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Communication in the Disciplines: Interpersonal Communication in Dietetics

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Abstract
This study proposes to expand the scope of oral communication across the curriculum research by exploring oral genres in a dietetics curriculum from the perspective of the dietetics faculty. The goals of this qualitative study, couched within the communication in the disciplines framework, are to identify the oral genres integral to the study and practice of dietetics and to determine if dietetics faculty who participated in the study perceive the communication experiences offered during dietetics education transfer to professional practice. Two conclusions resulted: the first result is that interpersonal communication is the oral site at which the dietetics discipline is advanced and maintained. However, the results of the study showed the interpersonal concepts and skills were applied differently in the dietetics interview as compared to their application in oral communication. Results of the data analysis regarding the second goal showed that although dietetics faculty felt communication experiences provided during dietetics education were adequate for professional practice, they noted a troubling lack of confidence in the dietetic interns that manifested itself in a reluctance to communicate with persons in power positions and extended to professional practice.

Keywords
communication, disciplines, interpersonal communication, dietetics

Disciplines
Dietetics and Clinical Nutrition | Higher Education | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Other Communication

Comments
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Communication in the Disciplines: Interpersonal Communication in Dietetics

Communication across the curriculum (CXC) research has emerged most prolifically from the disciplines of design (Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008; Dannels, 2005; Morton & O’Brien, 2005) and engineering (Dannels, 2002; Dannels, 2003; Dannels, Anson, Bullard, Peretti, 2003; Darling, 2005; Darling & Dannels, 2003). These studies are evidence of a discipline-specific trend in CXC research identified by a recent account of the evolution of the CXC initiative (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009). Concurrent with the trend toward discipline specific research is the emergence of a communication in the disciplines (CID) framework (Dannels, 2001) that proposes oral communication as the means by which a discipline is both maintained and advanced. Given the place of oral communication in the disciplines as asserted by the CID framework, empirical examinations of oral genres in a broader range of disciplines would illuminate and extend the expertise of communication scholars (Dannels & Housely Gaffney, 2009), informing and benefitting both communication and other disciplines. This study proposes to extend the scope of discipline specific CXC research by conducting a baseline study of oral communication from the perspective of faculty within a dietetics curriculum.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

The most recent history of the evolution of CXC (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009) arranges events chronologically into three eras since the first program in 1976 at Central College, Pella, Iowa (Cannon & Doyle, 2005). The first era, Establishment and Justification (1983-1995), substantiated the value of CXC as evidenced by case studies of specific programs (See, e.g., Morreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Whitney, 1993; Roberts & Cannon, 1981; Steinfatt, 1986; and
Strohmeier, Stratton, Novak, & Leipzig, 1992.). Also emerging were discussions of logistical issues such as the need for faculty professional development (Weiss, 1990), and discussions of the consulting, training, and contra models (Grice & Cronin 1993), approaches to working in other disciplines. The second era (1996-2000) as its title, *Expansion and Critical Reflection* (Dannels and Housley Gaffney, 2009) implies, was marked by internal debate about the repercussions on the communication discipline of this “controversial form of communication pedagogy (Morreale, 1997, p. 5).” An inventory of ten controversies that emerged during the era with seven proposed recommendations was compiled by Cronin, Grice, & Palmerton, 2000. The current era, *Reinvention and Empiricism* (2009-present) is distinguished by a renewed interest in CXC programs in specific disciplines. In contrast to the descriptive accounts of the first era, empirical studies of programs have recently emerged with most of them in design and engineering. These studies identified oral genres specific to the disciplinary site and extended the CXC research agenda.

Recent research conducted in design classes identified oral genres specific to that discipline and posed questions about the transfer of those genres from the academic to the professional environment. For example, Dannels (2005) identified four oral genres intended to professionally enculturate students. However, Dannels and Norris Martin (2008) concluded that feedback in a design studio was more reflective of an academically idealized studio than a professional environment. An analysis of public speaking textbooks used in design classes (Morton & O’Brien, 2005) found the content in most to be generic, often overlooking qualities of “good” design presentations that represented mental and material processes (p. 13). These researchers challenged CXC scholars to identify ways to prepare students for the workplace without compromising the goals of academia.
CXC research in engineering also identified discipline-specific oral activities and uncovered tensions between classroom practices and professional needs. In one study (Darling & Dannels, 2003), fifty per cent of practicing engineers surveyed named public speaking as necessary to their work, nine per cent listed interpersonal communication, and 32%, meetings and team work yet other researchers found that students in engineering classes viewed communication assignments as a distraction to what they considered their “real work” (Dannels, Anson, Bullard, & Peretti, 2003). Similar to findings in design, classroom communication experiences developed to introduce students to the professional environment continued to reflect academic priorities (Dannels, 2003). Dannels (2002) and Darling (2005) found that even when classroom presentations were assigned for a designated professional client, students presented as if for an academic audience. The researchers challenged future CXC researchers to identify ways to prepare students to deal with the contradictions they would be likely to experience when giving presentations.

