***Introducing Competency-Based Education to
UNC Charlotte via JOUR 2100***
**Jonathan Craig Paddock and Robin Rothberg
Communication Studies Department**

Abstract

The Communication Studies Department would like to introduce competency-based education at UNC Charlotte by transitioning a lower-level, large lecture class to an exam-only format with interactive, feature-rich, multimedia study materials that allow students to learn at their own pace through familiar tools. Face-to-face instruction would be discontinued so students could engage in the study program and take the proctored exam when they feel ready. The material of the course – JOUR 2100 teaches basic grammar – and the variation of knowledge students possess before enrolling make JOUR 2100 an ideal test for this model. Among the many objectives of this project are to use curricular innovation, active learning, and prompt feedback to improve access, efficiency, and engagement for traditional and non-traditional students, as well as students with disabilities; to increase student retention, progression, and graduation rates; and to enhance student professional development. The value of these objectives achieved through competency-based education can help both the Communication Studies Department and the university community realize efficiencies in 1000- and 2000-level coursework and how best to realize those efficiencies for faculty and students. Preliminary investigation indicates the Registrar's Office will be able to process the changed requirements, and the department would like to have the new system in place by Fall 2015.

Budget Request for SOTL Grant
Year 2014-2015

Joint Proposal?   X   Yes _____ No

Title of Project   Shifting to Competency-based Education in an Introductory Course

Duration of Project   Spring 2015, Summer 2015, Fall 2015, Spring 2015

Primary
Investigator(s)   Jonathan Craig Paddock, Robin Rothberg

Email Address(es)   jcpaddoc@uncc.edu, rrothber@uncc.edu

UNC Charlotte SOTL
Grants Previously
Received (please
names of project, PIs,
and dates)   N/A

Allocate operating budget to Department of   Communication Studies

		Year One
Account #	Award	January to June
Faculty Stipend (2)	Transferred directly from Academic Affairs to Grantee on May 15	$ 7700
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay (Faculty on UNCC payroll other than Grantee)	
915000	Student Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921150	Participant Stipends	
925000	Travel - Domestic	
926000	Travel - Foreign	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Current Services	
	GRAND TOTAL	$ -

Account #	Award	Year Two July to June
Faculty Stipend	Transferred directly from Academic Affairs to Grantee on May 15	$ -
911250	Graduate Student Salaries	
911300	Special Pay (Faculty on UNCC payroll other than Grantee)	
915000	Student Temporary Wages	
915900	Non-student Temporary Wages	
920000	Honorarium (Individual(s) not with UNCC)	
921150	Participant Stipends	
925000	Travel - Domestic	
926000	Travel - Foreign	
928000	Communication and/or Printing	
930000	Supplies	
942000	Computing Equipment	
944000	Educational Equipment	
951000	Other Current Services	
	GRAND TOTAL	$ -

Attachments:

1.   Attach/provide a narrative that explains how the funds requested will be used.

2.   Has funding for the project been requested from other sources? ___ Yes _X__ No.
       If yes, list sources.

Narrative to explain fund use: The faculty stipend will allow faculty members to focus their efforts on the significant tasks and creativity involved in the project proposed.

UNC CHARLOTTE
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Office of the Dean

9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001
t/ 704-687-0088 f/ 704-687-0089 http://clas.uncc.edu

November 3, 2014

SOTL Grants Committee
Center for Teaching & Learning
ctl@uncc.edu

Dear Committee Members:

This memo is to support the SOTL grant proposal of Jonathan Craig Paddock and Robin Rothberg of our Department of Communication Studies. These investigators seek to change a current Journalism course, JOUR 2100: Language Craft from a traditional lecture course to a self-paced, competency-based format. I am supportive of measures such as this that seek to employ technology to enhance learning and that can benefit our non-traditional student population.

I will be interested to learn of the results of their investigations comparing the outcomes of the redesigned course to the previous large lecture format and the reactions of students to this new format. It seems to me as well that the subject matter of the particular course that they have chosen to work with is well-suited to this method of delivery. This is a direction that we cannot afford to overlook as our enrollments continue to increase at a faster rate than growth in our faculty and we enroll a substantial proportion of nontraditional students. I am pleased to recommend the proposal for your consideration.

