Communication Class Size and Professional Identity

Dr. Corey Owen, University of Saskatchewan

Corey Owen received his PhD in English from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada in 2007. Since then, he has been teaching in the Ron and Jane Graham School of Professional Development in the University of Saskatchewan’s College of Engineering. His research focuses on issues of rhetoric, identity, and learning theory, as well as medieval ethics and literature.

Prof. Debora Rolfes, University of Saskatchewan

Debora Rolfes is an assistant professor in the Ron and Jane Graham School of Professional Development, College of Engineering at the University of Saskatchewan. She coordinates the required communication course as well as teaches Oral Rhetoric.
Communication Class Size and Professional Identity

Terms such as “optimizing” and “streamlining” our programs have become a standard way of describing our current institutional objectives. Of course, such goals are not new, and are characteristic of the rhetoric of austerity that has been popular among university administrations during various periods of the 20th and 21st century. At the University of Saskatchewan, which is in a province that, until only recently, has been enjoying an oil boom for the last decade, this rhetoric has resulted in an attempt to organize massive institutional restructuring in order to meet alleged financial constraints. In the College of Engineering, whose enrolment has been increasing steadily, we are faced with the need to provide quality instruction in professional communication to increasing numbers of students. We understand that our situation is not unique, and is symptomatic of the general tendency for budgets to restrict resources at the same rate that demand for our program increases. Naturally, a conventional way to accommodate increased demand is to increase class size. While such an increase has apparent financial advantages for universities, what are the effects on student learning? While much research has been done on the effects if class size, the research tends to focus on effects of larger or smaller classes on student grades or course evaluations; in this paper, we shall mainly use a theoretical perspective. After considering the evidence provided by previous studies on the effects of class size on student achievement, we shall consider the purpose of the professional communication class and the impact of class size on such a class. To this end, we adopt the perspective of social theory of learning, a body of theory that investigates the social dimension of learning. We shall then briefly consider our college’s approach to teaching professional communication, and introduce our larger research project, which aims to assess the effectiveness of our program. Finally, we shall briefly reflect on whether the small communication class is really as inefficient as some have suggested. The purpose of this study is to develop the theoretical groundwork for a larger study we are just beginning to conduct on the efficacy of our professional communication program. Using the investigative tools of narrative research and discourse analysis, we hope ultimately to determine the degree to which our program, which maintains small classes and focuses on cultivating students’ rhetorical judgment, effectively grafts professional communication onto our students’ burgeoning professional identity.

1. Previous Research on Class Size

As Johnson\(^1\) observes, there is not much agreement among researchers about what constitutes a small and a large class: the number of students that comprises a small class varies from 13\(^2\) to 65\(^3\), and large classes range from 54 students\(^4\) to 350\(^5\). While the disagreement about the number of students that comprise a large class is significant, the estimation of a small class is relatively consistent: a small class usually has no more than 30 students\(^6\), or perhaps just a few more (there are a few exceptions, however, who regard small classes as having 35-39 students\(^5,7,8\)). Both professors and students feel the effects of additional students more strongly in smaller classes than they do in larger classes. In a participation- and marking-intensive course such as our introductory communication class, which previously was limited to 20 students, our instructors noticed a shift in the classroom dynamic with the addition of only two students per section. From this perspective, a class of 39 students, which Hancock\(^8\) regards as a small class, would seriously compromise the quality of our program.

Over the last century, much research has explored the effects of class size on student learning, and the findings vary significantly. There have been two main approaches to the question of
class size: one focuses on course evaluations, and the other, and much more common, approach focuses on the effect of class size on exam and course grades. Only a few studies focus on course evaluations—for example, Feldman and Shapiro—and their results are mixed. With respect to academic performance, early studies, such as those conducted by Edmondson and Mulder suggest that the impact of large classes on grades is negligible—essays and mid-semester exams were better in smaller classes, but students in larger classes were more successful on quizzes and final exams. Nachman and Opochinsky agreed that there was little connection between academic performance and class size. More recently, Hancock concluded that class sizes had no measurable effect on student grades, and Kennedy and Siegfried argued that a large class size does not inhibit the students’ ability to learn the material. Interestingly, Zietz and Cochran, who used the same data as Siegfried from the third edition of the Test of Understanding in Human Economics (TUCE III), concluded that test results are lower in classes larger than 30 students.

