

# The Status, Extent, and Content of Communication Courses in the North Carolina Public School System

by William Pendergraft  
Media Specialist  
Pender High School

A study of the communication courses offered in the North Carolina Public Schools was undertaken in the Spring of 1974.

The researcher hoped to learn what common features existed among the courses investigated, the department or discipline in which the course was offered and the educational status of the instructor. The tendency toward decreasing or increasing the number of communication courses taught in secondary schools in the State was also to be determined.

The study was restricted to courses offered within a public school in North Carolina by teachers with North Carolina teaching certificates employed by the same county or city in which the course was taught. The study did not include extra-school courses offered by universities or other institutions of post-secondary education. The usual "annual" and "newspaper"

courses were not considered communication courses unless they included an in-depth study of the field.

A communication course includes studies of print journalism, radio, television, film, communication history and theory and related factors. "Status" refers to the present or future existence of the communication course, the department or discipline in which it is taught and the qualification of the instructor. "Extent" refers to the grade level at which the course was taught, the numbers enrolled, the length of the course, and the credit awarded for completion. "Content" refers to the objectives of the course and the operations for fulfilling those objectives.

There was a paucity of literature available on secondary communication courses. Letters were written to many individuals throughout the country in an attempt to

gather data which would assist in the preparation of the survey instrument and in the analysis of the content of existing courses.

The most substantive program identified through the correspondence was developed by the Southwest Iowa Learning Resources Center in Red Oak, Iowa and is termed the "Media Now" program. Funded in 1970 under Title III ESEA Iowa Department of Public Instruction, the program called for the development of a new course of study for eleventh and twelfth grade students to study the mass media. The course was independently evaluated and found to achieve stated objectives. The "Media Now" package is currently being marketed.

Little information was found in journals for apparently interest exists among only a few individuals.

A questionnaire was mailed to every superintendent employed by a North Carolina city or county. The questionnaire asked if a communication course was offered in the system. If the answer was affirmative, the respondent was asked to list course title, grade level, texts used, teacher's status, length of the course, credit given, number enrolled, date when the first course was offered, and plans for the future of the course. It was also requested that a course syllabus be returned. Fifty-six percent of those to whom the survey was mailed completed the questionnaire and returned it.

Approximately 86 percent of those responding to the questionnaire indicated that they had no communication course. Of those responding negatively, 79 percent indicated that no course would be offered in the 1974-75 school year. Fifty-one percent of those responding negatively did foresee the probability that such a course would be offered sometime in the future.

Those systems having no communication courses offered a variety of reasons. Among the reasons given were the unavailability

of funds, lack of trained and competent instructors, lack of student interest, avoidance of the duplication of community college or technical institute programs, the small size of the system, and the lack of an assessment of student need. One school system of 6,000 stated that although a mini-course in communication was planned and set to begin in the 1973-74 school year, the course was cancelled due to the lack of an adequate text and sufficient equipment.

School systems which indicated that a communication course was offered included:

Buncombe County Public Schools  
(Asheville)

Burke County Public Schools  
(Morganton)

Concord City Schools (Concord)

Durham County Schools (Durham)

Haywood County Schools (Waynesville)

Hendersonville City Schools  
(Hendersonville)

Nash County Schools (Nashville)

North Wilkesboro City Schools  
(North Wilkesboro)

Person County Schools (Roxboro)

Richmond County Schools (Rockingham)

Robeson County Schools (Lumberton)

Winston-Salem City/Forsyth County  
Schools (Winston-Salem)

The twelve school systems listed comprised about 14 percent of those responding to the questionnaire.

Communication courses appeared to be offered primarily in grades eleven and twelve with the fewest number of courses offered to ninth graders. The approximate number of students enrolled in communication courses of those systems supplying

enrollment is 1,794. If the results of the survey are generalizable to North Carolina as a whole, it may be estimated that only about 3,000 students are currently enrolled in communication courses throughout the State.

Most of the courses were the mini-course variety and were offered for nine or eighteen weeks for which the student received  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  units of credit.

The courses were taught principally by teachers holding bachelor degrees in English with "A" certificates. The mini-English courses were apparently designed as a novel way of approaching the broad field of language arts rather than as preparation for a job after high school, or a college level communication program.

Those systems which offered communication courses also tended to offer related courses. The most popular of these was print journalism which in most cases results in the publication of the school newspaper.

The school systems offering courses intended to continue, for when queried as to the probability of communication courses being offered the following year, over 90 percent responded positively.

Few North Carolina students are taught the use of evaluative tools in making qualitative judgments about commercial and non-commercial media. Hands-on experience with electronic media in a formal high school class is infrequent.

The reasons for the failure of most North Carolina school systems to offer communication courses would make an interesting study, yet the constraints of personnel, materials, facilities, budget, and the lack of demand are often cited. Although formal courses in communication were surveyed, more informal programs such as film clubs, discussion groups, and activities in the school media center are not reported. Informal programs may indi-

cate that interest does exist and that more formal programs should be developed.

Several steps may be taken which would lead to an increase in communication courses.

First, an assessment instrument which could be used throughout the state could be developed to determine what students are interested in learning. What students think they need to know and what curriculum designers think students need to know should have something in common.

Secondly, as courses are organized in the state, a recommended bibliography or adopted reading list could be developed which would provide some consistency in the course of instruction, and save teachers the overwhelming task of building a course from scratch. The organization of individuals throughout the state who are interested in a secondary communication program could lead to the design of a course complete with recommended media.

A program of state certification in communication is suggested for teachers wishing to specialize in the field. Undergraduate and graduate level courses tailored for secondary teachers would allow communication certification. The skills developed by some media coordinators and specialists also seem appropriate for teachers of communication courses.

Whether an education in the field of communication is part of an English, Social Studies, vocational or other program is less important than whether or not students are given some instruction at the secondary level. Students are exposed to the mass media and are led by it to evaluate their country, their education, and themselves. They are also faced with personal communication problems during high school. However, they are seldom exposed to instruction leading either to an understanding of the intricacies of the mass media or to an understanding of individual communication.

printing  
is your most  
persistent  
representative



make certain that you are properly  
represented with fine printing from  
**Hall Printing Company, High Point, N.C.**