Please let me know if you require further information. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Nancy A. Gutierrez, Dean
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

October 28, 2014

SOTL Grant Selection Committee
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Dear Selection Committee:

It is my pleasure to support the SOTL grant application submitted by Mr. Craig Paddock and Ms. Robin Rothberg, faculty members in the Department of Communication Studies at UNC Charlotte. The Department of Communication Studies is one of the largest undergraduate majors at UNC Charlotte and during the beginning of fall 2014, our department was projected to serve 1,398 undergraduates, minors, and graduate students this fall term alone (UNC Charlotte, Institutional Research). As the 2013 Provost's Award for Teaching Excellence winner, our department has a well-documented history of innovative, student-centered teaching strategies and practices throughout our curriculum. This proposal seeks to aid students on a number of metrics to ease physical resources, but to also place educational ownership back with our students.

Two of our largest student population segments are our Journalism minors (n=197) and our Public Relations concentration majors (n=150). Combined, these two groups make up a significant amount of students in our overall student population. Moreover, these two areas also require the most writing-intensive projects in our major. Public Relations professionals and journalists are expected to write; write a lot and write well. We have expertly trained these students to do both with alarming success, particularly given the limited faculty resources and the high enrollment demands that our department faces each year. However, there is a tipping point, as our enrollments continue to increase, but not at the same pace as our faculty hires.

The Paddock/Rothberg proposal seeks to automate and streamline one of our foundational courses, JOUR 2100: Language Craft, from a large lecture-style, instructor-driven course to a self-paced, student-driven course. The current course is not remedial, but it teaches basic grammar and stylistic rules in a traditional classroom setting, which our faculty and I agree is not the best utilization of our limited faculty and space resources. This innovative proposal seeks to transport theoretical foundational ideas tied to competency-based learning to JOUR 2100 as a fully-automated, self-paced examination-based platform. Although there are lots of political issues associated with the term "competency-based" learning; the ideas about creating a space for alternative, student-driven learning is a long-tested

concept and aligns well with the tenets of andragogy, the philosophy of teaching strategies focused on adults.

I fully support their proposal and find that it is ambitious, yet doable. Both investigators have a proven track record of implementing impactful initiatives on campus, so I am confident in their ability to research, implement, measure, and articulate the results of this project to the larger UNC Charlotte community in a timely manner. Moreover, this proposal clearly shifts the learning ownership model from the instructor to the student, an important task in an entry-level course in our major and across the university. The impact of the successful implementation of this proposal will be long-lasting, varied and high.

I unequivocally support this proposal and endorse the investigators. I am confident that you will realize an immediate return on your valuable investment if you select this project for funding. I am happy to discuss details of my letter if you have any questions.

Best regards,

Shawn D. Long, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair,
Department of Communication Studies
Shawn.long@uncc.edu
704-687-0783

UNC CHARLOTTE

Office of Adult Students and Evening Services
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001
t/ 704.687.5104 f/ 704.687.1690

October 21, 2014

Robin Rothberg, Senior Lecturer
Communication Studies
5032 Colvard Building
UNC Charlotte
9201 University City Blvd.
Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Dear Ms. Rothberg:

As the Director of the Office of Adult Students and Evening Services, I want to express my sincere interest in and support of the Scholarship of Teaching and Leaning Grant that you and Craig Paddock are submitting to the Center for Teaching and Learning at UNC Charlotte.

As you may know, approximately 25% of the undergraduate adult student population on campus is 24 years of age and higher. Thus approval of this proposal would allow for better access for many adult, nontraditional students who need evening and/ or weekend courses. Further this would serve specific students in our 49er Finish, Adult Student Admissions Program (ASAP), and Readmit students who desire to complete their degrees by using an alternative delivery method. Often nontraditional students have full-time commitments with numerous life responsibilities that make regular course attendance challenging at best. Adult learners are highly motivated and focused on specific learning outcomes. This unique opportunity to learn at their own pace and in their own time and location would be ideal and thus promising for many nontraditional students.

Thank you for the opportunity to support your application for this grant. I wish you the best with this grant opportunity. Please contact me know if you have additional questions, or if I can assist you further. I can be reached at jddaniel@uncc.edu or on my direct line at 704-687-5108.

Sincerely yours,

Janet D. Daniel

Janet Deal Daniel, Director
Office of Adult Students and Evening Services

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An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer

UNC CHARLOTTE

October 28, 2014

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Grants
The Center for Teaching and Learning
Kennedy Building
UNC Charlotte

Dear SOTL Grant Committee:

I am writing to support the Communication Studies Department's proposal to transition the introductory course, JOUR 2100: Language Craft, from classroom-based to an online platform. Modifying the classroom format to create online, self-paced modules has the potential to allow for learners to access this material in a manner that best fits their individual abilities and needs. Without the constraints of class time, students with disabilities who move at different paces – slowly or quickly – will find the format effective. Additionally, the Communications Studies Department plans to work with the Office of Disability Services in this transition process to address access for students with visual and hearing impairments so that the new format works well with assistive technologies and needed captions are in place.