While these studies generally equate student success with high grades, other studies include other possible criteria for success. Borden and Burton, for instance, also explored the likelihood of students’ enrolling in a subsequent course and performance in subsequent course, and found that large classes have a negative effect on both counts, with lower ability students suffering the most. Feldhusen found that student learning is just as effective in a large class as it is in a small one; however, while considering a group of students enrolled in an educational psychology class, he also observed that the students had “more favorable attitudes” after completing the course, and he hypothesized that “the small class affords teachers a better opportunity to establish rapport with students and thereby to teach or inculcate attitudes which are consistent with those measured by the MTAI [Minnesota Teacher Attitude Inventory]” (362).

2. Class Size and the Purpose of the Professional Communication Class

The purposes of post-secondary classes vary widely, of course. As McKeachie posits, in courses in which the primary learning outcomes focus on the student’s ability to recall the course material and explain it to others—outcomes that are often straightforwardly indicated through test results—large classes seem to have little effect on student success. However, classes that focus on higher cognitive functioning—to use the taxonomy of learning objectives formulated by Bloom and modified by Anderson and Krathwohl, the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize material—are likely harmed by increasing numbers of students. As McKeachie states,

...large lectures are not generally inferior to smaller lecture classes when traditional achievement tests are used as a criterion. When other objectives are measured, large lectures are on shakier ground. Goals of higher level thinking, application, motivation, and attitudinal change are most likely to be achieved in small classes. (26)

In Canada, this taxonomy has been modified for the purpose of measuring learning outcomes. The Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB) has our communication course measure our learning outcomes as they pertain to four separate attributes (problem analysis, communication skills, professionalism, and ethics and equity). The four levels of performance correspond roughly to the Bloom’s hierarchy of cognitive processes: (1) knowledge of the skills/concepts/tools but not needing to directly apply them to solve problems; (2) using the
skills/concepts/tools to solve directed problems; (3) selecting the skills/concepts/tools to solve non-directed, non open-ended problems; and (4) applying the appropriate skills/concepts/tools for open-ended problems. Of the 19 learning outcomes for our professional communication course at the University of Saskatchewan, 15 are at level 4, and 4 are at level 3. In our program we want our students to engage with a body of theory and practice applying that theory in diverse situations, that is, to become professional communicators. These goals naturally require instructors to establish a strong rapport with students, and to inculcate positive attitude toward the importance of communication.

Supporters of large classes might counter that large classes are superior because of the greater variety of experience a larger group manifests. Citing Thomas and Fink, McKeachie agrees that large groups have a greater resource input than small groups; “…the larger the number of group members, the greater the likelihood that some members will have resources of knowledge, intelligence, or other skills needed for the educational purposes of the group” (25); however, he counters, the group’s use of these greater resources is constrained, since “in a large group a smaller number of group members can participate orally, and … the larger the group, the less likely it is that a given person will feel free to volunteer a contribution” (26).

Because of our exclusive emphasis on higher-order cognitive functioning, larger classes pose a serious risk to the quality of our program. Students will not move into competent performance of top levels of cognitive processes in classes sized to restrict their participation. Facilitating meaningful class discussion in a larger group is terribly difficult, in part because a single individual’s experience of social pressure to respond to a situational exigence is inversely proportional to the number of individuals who share the responsibility, a concept known as diffusion of responsibility, and because of the increased face risk. According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, face is a positive social value we attach to ourselves as performers of a particular action in a specific situation; it is a sense of self-worth and dignity that we risk whenever we communicate. Students who have less effective coping skills for managing the anxiety that results from face risk will not likely be able to overcome their fear in such an environment—they will be silenced into non-participation. In a class consisting of fewer students, each individual student experiences greater pressure to take part in class discussion, but at the same time experiences significantly less face risk. As a result, a greater percentage of students is likely to participate.