Concurrent with the focus on discipline specific CXC research emerged a communication in the disciplines (CID) (Dannels, 2001) framework proposing that communication genres and disciplines have a symbiotic relationship; i.e., communication genres are the sites of disciplinary learning, with the protocol for their use emerging from the discipline. The CID framework is grounded in situated learning theory and it proposes communication as a context driven activity. According to the CID framework, standards for communication competence within a discipline are negotiated in that discipline, oral argument is a situated practice, and oral genres are sites for disciplinary learning. This framework has guided research efforts in academic contexts, but investigations in professional environments have been minimal. Since the motivation for including communication experiences in coursework is often for the purpose of professional
preparation, the lack of scholarly activity in this area represents a significant void in CXC research. Dannels and Housley Gaffney (2009) observed that even when oral communication assignments in academics were intended to prepare students for the workplace, academic standards and expectations were reinforced (See, e.g., Dannels, 2003; Dannels, Anson, Bullard, & Peretti, 2003; Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008; Smith, 2005). CXC research during the third era is grounded in the CID theoretical framework, making it pertinent to the current study of dietetics. Additionally, the program is professionally focused and a mandatory internship must be completed in order to be credentialed as a registered dietitian. This study may shed light on the extent to which an internship bridges the transition from undergraduate program to professional practice, further adding to an aspect of the CID framework that has not been explored.

The study of disciplinary orality is important because there are “complex, sophisticated meanings associated with…the role of orality in their epistemologies and pedagogies (Dannels, 2002, p. 266).” Previous research demonstrated that oral genres in design and engineering are not simply generic vehicles for disseminating information, they reflect the traditions of the discipline that encompass ways the work of the discipline is conducted, ways new knowledge in the discipline is generated, and ways the discipline is maintained. On the basis of the previous CXC research, it is clear that communication genres through which the design process is conducted differ from the genres of note in engineering (See, e.g., Dannels, 2005 and Dannels, 2002). The CID framework illustrates that if communication scholars were to assume a one size fits all communication approach to other disciplines, vast amounts of critical knowledge would be overlooked. Learning about orality in other disciplines enables communication scholars to understand the nature of key oral genres in those disciplines and makes it possible to participate in useful ways that respect oral disciplinary traditions. Additionally, knowledge of disciplinary
orality may offer beneficial insights to members of those disciplines as well as informing communication scholars in ways that may be helpful to their own work.

The current study proposes to identify oral genres that embody and reflect the way knowledge is constructed in the discipline of dietetics. One definition even describes the registered dietitian as “a translator of the science and art of foods, nutrition, and dietetics in the service of people whether individually or in families or larger groups: healthy or sick: and at all stages of the life cycle,” (Galbraith as cited in Payne-Palacio & Canter, 2006, p. 33), suggesting the prominence of orality in dietetics. A review of professional assignments held by registered dietitians further hints at the centrality of oral communication in this discipline: dietitians engage in clinical practice in hospitals, clinics and outpatient departments, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities; they participate in community nutrition practice in federally funded programs, such as the Women’s, Infants and Children’s program; and also work in private practice. They collaborate with other health care professionals to manage the spread of contagious diseases. Registered dietitians work in specialized areas such as sports nutrition and wellness programs (Winterfeldt, Bogle, & Ebro, 2005), and they serve as expert witnesses on behalf of institutions or institutionalized patients (Brown, 2007). According to 2008 data, 12% of registered dietitians work in management positions with the majority employed in clinical and health settings (Gould & Canter, 2008). They consult with grocery store chains and food manufacturers to achieve regulatory compliance, and also work for commodity groups to educate consumers about specific food groups. They are employed by school nutrition programs, commercial food services, and the military. Registered dietitians are advocates on behalf of clients and patients (called clients in this article), disseminate technical information to lay
audiences, and diagnose and monitor clients. In all these settings, communication skills are “the most critical skills in dietetics,” (Winterfeldt et al., 2005, p. 231).

An examination of oral communication in dietetics is expected to contribute in interesting and important ways to CXC research. In contrast to the more recent (1995) recognition of the role of oral communication in the education and professional development of engineers (ABET, 2008; Darling & Dannels, 2003), the American Dietetics Association (ADA) (2009c) has stressed oral communication as a necessary part of dietetics practice since it was established in 1917. This emphasis is especially visible in the accreditation mandates of the Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education (CADE) of the ADA that requires accredited dietetics programs to maintain a strong commitment to educating students to communicate effectively (ADA, 2009b). In addition, a required internship following completion of undergraduate requirements includes additional communication learning outcomes that must be met (ADA, 2009c). An informal review of resources for dietetics education also reflects this professional commitment to oral communication (see, e.g., Curry & Jaffe, 1998; Gable, 2007; Holli, Maillet, Beto, & Calabrese, 2009; Houston, Bassler, & Anderson, 2008; Payne-Palacio & Canter, 2006; Puhl, Whorton, & Hever, 2009; Rollnick, Miller, & Butler, 2008; Snetselaar, 2009; Stein, 2009). These resources discuss topics found in communication textbooks such as the transactional model which explains the communication process, and other communication topics such as assertive messages, teamwork, and influences of culture and self-image on oral communication. Treatments of some of these topics hint at differences of orality in dietetics when compared to communication. For example, the assertion that listening is a receiving process largely dependent on interpreting others’ nonverbal messages (Curry & Jaffe, 1998, pp. 56-64) and the observation that groups and teams are “similar but not the same” (Holli, et al., 2009, p. 294).
A second reason to conduct CXC research in dietetics pertains to potentially increased visibility of registered dietitians as a result of recent national events such as the recognition that obesity is a national health crisis. The profession has always played an important role in healthcare, but the expertise of registered dietitians is largely practiced in the privacy of hospital rooms and other institutional settings. Knowledge about the role of oral communication genres in the practice of dietetics may result in theory that informs oral communication in other health care professions. Even if this prediction does not come to fruition, food plays a large part in our lives. It reflects our personal identity and ethics (Steiner, 2009). Overconsumption is encouraged by economically motivated strategic marketing of food products (Kessler, 2009). The decisions we make about the foods that we eat have become detrimental to our health in epidemic proportions (National Institute of Health, n.d.). In The Miser (Moliere, trans. 1908) Valere explained: “We must eat to live and not live to eat,” Today our lives would be very different if our decisions about food and diet were guided by Valere; but since food has become more pervasive in our lives than merely providing sustenance, that alone predicts a more visible role for registered dietitians.