Including the Office of Disability Services in planning for this new format is in keeping with the institutional commitment of UNC Charlotte to provide a campus that is accessible for all, creating a new delivery system that will be beneficial to all learners.

Sincerely,

Gena Smith

Gena Smith, M.Ed.
Program Director, Office of Disability Services
Academic Services
UNC Charlotte

Project Narrative

The Language Craft course (JOUR 2100) was added in Fall 2009 to the public relations track and the journalism minor in the Communication Studies Department. The goal was to provide, as the course description states, "an in-depth examination of correct grammar, punctuation and writing style. The aim is to refine writing skills for journalism and public relations applications…." However, students too often discount the subject material as something they had seen before – even though the failure rate for the class runs about 9 percent in a typical academic year.[1] The large lecture format, usually 130-150 students per semester, is necessary for budgetary reasons, but isn't best for student comprehension of grammar terminology.

Purpose of the project

To correct these issues, the Communication Studies Department proposes introducing competency-based education to UNC Charlotte. Also called personalized learning, this type of instruction transitions "away from seat time, in favor of a structure that creates flexibility, allows students to progress as they demonstrate mastery of academic content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning," as explained by the U.S. Department of Education[2]. The Communication Studies Department's concept is to replace JOUR 2100 with self-paced, online modules. When students complete these modules, they would be eligible to take an in-person, computer-based exam. This exam would prove JOUR 2100 competency, allowing students to progress in their appropriate coursework. The departure from the semester-based system of instruction would make students responsible for material some find remedial and others find challenging, while allowing for easier access for non-traditional students[3] and students with disabilities[4].

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[1] The Fall 2013 failure rate was 8.87 percent; the Spring 2014 failure rate was 9.4 percent

[2] http://www.ed.gov/oii-news/competency-based-learning-or-personalized-learning

[3] Reference: letter of support from Janet Deal Daniel, Director of UNC Charlotte Office of Adult Students and Evening Services

[4] Reference: letter of support from Gena Smith, Director of UNC Charlotte Office of Disability Services

<u>Specific objectives</u>

In transitioning JOUR 2100 from the semester system to competency-based learning, the Communication Studies Department aims to:

- *Increase student retention, progression, and graduation rates.*

  An exam-only format allows students to more efficiently determine their track/minor progression. Because students could take the exam more than once per semester, they would be able to recalibrate their studying to pass the exam. In the semester system, this self-knowledge might come too late to gain course credit. Also, the cost savings of one fewer required course to progress toward graduation is likely to aid in student retention.

- *Improve access for specific groups of students or to specific programs.*

  As shown by letters of support from the Office of Adult Students and Evening Services (OASES) and the Office of Disability Services (ODS), the self-study of the exam format, as opposed to formal class meetings, could allow more students to learn the skills imparted in JOUR 2100 in an efficient, individualized manner. Because the exam would not cost a student tuition, and because the self-paced study would not require formal class meetings, the change would improve access to the public relations track major and journalism minor gateway (JOUR 2100) for all students, as well as non-traditional students and students with disabilities.

- *Enhance student professional development.*

  Since the grammar, spelling, and punctuation knowledge imparted in JOUR 2100 are important in the modern workplace[5], professional development is inherent in JOUR 2100. However, because students must be lifelong learners, taking responsibility for the self-paced study of the exam-only format enhances their professional development by mirroring online training and/or accreditation procedures in many workplaces.

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[5] Forbes.com, http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2012/07/20/why-grammar-counts-at-work/

- *Increase student engagement through curricular innovation.*

  The change from a large lecture course to self-paced, online study can increase student engagement by bringing JOUR 2100 to their laptops, desktops, and tablets. Students can prepare themselves for the culminating exam at their own pace, in their own way. Planned methods of delivery include videos and informal quizzes on Moodle. The Communication Studies Department is also investigating tools such as [StudyBlue](#) and [Amazon Storyteller](#).

- *Reach non-traditional students.*

  As detailed above, by eliminating JOUR 2100 as a required course for PR track majors and journalism minors and replacing it with an exam, all students, including non-traditional students, will benefit. However, non-traditional students may most benefit in time, by needing to commute to campus only to take the exam.

