion units. We found a notable improvement in the present study where more students wrote about communication concepts from the message responsiveness (26.1%) and persuasion (17.4%) units (see Table 3 for a detailed list). This finding suggests that our revisions to the application essay assignment—including our suggestions during instructor training—were successful in encouraging students to apply communication concepts from all units in the course to real life experiences.

One limitation of the application essay is that it can be difficult to compare students across multiple sections of a large general education course. For example, the application essays analyzed here were often worth different points and even the details of the assignment differed by instructor. However, this too is valuable assessment information for course directors and has been utilized to build a more standardized curriculum.

The findings from Jones et al. (2005) revealed a troubling trend that was occurring with the students—that is, approximately 25% of the students failed to make a direct link between communication events and course concepts. One possible reason this trend began to develop may be due to the application essay assignment instructions being unclear and inconsistent for the students throughout the semester. To rectify this apparent problem, we made significant changes to the instructions for the application essay (See Appendix A). In the present study, participants were exposed to the following revisions. First, students were provided a detailed description and model examples of an application essay for them to reference while completing their own assignments. Additionally, we trained instructors to describe the assignment in a thorough and consistent manner and to make reference to possible application essays throughout the semester. As a result of our revisions to the assignment based upon data from Jones et al. (2005), 63% ($n = 72$) of the participants made a direct link between the communication events and communication concepts. While the present study was not conducted on such a large scale as Jones et al. (2005), a majority of the 115 essays we analyzed in the present study ($n = 72$, 63%) accurately identified and linked the communication concept to the communication event. In fact, the data revealed that only 21% percent of the sample ($n = 24$), as opposed to 25% in Jones et al. (2005), did not make accurate links between communication events and communication concepts. This finding indicates that the revisions we made to the application essay assignment appear to explain the assignment more effectively for students. In addition, by revising course instructor training efforts we have rectified potential uncertainties that teachers and students may have about the application essay assignment.

Finally, instructors might consider implementing written student application essays in their general education courses. If application essays are effective assessment tools of student learning within a basic communication course that focuses primarily on public speaking, then

application essays can be adapted successfully into any type of general education course. Given that general education courses often provide students with concepts and definitions related to the specific course content area, instructors can ask students to apply those concepts and definitions to life examples through the application essay assignment. For example, the instructor of a general education psychology course might ask students to apply concepts related to different personality types to real life examples. These experiences can provide students with opportunities to synthesize and apply course content to experiences outside of the classroom.

The present study is not without limitations. We have been able to demonstrate that a majority of the students are making accurate connections between course material and the communication events they are exposed to outside of the classroom. However, our analysis of these application essays stops short of demonstrating actual student learning. It could be that students make these connections without deeply understanding the course material. Also, it may be that students have different "gestation" periods for fully realizing the applicability of the communication concepts they are exposed to in the basic course. In fact, we often have students come back to us, in some cases several semesters after taking the course, to express that they finally understand how useful the application essay assignment was in helping them see the relevance of the communication theories and principles discussed in the basic course. This suggests that we as basic course directors should employ a multi-method, multi-tool approach to the assessment of course goals and student learning. A comprehensive assessment plan should include psychometric measures as well as more authentic indicators of student performance like student portfolios. Indeed, in the present study, a smaller percentage of students (21%) failed to make strong connections between course concepts and life experiences compared to students in the prior study (25%). While this difference may appear marginal, the noted improvement in students' ability to make direct connections between course content and life experiences highlights the importance of longitudinal assessment in multi-section courses. Longitudinal data can garner information from students who—after completing the basic course—begin to more fully realize the applicability of communication concepts. By analyzing all of this data holistically, we can begin to capture a better image of student performance and better assess the short and long term implications of the application essay assignment. In many ways, the application essay assignment discussed here is just one part of the overall assessment picture.

Overall, the present study provided insights into the assessment of our course. The research indicated a need for change in several areas of course delivery as illustrated in Jones et al. (2005). Initially, the fact that so many students had difficulty making accurate links in the application essays indicated a need to clarify the assignment. As a result, we developed an assignment sheet clearly outlining the details of the assignment with model examples for students to follow (see Appendix A) as analyzed in the present study. The findings from Jones et al. (2005) indicated a need for us to reinforce the importance of the assignment to all instructors to ensure that students have the opportunity to write about course concepts in each of the major units of the course. In a similar vein, the data indicated a pressing need for us to direct the instructors to require students to write about the content delivered in the message responsiveness and persuasion units. This information has been incorporated into our training of course instructors. Our findings from the present study indicate that our revisions to course delivery were effective in helping students make direct linkages between course content and real life situations. Notably, recent advances in communication technology can provide students with a plethora of opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of course concepts. For instance,

students might link course content to their communication experiences through social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking venues.

Finally, this study was an exercise in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The data we analyzed were largely formative. In other words, we gleaned insights about what the students were learning in the course, but we also learned about areas where we could improve course instruction. Future research might further explore how the application essays are linked to student achievement and learning outcomes. Do students who make strong connections between course concepts and communication events (in the application essay) perform better on course exams? Obviously, this kind of assignment/assessment is not unique to the basic course. Teachers in other courses and disciplines can adapt both the assignment and the procedures for analyzing the data to their own unique requirements. Procedures such as those outlined in the current study are particularly relevant given the pressure educators are under to conduct assessment. Student application essays have wide applicability as a method not only to encourage student reflection, self-expression, and critical thinking, but also to assess program quality and the achievement of specific course goals.

Appendix 1. Application Essays

Description

Application essays are opportunities to show how communication directly affects your life. They may include any phenomenon outside of class that are effective examples of course concepts discussed in class and throughout <u>all units</u> of the course. Application essays might include television shows, movies, newspaper articles, comics, guest speakers, personal conversations, etc. In a brief (one page) paper, you are to describe the application essay, link it to a communication concept, and analyze how the application essay is related to the communication concept.

Format

Again, your paper should be one page long (typed and double spaced with no more than 1.25 inch margins and 12 point font). Your paper will contain two paragraphs:
      (1) the description of the application essay,
      (2) a link between the application essay and a communication concept, and an analysis of
          how the application essay is like the concept.

The first paragraph should discuss and/or describe the application essay in detail (who, what, where, when, how). As mentioned above, communication application essays can be anything from a sitcom episode to an article from a newspaper—exercise your imagination here. Basically, this first paragraph explains what happened, how it happened, and why you thought it happened. Just tell the story. Do not forget to cite where you found the application essay (if appropriate).

The second paragraph should identify ONE communication concept (reference class discussions or text material). The first sentence should link the application essay to ONE communication concept (i.e. the communication process model, ethics, listening, audience analysis, language,

delivery, small group communication, etc.); remember to cite where you found the communication concept (i.e. a particular portion of a class lecture, a concept in the textbook, etc.). Next, in the same paragraph, analyze the communication concept being discussed. This analysis should demonstrate that you have a mastery of
how the communication concept helps shape your understanding of the application essay or vise versa. Finally, illustrate why this interaction is important to your life. Provide strong support for your argument(s).

When appropriate, include the application essay with your paper.

Format
This paper is worth _____ points and is part of your total portfolio grade. The following is my criteria for evaluation: Format (_____ pts), Writing (_____ pts), Description (_____ pts), Link (_____ pts), and Analysis (_____ pts). This is a formal writing assignment and should be treated as such. Please plan what you want to write and then follow through with complete, but concise sentences. In other words, do not "think" or "talk" on paper.

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