



Peer Reviewed

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Abstract

Communication skills top the list of what employers look for the most in employees and job candidates. Unfortunately, communication skills also top the list of skills most lacking in new college graduates.

As a result, many academicians have incorporated business communication courses into their curricula to teach students to be effective communicators. These courses have historically included such areas as oral and written communication, team skills, etc. but have generally not emphasized skills that make students employable.

This paper describes issues associated with creating an undergraduate business communication course that not only focuses on the topics employers and academicians demand, but it also addresses how an undergraduate business communication course can *change* the focus of course content to address not only oral and written skills, but introduce skills that increase the employability of students. It discusses course content, delivery methods, and how to respond to student feedback in an effort to formulate a teaching approach that works for students, faculty, and employers.

Introduction

Research indicates a positive correlation between an employee's ability to communicate and advancement up the corporate ladder. As a result, many academicians have incorporated business communication courses into their curricula to teach students to be effective communicators. These courses have historically included such areas as oral and written communication, team skills, etc. but have generally not emphasized skills that make students employable. One such effort occurred in the Business Division at a private Liberal Arts College in the southeastern United States, when, in the mid-1990s, The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACS] began requiring member schools to demonstrate how instruction in oral communication was delivered and assessed.

This paper describes the communication skills employers require of college graduates and the communication shortcomings that hinder student employability. It then illustrates how one college developed an undergraduate business communication course that ultimately provided students with the communication skills needed to successfully compete in the business world. The paper also offers ways faculty can deliver instruction in the basic communication skills employers require.

Finally, the paper also describes issues associated with creating an undergraduate business communication course that not only focuses on the topics employers and academicians demand, but also addresses how undergraduate business communication courses can change the focus of course content to address, not only oral and written skills, but skills that increase the employability of these students. It provides a discussion of course content, delivery methods, and how to respond to student feedback in an effort to formulate a teaching approach that works for students, faculty, and employers.

Literature Review

The Need for Strong Communication Skills: Perspectives from Business Professionals

Communication skills top the list of what employers look for the most in employees and job candidates, yet relatively few studies have examined the area of employer satisfaction. In fact, claims that students need to improve their oral and written business communication skills remain largely anecdotal. According to Stevens (2004), business school deans return from meetings where corporate executives complain that graduates cannot write well, but few business communication journals publish studies of employers' evaluation of their new hires' communication skills.

In a synthesis of literature on entry-level employees, Tanyel and Mitchell (1999) identified the following communication abilities expected by employers: written communication, oral communication, leadership communication, team skills, presentation skills, global/cultural awareness, and interpersonal communication (Wardrope). In numerous surveys, employers, graduate students, academicians, and others continue to list oral and written communication among the most critical skills needed by business students today (Pittenger, Miller & Mott). In addition, managers who can express themselves clearly and communicate effectively across functional lines will have a competitive advantage over those who cannot (Rubin). Managers along the Gulf Coast identified oral communication as the most important competency for college graduates entering the work force (Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle).

Furthermore, a study of Silicon Valley employers indicated employers were not satisfied with the business communication skills of their newly hired college graduates. While improved public speaking skills were the most frequently mentioned as important by Silicon Valley employers, employers also believed students should also improve their interviewing skills (Stevens).

Teaching Business Communication: An Academic Perspective

University business school faculty have come to realize that they must equip students with the communication skills employers demand (Plutsky). In a study conducted by William J. Wardrope, department chairs in six business disciplines were asked to rate the importance of business communication skills in seven areas. Four of the five highest rated communication skills were written competencies (using correct grammar, writing reports, writing memos, and writing letters). Two oral communication skills – making oral presentations and using good pronunciation – were also rated highly. Ratings for skills in the other five composite areas – cultural skills, interpersonal skills, group/team skills, listening, and technology mediated skills – fell below written communication. Wardrope's investigation pinpointed basic written and oral skills as the most critical to graduates' success and suggested that letters, reports and memos should be a priority of business communication faculty. Wardrope and Bayless's (1999) study of business communication instructors concluded that practicing interviewing skills was important; yet little time was spent covering this topic.

Meeting the Challenge

Business communication course content should provide students with more opportunities to speak and write (Plutsky). However, given the number of topics identified as being important for the business communication course, issues arise because there is not enough time to cover every communication topic in a single course. Therefore, the question becomes how should business communication faculty teach, and how should they prioritize topics within their course (Wardrope)? The challenge faculty face is determining the best way to teach the necessary communication skills business students need to meet real-world standards (Pittenger, Miller & Mott).

Another equally important issue is students' general unwillingness to take business communication courses seriously, even though their livelihood may depend upon it. Many teachers have discovered that students' enthusiasm for the course can be stimulated if the course content relates topics taught in school about the career or life goals of students. Successful teachers know students learn best when they perceive what they are learning as relevant (McPherson). Instructors can best serve their students by teaching outlining techniques, the proper use of electronic visuals and by requiring PowerPoint presentations (Mahin).

Lastly, courses that are continually assessed and revised stand by the faculty who teach them stand a better chance of meeting students' needs by preparing them for the speaking and writing requirement in upper-level courses (Plutsky).