Of course, some programs include small tutorials to help students overcome diffusion of responsibility and face risk, but regular small classes also help ensure transfer and identity formation. As Brent argues, “…any rhetorical knowledge that we want to stick will need to be woven through the fabric of rhetorical education. If we cannot enable year-long or program-long experiences, we must at least ensure that each course represents a coherent community of discourse that supports the values and skills we want our students to take away” (411-12). Thus, regular meetings in a community environment are the most effective way to encourage regular participation and thereby ensure that the course material contributes meaningfully to the student’s identity.

3. Social Theory of Learning and Class Size

While the ability to creatively apply the course material appropriately appears at the top of the
learning hierarchy, such learning is not actualized completely until the student negotiates it as part of her identity. According to the social theory of learning advocated by Etienne Wenger, learning is both an individual psychological activity and a collective activity. Psychological theories of learning, such as constructivist and cognitive theories, focus on the modification of the learner’s cognitive structures and the ways in which learners accommodate and assimilate learning into a preexisting framework of understanding. Wenger’s focus is instead on learning as the practical application of knowledge as a means of discovering meaning and developing identity in the context of a community of practitioners; thus, his theory explores the ways in which participation facilitates learning:

Participation … refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. (4)

Participation is a type of engagement through which learners not only learn the skills to become competent practitioners, but it is also a process through which they discover and contribute to the discussion of meaning in their discipline, and through which they develop their identity.

As Wenger states, identity is the experience and reification of self within the context of particular experiences, affiliations, and social practices. We construct an identity positively, that is, through identification with a group of people engaged in specific practices, or negatively, that is, through distancing ourselves from practices we do not take part in (164). Affiliation is a central element of identity, and certain types of affiliation naturally contribute more to identity than others. For instance, medical doctors and police officers seem to have a stronger sense of professional identification than, say, care workers and accountants. A professional identity is our sense of ourself as a practising professional, and such an identity influences what we think we can do, and, more importantly for our purposes here, what we think we cannot do.

Engineering students develop strong disciplinary identities based, in part, on shared experiences within their discipline, and, as Sullivan and Kedrowicz argue, their identity is, in part, based on the trivialization or rejection of skills regarded as “soft,” such as communication. That engineering identity has traditionally rejected the importance of learning effective communication skills is a commonplace. Sullivan and Kedrowicz contend that the designation “soft skills” still ensures the marginalization of communication among students: “In the broader context of language and meaning, “hard” and “soft” convey which disciplines have scientific and educational value and gender difference. When communication is repeatedly noted as “soft,” easy, or something everyone can do … it often loses its scholarly virility” (607). While accreditation agencies have been working for the last two decades or so to promote the importance of effective communication, as Sullivan and Kedrowicz observe, “These changes necessitate a cultural shift that involves ideologies, language, practices, and norms” (608). Ultimately, they require a shift in professional identity: engineering students need to regard communication as an essential component of engineering identity, and not simply as a soft skill that can perhaps help them to work more efficiently.

Forming identity is thus an essential component of education. As Wenger writes, “When information does not build up into an identity of participation, it remains alien, literal, fragmented, unnegotiable. …to know in practice is to have a certain identity so that information gains the coherence of a form of participation” (220). Without identifying themselves as at least
potentially effective communicators, engineering students risk learning only abstracted principles or assorted details, because learning in the absence of an identity that embraces the subject of learning tends toward lowered applicability; Wenger states, “To the extent that knowledge is reified, decontextualized, or proceduralized, learning can lead to a literal dependence on the reification of the subject matter, and thus … to a brittle kind of understanding with a very narrow applicability,” and this “brittle kind of understanding” is especially the case in courses that do not facilitate practice, in ones that instead emphasize “instructional structure and pedagogical authority that discourages negotiation” (265). The failure to establish an identity of practice potentially results in the failure to facilitate effective learning transfer. Professors, pedagogical researchers, and employers are all aware of the deep problem of knowledge transfer, that is, of the difficulties students have applying knowledge they learn in their classes to different contexts. Studies that judge the success of teaching by course grades are not particularly useful, especially in a professional college such as engineering, because, as Wenger argues, the “…evaluation processes reflecting the structure of a reified curriculum are circular. Students without a literal relation to a subject matter can reproduce reified knowledge without attempting to gain ownership of its meaning” (265). For instance, students can have the ability to recite factual information about rhetorical theory in a communication class, and even apply that information to a simulation in class, but still be unable to connect their learning to the performance of communication in the professional world, which is the ultimate goal of the class. Without seeing the need to internalize the information, to assimilate it into their identity for the purpose of practice and continuous improvement, students all too easily leave the information behind after the final exam.