- *Encourage active learning.*

  An online course delivery full of examples through which students must deconstruct sentences to understand the grammatical underpinnings will encourage active learning through the self-paced journey through grammar.

- *Give prompt feedback.*

  Delivering the exam via Moodle in a proctored environment allows for immediate feedback to students on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their overall exam score. Moodle quizzing during the student's self-paced study would also enable immediate feedback.

- *Communicate high expectations.*

  Putting the learning of grammar concepts in the hands of students communicates high expectations – that they can achieve basic skill competency on their own.

Specific research questions to be answered

As a result of this project, the Communication Studies Department would aim to learn:

- Does competency-based education serve our students, as measured by exam pass rate after students have exhausted their opportunities to test?

- In self-reports, how do students indicate a shift in their learning processes as they prepare for the exam?

- What online learning tools (videos, mini-quizzes, etc.) do students self-report as most valuable to their comprehension and why?

Rationale

SOTL funding will allow the Communication Studies Department to overhaul JOUR 2160 to fulfill its pedagogical *mission* by allowing for a feature-rich, online study system suited to the Millennial student, as well as to non-traditional students and students with disabilities. The elimination of the large lecture course also will free up faculty and classroom resources, allowing the department to *prioritize* an improved learning environment in which students may fulfill the *objective* of conferring basic learning responsibility onto the student.

In potential implementation planning, the department has already conferred with the Registrar's Office, which informally indicated it can process the exam as a student requirement to progress in coursework once the department double-checks and/or makes appropriate changes to pre-req and catalog course descriptions. The department has piloted an opt-out exam for the current class, but, without adequate study materials easily available, student performance on the opt-out exam has been weak.

The letters of support from OASES and ODS also indicate departmental plans to ensure implementation of a standalone exam with multimedia study materials will take into account both traditional and non-traditional students, as well as those with disabilities.

<u>Impact</u>

Since JOUR 2100 often serves more than 250 students per academic year, these students all stand to benefit from self-paced study. Some will complete material more quickly, others will need more time. All will become responsible for learning without the traditional costs and rigidities of the semester system. The opportunity for feedback after each attempt at the exam, while retaining access to high-quality, self-paced study materials, will allow students to refine their learning to master material to the best of their abilities.

In terms of teaching, students can focus on weak areas and learn at their own pace. The Communication Studies Department, meanwhile, can free faculty resources for higher-level coursework.

Literature Review

While competency-based training has long been associated with vocational training (Guthrie 2009), the idea is gaining a foothold in the academic arena, particularly in areas with a more direct professional link (Kouwenhoven, 2003). A surge of interest has come in the 21st century, with the recognition that an affordable yet high-quality education is the key not only to national competitiveness but also to individual success (Johnstone and Seares, 2014).

Competency-based training, research suggests, provides the benefits the Communication Studies Department hopes to accrue from its project. Klein-Collins in a 2012 report identifies three positives:

1. Institutions become more **efficient** because they focus on how best to help students demonstrate competence – even eliminating redundant coursework or unnecessary degree requirements.

2. Institutions become more **effective** because they develop ways to validate learning occurred – rather than assuming students learned because they took a certain number of courses.

3. Institutions become **more fair** because they recognize learning students may have learned outside the classroom. Closely tied to efficiency is **flexibility**. Students can learn at their own pace and at their own times – and institutions can develop new learning systems not tied to traditional timetables (Vorhees, 2001).

Regarding self-paced learning, recent research confirms earlier studies that show students do as well as or better than students in traditional instructional methods. Self-paced learners significantly outperformed others in a 2011 study – but only those who allocated more study time to difficult items. (Tullis & Benjamin 2011). A later study concurred, finding that allowing learners to freely allocate study time produced better results (de Jonge, Mario, et al 2014). Self-paced learning has also proved more satisfying to students (Tatum & Lenel 2012), who were found to learn the same amount of material in 20 to 50 percent less time. (Kulik, Kulik, & Cohen, 1980).

Methods

The Communication Studies Department's overall project plan is to transition JOUR 2100 from a two-credit-hour course to a zero-credit-hour exam required for progression in the department's PR track major and journalism minor. The department has selected this approach, which would introduce competency-based learning to UNC Charlotte, because it believes students would be better served by self-paced study of basic material than by a large lecture course.

The self-paced study would be comprised of multimedia presentations that would lead to online quizzes. Once they pass these quizzes, students would be eligible to sit for a proctored, online exam. When they

finish the exam, students would receive immediate feedback, either qualifying them to progress in their coursework or indicating their areas for improvement in the tested material.