Finally, the practice of dietetics is a delicate undertaking and knowledge about oral activities in this area has implications for other professions whose members engage in sensitive or risky interaction. Some eating habits may induce guilt and be difficult for clients to discuss; individuals may be uninformed about nutrition. Under these circumstances, what could be more professionally challenging than to construct an accurate profile of a client’s relationship with food in order to propose, monitor, and motivate that individual to embrace more healthful eating habits? The health of the client that is dependent on the skill of the registered dietitian to practice those oral genres. For these reasons, CXC research in dietetics stands to inform
communication scholars and members of the dietetics discipline of the intricacies of these oral activities.

Dannels (2005) has indicated it is time for the CXC research agenda to move to more discipline specific inquiry. As the CID framework proposes, knowledge about oral genres must come from the disciplinary site. Despite almost a century of awareness by the ADA that oral communication is crucial to the practice of dietetics, its practices are not currently contained in the body of knowledge of CXC research. A baseline study of dietetics will further extend the scope of CXC research and may identify potential roles for communication scholars; however this research is necessary for another reason. Dannels reminds us CXC researchers and practitioners are able to conduct their work and offer their expertise only with permission of the other disciplines. According to the CID fame work, oral communication is practiced and assessed based on the standards of their disciplines, consequently the disciplines must first be understood from the perspective of their members. This research is intended as the initial entry and acquisition of knowledge of the dietetics discipline.

Despite the anticipated contributions of baseline research conducted in a dietetics program, this exploration is not without limitations. First is the fluid nature of the participants; that is the dynamics of this baseline investigation depend on the insights the current participants bring to the investigation. Changes in the ranks of those individuals may change the resulting view of the discipline. Also, the results of this investigation pertain only to the program examined here. It should not be assumed that findings of this investigation would be relevant to other dietetics programs. Despite these limitations, this baseline study is intended to provide initial data that will inform future communication scholars.
The results of this study will add to the current body of CXC research in terms of the baseline knowledge it reveals about the discipline of dietetics, the way that oral genres maintain and advance the practice of dietetics, and in the ways these results inform CXC theory. Additionally, from this study issues of relevance to CXC may emerge, signaling directions for future exploration and also suggest areas for the cultivation of interdisciplinary partnerships with other discipline practitioners and perhaps external entities (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009). Broadening the range of CXC research is also important to identify practices common across disciplines. Research within this framework may expose common threads across disciplines as well as identify common practices that may be referred to in different ways, the results of which stand to have more far reaching implications about the generation of knowledge.

In the spirit of the CID framework and for the purpose of providing baseline information to further CXC research and to inform CXC scholars regarding the role of communication in dietetics, my goals for this study are as follows: (a) to identify the oral genres integral to the study and practice of dietetics and (b) to determine if dietetics faculty perceive communication experiences offered during dietetics education transfer to professional practice.

In the following sections, I construct a methodological framework and discuss the results of the study. I conclude by discussing ways this study has enabled meeting the research goals and identifying questions for further investigation.

**Methodological Framework**

*Research Setting and Researcher Role*

The dietetics program that is the focus of this study is a part of the Food Science and Human Nutrition (FSHN) Department at a large midwestern land-grant and research university.
(The department administers two other programs in addition to dietetics, human nutrition and food science.) The accredited program has been classified by CADE as a Didactic Program in Dietetics (DPD), meaning undergraduate work includes evidence-based course work that meets CADE’s specific requirements for knowledge concepts and competencies. The program also offers an approved internship. Students who complete the DPD may apply to this internship or to one of the CADE-approved internships across the country.

The seven female faculty who participated in this study are all registered dietitians. They are the holders of three doctorates and four masters of science degrees. Their ages range from 37 to 66 years and one has recently retired. Their teaching experience in this program ranges from 10 to 27 years with an average of 18 years. In addition to their teaching experience, they have accrued an average of 11 additional years (ranging from 2 to 28 years) of professional experience as practicing dietitians, managers, and clinical and medical technicians. All have published in professional and scholarly journals such as the Journal of the American Dietetics Association, and some have received awards and other professional recognition for their scholarly publications and research. They have been elected to offices in local and state professional organizations, served on the governor’s dietetics advisory board, acted as official spokespersons on dietetic issues and collaborated with other institutions to develop educational initiatives in dietetics.