Professional communication is best taught through the cultivation of the student’s rhetorical judgment. While not dismissing the value of integrated communication programs that teach students specific approaches to producing rhetorical messages in particular situations, Brent acknowledges that “general rhetorical knowledge, not specific, context-bound rhetorical strategies, seems to help students the most when they must adapt to alien territory” (411). As stated above, many students can recite the proper formats for letters, memos, and formal reports, write fairly clearly, deliver a competent speech, and, because they continue to lack a proper understanding of the general transferable principles of effective professional communication, still fail to impress their employers with their communication skills. Thus, Brent writes,

We should not expect to discover how to import knowledge in our classrooms that can be lifted wholesale and reused in other classrooms and the workplace. Certain kinds of knowledge may be transportable in this way, but on the whole, such knowledge is likely to concern more basic operations such as how to construct a well-formed sentence or cite a source (and transfer at this level cannot be automatically assumed). (410)

The art of effective communication cannot be reduced to a series of formulae, since success in communication requires an ever-increasing level of self- and audience-awareness, as well as an understanding of rhetorical genres that enables the communicator to adapt to the broad diversity of rhetorical situations. For example, terms such as ethos, pathos, logos, rhetorical exigence, rhetorical audience, and constraints, as well as footing and face, provide students with concepts that they can apply when communicating through a variety of genres, including articles, letters, emails, posters, and presentations. Their understanding of these concepts grows through experience, and enables them quickly to develop competency in unfamiliar genres. These concepts develop a student’s rhetorical judgment, and enable them to respond successfully to a
variety of situations. Much of what we teach about rhetorical judgment is the seed of future understanding, and needs first to be nurtured by experience, reflection, and integration into an identity of practice.

Identity is conferred not just through practice, put also through the generation of meaning that occurs through interactions with those whom Wenger refers to as “oldtimers.” Such people have been long engaged in practice, and as a result can be described as mature practitioners. Thus, professors are learning resources not only because of their education and research, but also because of their membership within a community of practice. Unfortunately, as Wenger notes, …in many schools, the separation from mature practice is exacerbated by the roles of teachers as managers of large classrooms. In such a role … [teachers] constantly have to act … as representatives of the institution and upholders of curricular demands, with an identity defined by an institutional role. (276)

The institution creates distance not only between students and professors, but also between professors and their roles as colleagues. In essence, the large class reflects the ideology of the factory, with the professor as the largely absent upper-management figure, and the teaching assistants as mid-level management. Factory production is suitable and efficient for products and processes whose perfection is maintained by exact reproduction. Learning however is a highly idiosyncratic process that thrives in the sort of enculturation that results from the encounter between the student’s individual personality and an intimate, inspiring learning environment that involves the personality of the instructor. At its best, of course, education aims to transform students and, as a result, improve our collective quality of life. However, as Riley remarks while commenting on the limitations of our structural-functionalist approach to education, “Deep relational encounters that permanently alter one’s world view happen in spite of rather than because of this pedagogical design.”

4. The Professional Communication Program at the University of Saskatchewan

If the most effective context for teaching communication occurs in a community of practice facilitated within a small class, how can we design cost-effective communication programs that help engineering students expand their identity to include the possibility of excellence in communication? In the Ron and Jane Graham School of Professional Development in the College of Engineering, we have recently begun a study that aims to measure the efficacy of our program, which attempts to balance student experience with a reasonable level of efficiency. The College of Engineering hired an endowed chair in 1998 to improve the teaching of communication. Since then, the College has developed an academic program that complements the engineering students’ technical education. While every engineering student takes our introductory professional communication course in the second or third year of their program, many take one or more of our upper-year courses, and some complete our option, which we are currently transforming into a certificate program. All of our courses—which include leadership, negotiation, interpersonal communication, public speaking, composition, document design, and mentorship—maintain a common focus on rhetorical theory and practice. Our class sizes do not exceed 25 students, even in our introductory class. By maintaining disciplinary continuity in the context of small classes, and by engaging students through extracurricular activities, we have managed to create a lively community of practice, in which we encourage students to identify themselves as rhetoricians as well as (aspiring) engineers. Our small classes attempt to enculturate students into a rhetorical
manner of thinking, that is, into a way of evaluating and responding to communicative situations efficiently and effectively. As a result of this enculturation into a community of practice, our classroom is more like a laboratory than a lecture hall, a concept we discuss in section 5.