To accomplish this project, the department will need to complete:

- steps noted by the Registrar's Office to enable procedures to process JOUR 2100 exam credit.
- recommended changes to course description(s) through the Course & Curriculum Committee of CLAS.
- meetings with Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) representatives to work out Moodle delivery of online study materials and the in-person, proctored exam.
- meetings with the ODS to implement best practices in content delivery to students with disabilities.
- work with appropriate entities on campus to identify a site and personnel to proctor the exam on a reasonable schedule. CTL can help the department determine how to enforce attempt restrictions, as well as how to enable and later disable student access to study materials.

Timing will be a concern, as the department would like to stop offering the face-to-face, large lecture class with the Spring 2015 offering. The exam-only format would begin in Fall 2015. However, this limitation can be surmounted by scheduling meetings early in the Spring 2015 term. Also, the department already has a wealth of study materials and quiz questions JOUR 2100 course instructors have already offered for use in modifying to the exam-only format.

The department does plan to keep JOUR 2100 content substantially similar, but proposed changes include de-emphasizing meticulous grammar terms such as verb types, while bringing increased emphasis to real-world grammar requirements such as quotation punctuation and proper word use. While this may create

difficulty in evaluating learning outcomes, there should be enough similarities to allow the department to compare exam and course pass rates.

Evaluation

The Communication Studies Department will assess the success of this project by measuring objectives:

- Does competency-based education serve our students, as measured by exam pass rate after students have exhausted their opportunities to test? *The department can collect these data by accessing Moodle logs of student pass rates. This measure is appropriate because it indicates student mastery of the material via competency-based learning. The goal is a 90 percent pass rate after students have exhausted their exam attempts*

- In self-reports, how do students indicate a shift in their learning processes as they prepare for the exam? *The department can collect these data by requiring students to answer this question when the students sit for the in-person, online exam. Results can be tracked over time if students require multiple attempts to pass the exam. This measure is appropriate because students can inform the department how their learning methods changed due to this new type of learning introduced to UNC Charlotte – making results potentially useful to other academic units. A positive shift toward responsibility would be measured qualitatively.*

- What online learning tools (videos, mini-quizzes, etc.) do students self-report as most valuable to their comprehension and why? *Again, the department can collect these data by requiring students to answer this question when the students sit for the in-person, online exam. Results can be compared to student performance on exam modules and compared to study resources for those modules. This measure is appropriate because only students can help the department understand how students best learn via online delivery. The tools students report as most valuable could be expanded into other*

areas of the self-study materials, if not already present, and these results could be shared with other

academic units.

Formatively, these evaluation techniques can enable the department to examine the shift in JOUR 2100 from course to exam after an academic year – Fall 2015-Spring 2016. Summatively, whether successful or unsuccessful, our results should prove useful to the broader campus community, and hopefully beyond, to measure competency-based learning

Knowledge Dissemination

Though Communication Studies students will be the immediate beneficiaries of this project, the department expects this work to be of significant help to the campus as a whole. The grant applicants envision participating in UNCC's annual SOTL Showcase as well as leading campus workshops, furthering discussions on competency-based learning and online evaluation efforts. This project can help entities across campus and the broader academic community better understand how students learn in an online environment.

Human Subjects

If this application is granted, the Communication Studies Department will complete an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol application early in Spring 2015.

Extramural Funding

There is no plan to seek extramural funding for this project.

Timeline upon grant approval in December 2014

January-February 2015	Ensure departmental representatives formalize verbal commitments regarding exam sequence, content, delivery, opportunities, etc.
	Complete IRB protocol application.
	Meet with Registrar's Office to confirm method already discussed to grant student credit for exam-only format for JOUR 2100.
	Meet with the Course & Curriculum Committee of CLAS to determine catalog copy changes to move forward with changes.
	Meet with CTL to determine how to best deliver self-study and exam content.
	Meet with ODS to determine best practices for access for students with disabilities (screen readers, closed captioning, etc.).
	Meet with the appropriate university entity to secure exam and proctor space.
March-April 2015	Complete requirements and recommendations outlined in meetings
	Once CLAS and Registrar representatives approve changes, begin informing students of the changes to JOUR 2100.
May-June 2015	Continue building and testing self-study materials. Confer as needed with CTL

	and ODS.
July 2015	Test system – self-study materials and exam.
August 2015	Put system online and, when fall term starts, make materials available to students.
August 2015-May 2016	Refine and troubleshoot.
May 2016	Prepare and deliver formal evaluation for CTL and plans to share results.