Prior to my involvement with the department, the faculty made a commitment to prioritize oral communication in their curriculum. My association with the department and the dietetics program has extended for 9 years beginning with a request by the faculty communication task force to conduct a series of department communication workshops to introduce the faculty to public speaking, and interpersonal and small group communication.
Since that time, the initiative has advanced through several phases, with most receiving funding from university grants that support curricular development. Following a faculty review of the curriculum, programmatic changes aligned the distribution, types, and complexity of oral communication experiences across the curriculum. Assessment procedures are standardized, an electronic portfolio system has been implemented, and additional faculty workshops held on topics such as the development and assessment of reflection pieces required by students for inclusion in their electronic portfolios. The initiative became a key part of the department culture as evidenced by one of the department core concepts listed in a previous edition of the university catalog:

Interpersonal Communication: Demonstrate the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively as Family and Consumer Sciences professionals and members of the global community while respecting diversity and enhancing the dignity of others (Iowa State University, 2003-2005).

I have been involved in all phases of the project through participation on various communication committees and facilitation of professional development workshops for faculty including consulting with faculty about courses, assignments, assessment methods, and exam construction. I am also called on to facilitate faculty meetings and on several occasions I have been introduced as an honorary member of the department.

Data Sources and Data Collection

For this ethnographic study, I chose to construct an emic (Patton, 2002) understanding of the oral genres in use in dietetics from the perspective of the faculty. This study reports results from the earlier years of my association with the dietetics program and the FSHN Department as a means of broadening the scope of CXC research since dietetics is not among the disciplines from which data has been gathered. Additionally, due to the mandatory internship, the results may be
beneficial to discussions of the transfer of skills beyond the academic setting. Furthermore, although not considered one of the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, math), dietetics is based on science and medicine, consequently the results of this study may inform studies in the sciences and health care professions. Finally, it is anticipated that issues will emerge from this research that direct the future CXC research agenda. I used three data sources for this study.

The first data source was results of interviews with seven dietetics faculty. After receiving institutional review board approval, dietetics faculty who attended the three communication workshops were invited to participate in a one hour interview to discuss oral communication in their classes, the discipline, and the profession. The interviews were conducted at the participants’ convenience in their choice of location, typically faculty offices or a conference room. Although the interviews were semi-structured, these four suggested discussion questions were distributed with the consent form:

Q1: What makes a good communicator in your discipline and in your profession?

Q2: What communication outcomes do you desire for your classes and for your students?

Q3: How is communication assessed in your classes and in your discipline?

Q4: What support do you need to assist you in reaching your classroom communication goals?

I initiated each interview by reviewing the purpose and affirming participants’ rights to decline to discuss any topic and to terminate the interview at any point. An audio recorder and an omni-directional microphone were placed in view and used to tape the interviews, but I also took notes and occasionally asked follow-up questions. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed resulting in seventy typed, double-spaced pages. The tapes were then destroyed. The second data source
was notes taken during class observations. I visited at least one class taught by each participant and in some instances such as when a special event was scheduled, attended a second class. I took notes on lecture content, activities, student responses, and my own impressions. The third and final source of data was documents such as course syllabi, class assignments, and internet resources. I examined these documents, taking particular note of the oral communication assignments and course objectives that pertained to oral communication. All of these sources contributed to a view of the nature of the dietetics disciplinary site and the oral genres through which the culture of the discipline is both advanced and maintained.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed inductively, using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First I reviewed field notes from the classroom visitations, examined documents, and read the interview transcripts, noting all ideas, references, and statements that referred to oral communication in the dietetics program. Next I used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Corbin & Strauss) to code and categorize the data. The constant comparative method makes meaning of the data by comparing each piece and categorizing data with conceptual similarities. To assure consistency in the coding process, I developed a code sheet as conceptual categories emerged, taking care that the data were classified according to the code sheet and the code sheet reflected the data groupings. This process yielded 11 thematic categories (See Table 1). The data and the code sheet were given to a graduate student who served as an independent coder. Using Scott’s pi (Reinard, 2008), the results of the independent coding and mine resulted in an intercoder reliability of 91.5%. When items were coded differently, the independent coder and I discussed and agreed on their coding. Finally I studied the contents of the eleven categories searching for common characteristics that would provide
baseline insights regarding the oral communication genres within the dietetics program. Two such insights emerged. The following section summarizes these areas and cites data to support the findings.

**Results**

The first result that the data analysis supported is that interpersonal communication is the context within which registered dietitians gather dietary information from clients in order to diagnose dietary problems and propose and monitor interventions. (Throughout this discussion comparisons are made of communication skills and their dietetic counterparts. These comparisons are presented in Table 2.) From the data analysis, one genre and two sub-genres emerged: the dietary interview is the genre through which registered dietitians acquire pertinent dietary information about clients and propose and monitor a particular course of action with the client. In addition, two sub-genres that may be integrated in the dietary interview are the diet history, a comprehensive assessment of client nutritional status, sources of food information, relevance of food, etc., and the 24 hour recall, an account of food consumed the previous 24 hours; (The term “interview” will be used in this discussion unless otherwise noted.) One instructor described this process:

They’re [registered dietitians] doing oral work one-on-one with their clients in a clinic setting where they have to be able to ask questions; they have to be able to do the interviewing techniques: ask questions, get good answers, be able to formulate what the next question should be, and then be able to provide nutrition information.
### Table One  Emergent Categories in Data Analysis

- **Category One:** Career paths of dietitians. Descriptions of career paths and responsibilities of registered dietitians. *Sample Data:* “Some go to hospitals and there they may do inpatient counseling or they may do outpatient counseling.”

- **Category Two:** Professional communication skills. Communication skills used by registered dietitians. *Sample Data:* “They have to be able to work with peers on the same level.”