As Wenger\textsuperscript{21} writes, “An identity is … more than just a single trajectory; instead, it should be viewed as a nexus of multimembership” (159). Thus, while communication professors seem to belong to a community of practice that is fundamentally different from that which engineering students hope to identify with, Wenger’s concept of multimembership enables everyone to come together in the rhetorical communication class as practitioners of rhetoric. Indeed there are clusters of memberships that are generally associated with each other, and ones that are not (such as engineer and effective communicator). Nevertheless, rhetorical skill is necessary for all professions, and promoting a community that studies and practices the art of rhetoric helps us overcome the disciplinary divide we experience with our students, and promotes the formation of new and more productive identities. We invite our students into a common community of practice, and, as a result, we help them graft the identity of “rhetorician” to that of “engineer.” The presence of agriculture students in our classes only heightens the potential for multimembership and identification—disciplinary identities are neither threatened nor reinforced; instead all are invited to partake in an inclusive and highly interactive community that complements their professional training and, hopefully, expands their professional identity.

How can we discover conclusively whether large classes are detrimental to student learning? The main problem with conducting research in higher-level cognitive processes (higher, that is, than rote memorization or the imitation of processes), such as communication skills, is the difficulty of measuring learning. As stated above, grades are not a strong measure of student success in a communication class. While we can assign grades that generally reflect the students’ ability to engage in this sort of thinking in a simulated environment, it is difficult to assess the degree to which they are able to transfer this type of thinking into a work environment, which is the true measure of success in our program. Student evaluations, which are also often used to evaluate the effect of class size on learning, are also quite limited, because they reflect the students’ perceived experiences. Unfortunately, such feedback does not offer us insight into whether the students have actually developed their communication skills because of our small class. Thus, in order to measure the degree of success of our program, we have initiated a research project inspired by Brent’s\textsuperscript{20} call to action: “Rather than directly probing students for explicit instances of transfer, we will need to infer from field observation or rigorous interviews, or both, the academic experiences that students are using as background to their new learning” (410). Our project involves interviewing students who take part in an internship program, as well as interviewing their employers, supervisors, and possibly co-workers. Hopefully, this research will help us better understand whether the enculturation we attempt to share improves our students’ communication skills, and will provide us with some insights into how we might improve our program, in the light of the current university imperative that we do more with less.

5. The Question of Cost

Another avenue to investigate the success of the smaller class size of our communication course is to challenge the assumption that these classes are less efficient in use of resources than other
courses taught in the college. The pressure to increase class size is, fundamentally, a result of reduced financial resources; the surge in research interest in the effects of class size on student learning is an attempt to ascertain whether large classes are as good as smaller classes, not that they are better, which suggests that the impetus to move to larger class size is not pedagogical but financial. Since the move to larger class sizes is made based on economic considerations, it is worth investigating the assumption that smaller classes are necessarily more expensive than larger classes. While specific dollar numbers are extremely difficult to secure, we can estimate the resources needed to offer various configurations of courses with more certainty. Such estimations will provide a standard by which to measure the relative “efficiency” of those configurations. (It should be noted that “efficiency,” as generally used by administration, refers to the numbers of students processed through the system, without regard to learning outcomes.)