- **Category Three:** Classroom communication skills. Communication skills introduced in classrooms in anticipation of needs of registered dietitians. *Sample Data:* “The way that I approach lecture is that there are low risk, medium, and high risk responses.”

- **Category Four:** Curriculum issues. Statements about curricular goals and objectives. *Sample data:* “Our main goal is to make them into competent, entry-level professionals.”

- **Category Five:** Communication. Descriptions of classroom communication activities. *Sample data:* “I have them do a 24 hour recall on each other. I have one of them facing one direction and the interviewee is facing the other direction.”

- **Category Six:** Learning disciplinary content. Use of communication to learn disciplinary content. *Sample data:* “They took those forty different drugs and they started doing their classification scheme. And then I grouped them in groups of four and they had to explain their classifications to each other and as a group refined their ideas into one classification scheme.”

- **Category Seven:** Curriculum decisions relevant to assessment. *Sample data:* “We walk through the expectations for the assignment and at that time I give them the rubric and explain this is what we’ll be looking for.”

- **Category Eight:** Student assessment: Focuses on self or peer student assessment. *Sample data:* “The second session I actually have them do a verbatim record of all their verbal responses and have them label each response.”

- **Category Nine:** Instructor assessment: Focuses on instructor assessment processes. *Sample data:* “It’s more of a ‘I kind of know what I’m looking for’ and it’s a gut-response sort of thing. I don’t have a formal tool that I’m using.”

- **Category Ten:** General challenges: Description of classroom dilemmas, may be tangentially related to communication. *Sample data:* “My biggest thing is time. We’re a very fast program, we’re six months, and there’s a number of things we could do better.”

- **Category Eleven:** Communication challenges: Description of dilemmas related to communication in a specific course or curriculum-wide. *Sample data:* “I gave them [interns] the opportunity to practice: ‘If you were approaching a physician about this patient, what are your concerns?’ They couldn’t do it. It wasn’t fear. They laughed, they giggled, they thought it was superfluous and funny to practice this in front of the group. So that bombed and I was really disappointed.”
genres by its integrally connected structure and goal-driven purpose. In contrast, within the dietary interview, the structure of the interaction appears to be much less integral to the achievement of the goal, the good health of the client. Another instructor further explained the process:

We start by focusing more on the people skills, building the relationships, that’s the most important thing in counseling or educating, and then we talk about the process of counseling and educating, planning outcomes …used to accomplish this process.

The “people skill” that the instructor referred to is, in dietetics terms, rapport. Although faculty did not view rapport specifically as a skill (i.e., a learned action), they included in their courses skill sets that they believe resulted in rapport. One of these skills is nonverbal mirroring that, in the study of nonverbal communication, appears as a relational variable but is generally considered an unintended, possibly unconscious behavior (Cappella & Schrieber, 2006). In dietetics, mirroring is the technique of reflecting the nonverbal actions of the client as a way to increase understanding (Gable, 2007) and is a learned behavior. One instructor explained how she approached rapport building skills in her classes:

I talk about building rapport skills, and three that I really hit are mirroring, empathy, and compassion. We talk about mirroring and what it might do, how it might help build rapport. …And then we talk about empathy. You know, it’s not “I understand, I understand,” because it’s not. You could have said that without even listening. So it’s empathy, listening well enough so that you understand, and then communicating back that understanding so that they [the patient-client] felt that you really did hear.

Whereas in a communication classroom, instructors might teach interviewing by focusing on selection and arrangement of questions in order to achieve a particular interviewing goal, the data analysis showed that dietitians’ ability to build rapport is considered integral to their establishing a relationship with their clients. This relationship is viewed as the precursor to the
Table Two  Comparison of Dietetics Applications of Communication Concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Concept</th>
<th>Dietetics Application</th>
<th>Example from Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Communication</td>
<td>Dietetics Interview</td>
<td>“They’re doing oral work one-on-one with their client in a clinic setting where they have to be able to ask questions; they have to be able to do the interviewing techniques…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Interview Questions & Structure | Rapport                    | “I talk about building rapport skills and three I really hit are mirroring, empathy, and compassion.”  
                                      | Relationship Building         | “Take four of the five minutes and build a relationship with them and then take the last minute to share some information.” |
| Reciprocity of Self-Disclosure| Active Listening           | “If somebody’s not asking me questions or paying attention to me or giving me their attention, I can’t keep going…” |
| Self-Concept                  | Relationship with Food     | “Sometimes people are attracted to our major because they don’t have healthy relationships with food, and we sure don’t want them to go out trying to get other people to have a healthy relationship with food when they don’t have one themselves.” |
| Nonverbal Mirroring (Unintentional) | Nonverbal Mirroring (Intentional) | “We talk about mirroring and what it might do, how it might build rapport.” |

dietitians’ meeting their professional obligations to their clients, as evidenced by faculty comments that a registered dietitian would not be effective without developing a relationship:
Historically what’s happened is, in a hospital setting, a doctor will say, “This patient is leaving the hospital in five minutes. Educate them on what they eat when they go home.” Worst case scenario. But I say, “Okay, if you were given that situation, then take four of the five minutes and build a relationship with them. And then take the last minute to share some information.” Because they’re going to be much more likely to listen to you if you listen to them first and have heard what they have to say.

Relationships are built through the negotiated progression of increased and reciprocated disclosures by the participants. In the case of the dietary interview, client disclosures about certain dietary habits may be difficult enough to reveal even if they were reciprocated. It is questionable whether a registered dietitian would reciprocate such disclosures, so the client must be motivated in some way to continue. That motivation results from the registered dietitian engaging in active listening. The faculty described active listening as paraphrasing and asking for clarification and justification. One instructor began teaching active listening in her classes when she discovered that students thought they were supposed to sit quietly until the client spoke to them:

If somebody’s not asking me questions or paying attention to me or giving me their attention, I can’t keep going [because] your interaction with the patient or your client has a very profound impact on that other person, and you need to keep that in mind.

Communication scholars recognize that interpersonal communication begins with and is influenced by the self of the communicator. The dietetics faculty work to incorporate into their curriculum opportunities for students to realize ways that their self-concepts, particularly their vulnerabilities, might adversely influence their interactions with clients. Studies have found that registered dietitians are more susceptible to eating disorders than are other professionals (Houston et al., 2008) and tend to interact in nonconstructive ways with obese clients (Puhl el al., 2009). The faculty want the dietary interventions proposed by registered dietitians to be motivated by self concepts that include healthy attitudes toward food and diet:
Sometimes people are attracted to our major because they don’t have healthy relationships with food, and we sure don’t want them to go out trying to get other people to have a healthy relationship with food when they don’t have one themselves.

The dietary interview requires the registered dietitian to work toward shared meaning with the client, but allows only a limited opportunity to negotiate that shared meaning due, in part, to time limitations. Essentially the registered dietitian and client must get to a point where the client is willing to reveal potentially sensitive information about dietary habits without the usual relationship progression that might occur between two individuals of other identities. Given the nature of dietary interviews, more is required of the interview than questions asked and answered so rapport becomes necessary because it exists for the purpose of “establishing connections and negotiating relationships” (Tannen, 1990, p. 7). The communication priorities described by the faculty that emphasize rapport and relationship building are the means used by the registered dietitian to reconcile the need for pertinent information with the limited time frame. Holli et al. (2009, p. 36) suggests that registered dietitians be particularly sensitive to the affective dimension of clients’ messages as a means of making connections that enable gathering dietary information. Rapport may be credited with encouraging clients to embellish on more general descriptions of their dietary habits or at least with enabling registered dietitians to probe for more specific information.

The second goal of this study was to determine if the dietetics faculty believe communication experiences in the DPD prepare students for their internship. The result of the data analysis in this area is intriguing. The DPD is a professional program rather than a liberal arts education and all components of the program including oral communication experiences are directed to the professional preparation of registered dietitians. Technically the internship is not professional practice, but affords the opportunity to examine the transfer of oral skills from the
professional DPD to the workplace within which the internship occurs. The second result of the data analysis shows that faculty viewed the undergraduate coursework, including communication experiences as adequate preparation for the internship. Accounts of faculty interaction with interns suggest at this point the faculty have opted for a situational supervisory approach of low direction and high support due to the professional readiness of the interns. Some faculty spoke with pride of the relationships they cultivated with interns that often resulted in an intern notifying them about difficulties: “The students…they’re so far into it that they want to make sure they’re doing the best they can do, and so if somebody really stumbles, they let me know that they’re stumbling. And I find that very refreshing.”

The confidence faculty expressed about the professional maturity of interns makes the lack of confidence they note about the interns’ reluctance to communicate, particularly with persons in power positions, especially intriguing. One instructor said, “It’s not that they don’t have the knowledge base. I don’t know.” The communication reluctance manifests itself in the interns’ interactions with faculty:

Because they [interns] feel in a sense as though they’re being put on the spot during a site visit to some extent. Some interns have complained that they have literally been sick because of this process. So, you know, of course we want that not to be a threatening experience.

Dietetics interns are also reluctant to communicate with health care professionals:

They don’t want to talk to the nurses, they don’t want to talk to “Oh, heaven forbid I talk to a physician all by myself.” It scares them. Scares the pants off of ‘em, they are so insecure in their own knowledge base. The confidence is so weak, and that is crucial to the professional challenge. They’ve got to be able to communicate with those other professionals.

There is additional cause for concern because the internship experience apparently does not diminish the communication reluctance, as one instructor confirmed: “A major concern [is
that we have dietitians out in the field who don’t talk to the physicians, they don’t talk to those other health care team members. They hide in their desk.”

The communication reluctance described here may not be due so much to DPD preparation but from other forces. A recent needs assessment of registered dietitians (Rogers, 2009) revealed that respondents believe the public lacks awareness of and respect for dietitians’ work. If this belief is sufficiently pervasive, interns might refrain from communicating because they don’t feel they are worthy or able to adequately communicate. Circumstances may be slowly changing, however, as one instructor described an internal evolution in the medical profession demonstrating an increased respect for dietetics expertise:

It wasn’t too long ago that dietitians weren’t even allowed to document in the medical record, I would say we’re a new kid on the block when it comes to the health care team arena as far as being acknowledged. And we have some fabulous dietitians out there that are very assertive, very well respected, and do an excellent job. And they [interns] don’t see those, what I would consider the better role models, until later in the relationship.