The first step is to determine into what delivery category the communication course should be slotted. In the College of Engineering at the University of Saskatchewan, most undergraduate courses are offered in one of three configurations: lecture, laboratory, or lecture/lab mix. Lectures involve three hours/week of typical classroom lecture time; laboratory classes take place in dedicated lab space with the infrastructure, hardware, and software required to implement engineering principles and can require up to six hours/week; lecture/lab mix classes tend to require three hours/week of lecture time and three hours every second week in lab time. Traditionally (and in the University Course & Program Catalogue), the university categorizes the introductory communication course as a lecture class. When compared to a typical lecture class in engineering, the communication course can, indeed, appear to be an inefficient use of resources. Table 1 shows a comparison of the basic resource requirements for our communication class and a typical class in the College of Engineering that teaches engineering principles. Since the enrolment in the communication class is limited to 22 students, categorizing the communication course as a lecture course results in a high student to instructor ratio, which lowers efficiency, in comparison to other lecture classes with larger class sizes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecture Class Configuration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Personnel** | 1 Faculty Instructor | 1 Faculty Instructor  
| &nbsp; | 1 Teaching Assistant (marker) |
| **Infrastructure** | Classroom | Classroom |

However, as argued above, our communication class aims to create an environment in which participation in the practice of communication leads to the construction of identity as rhetorician. The course not only teaches the principles of rhetorical theory, but also asks students to implement these principles in the rhetorical space created in the classroom. It is this combination of learning basic principles and applying those principles in a controlled, practical scenario that argues that the communication course is better compared to a lecture/lab mix course. Table 2 shows that when this comparison is made, the assumed inefficiency of the communication course disappears.
### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecture/Lab Mix Configuration</th>
<th>Communication Class</th>
<th>Engineering Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Lab</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77 (x3 sections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>1 Faculty Instructor</td>
<td>1 Faculty Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructures</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When engineering courses are taught in the lecture/lab mix configuration, it is because, for transfer to be possible, it is not enough that students only learn the principles involved; they must also have practical experience implementing those principles in the laboratory before they become available to them as knowledge that can be applied appropriately in a professional setting. As Riffell and Merrill\(^2\) point out, a “laboratory should be a more active and more social learning experience” (96). While lectures tend to have large student to instructor ratios (77 students in our selected representative engineering lecture), labs will have a lower student to instructor ratio, since the students enrolled in the lecture portion of the course will be divided into smaller lab sections. In our example, each lab section of 26 or 27 students will interact with the faculty instructor as well as with the lab coordinator and with a teaching assistant. In this environment “lab exercises are more interactive, group-oriented, and targeted toward problem solving than the associated lecture. It is in the laboratory portion of the course that students acquire hand-on experience with the subject matter\(^2\) (96).

The same need for practical lab experience to solidify the learning of theoretical knowledge pertains to the communication course: students must have practical experience, in a dedicated space, implementing the rhetorical communication principles they are learning. Such experience requires that they use the principles in guided problem solving and then reflect on the outcomes of implementing the material they have learned. The difference in our communication course is that, instead of requiring a dedicated laboratory space with continually updated infrastructure including equipment and supplies along with additional lab personnel, communication students implement the principles they are learning in the community space created in the classroom through the rhetorical expertise of the instructor. The lab equipment required in a communication course is a community of practice that facilitates interaction with “oldtimers.” A comparison of the communication course to the lecture/lab mixes shows that small class size is not as inefficient as the advocates of large classes suggest because the community formed in the smaller class size meets the requirements for our lab space, yet requires fewer resources than a typical engineering laboratory classroom setting.

### 6. Conclusion

Budgetary cuts in Canadian universities are forcing administrators and faculty members to reconsider how they deliver their academic programs. At the same time, engineering
communication departments continue to receive complaints about students’ communication skills from other engineering departments, and from industry representatives. While such times of fiscal restraint are not new in the university, and large classes have been fairly standard for decades, we must be careful to differentiate between subjects that are not harmed by factory learning, and ones that are. If communication skills are best taught through a type of enculturation, that is, through a process by which a student comes to regard her effective communication skills as part of her identity as an engineer, small classes that encourage students to identify themselves as part of a community of practice are key to ensuring our success. Adding even five students to a class of twenty has consequences for faculty who are teaching five or seven sections of a communication class each academic year (and we all know how quickly adding only a few students each year adds up)—the number of assignments needs to be reduced, and the quality of the feedback students receive is slightly diminished. Most importantly, though, our ability to facilitate a community of practice is weakened, since the class becomes less of a laboratory, and more of a classroom. Our job as professors of communication is not simply to share information; it is to help students develop an identity of competent practice, to promote citizenship in the broadest sense of the term.

REFERENCES