Although changes in public and professional attitudes may eventually occur, despite the CADE mandate and efforts of faculty, other efforts would benefit as well. Smith (2005) found in her work with novice teachers that participation in a professional community of experienced teachers resulted in learning the culture of that community but it did not enable the novice teachers to participate in shared discourse with their experienced counterparts. Similarly, it is possible that with respect to their communication skills, the dietetics interns received sufficient preparation but without opportunities to engage in discourse with members of the professional community in which they were interning, they didn’t feel prepared to discuss competing ideas with health care professionals nor feel qualified to question existing practices despite their skill in oral genres. As Smith concluded, something beyond preparation for the logistics of the profession may be needed such as practice in professional participation.
Conclusions

This baseline exploration of oral communication genres in dietetics fulfilled the intention of providing a preliminary view in a discipline where CXC research has not yet ventured. However, the study has limitations. Only one accredited dietetics undergraduate and one approved internship program were the focus of this study. Although the baseline information revealed extends the scope of CXC research and provides direction for CXC scholars, the use of the knowledge that resulted is not intended to apply to other dietetics programs nor internships and should be viewed as preliminary only. The second limitation lies with the participants. The decision to limit the investigation to faculty participants’ was deemed appropriate to the baseline nature of this study. Neither students nor interns were interviewed; other untapped sources are the preceptors who supervise interns on-site and employers of entry level registered dietitians. Thus, a limitation exists as a result of the omission of these important voices. Finally, although the results of this study are believed to accurately portray the research site according to the perceptions of faculty who were interviewed, the dynamic nature of the environment is also a limitation. The majority of the faculty who participated in this study continue today as members of this program, but the internal and external environments within which these individuals do their work is in constant change. The program examined in this study is part of an administrative structure inhabited by two other programs, and students who graduate from any of them take common core courses. Curricular changes in the major influence the dietetics program as do changes in campus wide curriculum requirements. Additionally, client demographics and their dietary habits may require revisions to accreditation mandates and curricula, and classroom
practices and internship training must respond to these lifestyle evolutions. The results of the current investigation are subject to all of these influences.

Despite the nature of the study and the limitations described, areas emerged that have the potential to inform CXC research and communication intervention in dietetics. Development of communication genres in the discipline and practice of dietetics date from the 1917 advent of the ADA. These genres have specific meanings and represent specific ways of practice in dietetics. The history of communication in dietetics warrants the reminder that the communication scholar is an explorer, learning about orality in dietetics, rather than a change agent. With this caution in mind, the results of this study raise questions that with further research would provide greater insights regarding the role of oral communication in dietetics.

Interpersonal communication genres emerged from this study as prominent sites of disciplinary learning, suggesting several areas for future research. This study identified communication activities that, as illustrated in Table 2, while recognizable in communication, differ in their practice of dietetics. For example, relationship building is an essential activity that earns registered dietitians the right to make potentially life-saving diagnoses and recommendations. In what ways, does relationship building for the purpose of dispensing dietary guidance differ from relationship building to develop social relationships? An understanding of ways these activities differ from their similar counterparts in oral communication would benefit the communication scholar, and might also assist dietetics faculty to design learning experiences for their students.

A second issue questions the relevance of communication theories applied to the practice of dietetics. As effective as the dietary interview might be, could its effectiveness be increased through the application of interpersonal theory? For example, would Coordinated Management
of Meaning (Pearce, 2007) clarify critical moments in clients’ disclosures, facilitating dietetic diagnoses? Is Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957) useful in changing client dietary habits by illuminating reasons for contradictory eating habits? Whether these or other interpersonal theories sharpen a disciplinary genre that represents the foundation of dietetics knowledge and practice is worthy of future exploration.

A third issue of interest is the degree of sturdiness of the oral genres of use in dietetics in the face of changing client demographics. A recent change in accreditation mandates (effective March 2009) driven by an environmental scan (Jarratt & Mahaffie, 2007) of ADA members revealed that as a result of predicted cultural and demographic changes, registered dietitians feared they would be without the skills to interact with increasingly diverse client populations. Whether the emphases on rapport and relationship building and other advocated communication approaches will remain effective when serving an increasingly diverse clientele is yet to be determined. Additionally, barriers erected by language differences and the presence of third party interpreters during confidential exchanges between clients and registered dietitians raises additional challenges for the facilitation of the dietetics interview.

A fourth issue for future exploration is the nature of the dietetics internship. Although faculty felt confident about the communication preparation of the interns, they also expressed concern about their interpersonal confidence. That sentiment is expressed not only by the faculty interviewed for this study but also by others. Prior to the most recent revision of the CADE accreditation requirements, employer focus groups indicated a need to employ registered dietitians who were able to interact confidently with health care professionals (Skipper, Young, & Mitchell, 2008), noting the reluctance to communicate by the interns also extends to registered dietitians. Recently CADE increased the internship from 900 to 1200 hours (ADA, 2009d, &
Skipper et al., 2008) in response, partially, to this concern. An area for further investigation is tracking the extended experience to determine its impact on the confidence issue.

In addition to the research areas suggested, the current study also raises questions for the CXC research agenda. Much of CXC research thus far focuses on public communication. The work of Dannels (2003) and Dannels (2002) and Darling (2005) and others in engineering and Dannels (2005) in design classes explores public speaking as a disciplinary site in those areas. The current research shows that interpersonal communication in the dietetics discipline performs a similarly important function. Future CXC research should locate other disciplines in which interpersonal genres serve similarly important roles and identify the functions of these interpersonal genres in maintaining and advancing those disciplines.

CXC research has typically explored communication in the disciplines as professional preparation. Yet, a growing body of evidence (See, e.g., Dannels, 2003; Dannels, Anson, Bullard, & Peretti, 2003; Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008; Smith, 2005) suggests that academic communication experiences for professional preparation prioritizes the academic environment rather than the workplace. In the current investigation, the efforts of dietetics faculty to prepare students for professional communication as interns was apparently only partially successful. Although faculty felt the interns were skilled in the necessary areas, they recognized the reluctance of the interns to interact with persons in positions of power, a sign that other approaches to teaching communication in the disciplines are needed. Results of writing across the discipline research (Russell, 1997) suggest that because the workplace culture differs from the academic environment, skills and concepts learned and practiced in the classroom will not transfer to the workplace; however other researchers have made various suggestions for facilitation of this transfer. Dannels (2002) called for greater involvement of practicing
professionals in academics. Carter, M., Ferzli, M., & Wiebe, E. N. (2007) suggested a learning apprenticeship, similar to an internship, as a means of learning “an authentic activity in a knowledge domain [that embodies] the ways of knowing of that domain (p. 283).” Research conducted in hospital settings (Lingard, Garwood, Schryer, & Spafford, 2002; Schryer, C. F., Lingard, L., Spafford, M., & Garwood, K. 2003) found that medical students learn to communicate as professionals through their interactions with medical professionals. However, research conducted by Smith (2005) found that although a transition experience such as the dietetic internship was valuable in some ways, it raised other issues. When novices interacted with an experienced counterpart, tensions emerged that warranted a different type of professional preparation. Considering the academic investment to orient students to professional communication, and as a result of the divergent opinions of researchers, an exerted effort to explore ways classroom experiences can be designed to facilitate their transfer to the workplace would be beneficial. Additionally more needs to be known about the place of internships and apprenticeships in professional preparation. Research that is deliberately designed to explore bridging experiences in this and other disciplines is needed.

The results of the current study confirm previous findings of CXC research but also extend the scope of this work. First, this study offers additional support for the CID framework by confirming that communication in the dietetics discipline is site specific. In the case of the current study, the foundation of knowledge in dietetics lies in the dietetics interview, a context driven oral activity in which registered dietitians must engage in relationship building to acquire pertinent dietary information from clients in order to recommend and monitor clients’ dietary changes. These genres regenerate the discipline by identifying trends in food consumption and client demographics that in turn drive research and pedagogy.
The current research also supports Smith’s (2005) finding that different preparation is needed in order for students to participate in professional culture. Smith suggested pre-professionals must “learn ways to negotiated issues of power and voice (p. 69),” as a result of her observations of novice teachers who were unable to talk as practicing teachers. Similarly the current research demonstrated that although interns are technically prepared for the professional culture of the internship, concern was expressed about their ability to interact with health care professionals and other individuals to whom they might have a subordinate role.

In other ways, differences resulted from the current research in comparison to previous research. Other CXC research, for example Dannels, 2002, Darling, 2005; Dannels, 2005; Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008; and Darling & Dannels, 2003, found the central oral genres in design and engineering to be based on public speaking. Darling & Dannels (2003, p. 14), suggested CXC research should focus on other genres, and it was the case that interpersonal communication emerged from the current research as the central oral genre of dietitians.

The oral genres emerging from other CXC research displayed more specific prescriptions in terms of content, structure, and voice than is the case in dietetics. The content of interaction in design “crits,” for example, demonstrated a typology dependent on students’ progression through increasingly more challenging design studios (Dannels & Norris Martin, 2008). Although registered dietitians meet with clients several times, content of these meetings is negotiated by the dietitian and client as a result of the disclosures of the client rather than on the basis of an established typology. Other design research (Dannels, 2005) discovered established competencies for “crits,” but again this is not so in the dietetics interview. Competency is not so clearly structured but is a result of the registered dietitian’s ability to identify detrimental dietary
habits of clients which, when changes are proposed and monitored, result in improved client health.

Engineering presentations were found to be independent of the presenter’s individuality (Dannels, 2002 and Darling, 2005). In contrast, the dietary interview is highly personal and although it is all about the client, the registered dietitian must become a partner in the relationship in order to encourage the dietary disclosures of the client. The content of engineering presentations was technically oriented (Dannels, 2002 & Darling, 2005). Such is not totally the case with the dietary interview where rapport and relationship building share time with highly technical dietary information.

Engineers must be skilled in the translation of technical issues to different audiences (Dannels, 2002, and Darling & Dannels, 2003). This is also the case with practice in dietetics, yet in dietetics, the translation is a two way street. Registered dietitians not only translate highly scientific information about food, diet, and physiology into messages that clients understand, they must also translate clients’ potentially vague or inaccurate accounts of dietary habits into content that enables informed diagnoses and recommendations.

Forecasts are bright for the future of dietetics. Projected new opportunities for dietetics professionals continue to emphasize the importance of communication as registered dietitians find themselves interacting with increasingly diverse cultural and demographic populations. Professional opportunities may emerge in different physical contexts, and registered dietitians may find themselves in more frequent contact with health care professionals. Also, an anticipated increase in the use of technology to interact with clients may motivate the profession to reassess its current ways of establishing rapport and building relationships, much as the current discussion
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of cultural competency is motivating the profession to reexamine its interviewing methods. The dietetics discipline represents a rich area for exploration by CXC scholars.

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