Methods

In the mid-1990s, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACS] required its member schools to demonstrate how oral communication was delivered and assessed. Since methods of learning assessment can include alumni surveys, the Division of Business at the University of South Alabama surveyed its undergraduate alumni, the majority of whom were employed in various management positions around the United States, to determine their satisfaction with their concentration and, ultimately, their business administration degree. In particular, the survey included variables that measured which business-related subjects alumni ranked as the most important to the least important in terms of their current employment performance.

The survey questions were very helpful in determining student satisfaction. The responses to one question, however, offered important feedback which led to the development of an undergraduate business communication course. The survey question asked: "If you could change part of your business degree, what areas would you strengthen?" Among the alumni who participated in the survey, many believed that both the oral and written communication skills components of the curriculum should be strengthened. The challenge became to create a course that would provide business undergraduates with the communication skills necessary for real world success.

Building on input from constituents and using student feedback instruments from the graduate business communication course, faculty members from the divisions of Business and Communication created an undergraduate course that focused on teaching written and oral communication skills as well as listening and intercultural communication.

Students were required to take the three hour, sophomore level course as part of their business concentration. Only those students who had completed six hours of lower division English requirements were allowed to enroll. Course content consisted of business communication basics such as writing good news/bad news letters and memos, individual report writing, and employment communication (cover letter and

resume writing). The course required one persuasive PowerPoint presentation on a topic specifically related to the student's area of concentration. Various faculty members taught the course using the same syllabus and text book.

Over the next several years, feedback systematically collected indicated that, overall, students believed the course was worthwhile. However, many students deemed memo and letter writing as busy work and indicated that not enough emphasis was placed on oral skills and employment communication. Students were not only interested in writing cover letters and resumes. They wanted interview training as well.

While students are clearly not experts in curriculum, business programs should be sensitive to students' concerns and preferences when considering changes in the business curriculum (Scrabec; Richards-Wilson).

Responding to Student Feedback

As a result of receiving less than positive student feedback relating to course content, members from the Divisions of Business and Communication assessed course content and addressed other issues to ensure that the course not only met SACS oral and written communication goals, but that it met the students' needs as well.

Feedback suggested that, although course was created as a vehicle for teaching oral and written skills, repetitious writing assignments and the lack of an employment skills component actually weakened the course. Student feedback indicated that, overall, the course was not practical. Student responses suggested that not enough emphasis was being placed on oral skills because the current course required students to make only one formal oral presentation.

Employment communication in the form of interview preparedness was addressed in great detail. The faculty member responsible for teaching the course consulted with the Director of Career Services to determine the best way to expand this component. It was decided that The Director of Career Services would become a regular guest lecturer and provide students with resume and interviewing tips. Additionally, mock interviews would be scheduled with various business professionals from the community. An "Interview Critique Form" (See Appendix A below.) was created to rate the students' interviewing skills and to serve as a feedback instrument to pinpoint areas for improvement.

Modification of the Undergraduate Business Communication Course

In the spring of 2004, a modified version of the course was offered to all business majors. This new course featured the latest text book written by Pamela Angell, a respected communication scholar, entitled *Business Communication Design* (2004). The Angell text not only covers business writing in sufficient detail, but it covers employment communication in an expanded format and contains real world communication challenges frequently confronted by business professionals. Its cases

serve as a basis for class discussion and illustrate communication skills needed in certain situations, such as conflict management and performance evaluation.

While the writing component of the revised course remained essentially unchanged, the actual amount of writing assignments was reduced. Decreasing the number of writing assignments allowed the number of oral presentations to be increased from one to three. In the revised course, two of the presentation topics were informative and left to the student's discretion. The only stipulations were that the topic had to be business related, the presentation had to be five to six minutes long and PowerPoint slides were required.

The requirements for the third presentation were more stringent. The topic had to be persuasive; focus on a specific aspect or issue within the student's concentration; be approximately six to eight minutes in length; and include a question and answer session. PowerPoint slides were required for all three presentations. Each presentation was recorded and critiqued by the professor.

In addition to a cover letter and resume, a mock employment interview was added to the course. Several members of the local business community and faculty from the Division of Business as well as the Director of Career Services were recruited to conduct the interviews. The interviewers were provided a copy of the student's cover letter and resume prior to each interview.

Each interviewer met with approximately three to four students with the interview and the critique lasting thirty minutes. The "Interview Critique Form" addressed interview performance (See Appendix A below.). The interview was recorded and reviewed by the interviewer and the student. The professor then met with the interviewer and both assessed each student's performance. The student's grade was based on the interviewers' and the professor's assessment of their performance during the interview.

Discussion and Conclusions

Business communication courses focusing on the communication skills employers demand not only provide students with the skills necessary to compete in today's business environment, it also enhances their employability. As a result of modifying course content in response to student feedback to include an expanded employment component and an increased number of presentations, positive student feedback increased significantly. Feedback went from lukewarm comments such as "course was worthwhile" to enthusiastic comments of "highly recommend". Faculty also noted an improvement in presentation abilities after students had successfully completed the business communication course that contained multiple presentations.

Strong anecdotal evidence exists that a practical approach to teaching business communication will be readily accepted by students and the business community. Alumni who are now practicing business professionals comment they consistently use the skills they learned in the business communication course. They also report that

prospective employers have remarked on the quality of their resume. One student e-mail indicated that she received the finance position she wanted because her resume was “the best” the interviewer had seen.

Business faculty must meet employers’ demands by focusing on teaching the most highly valued and practiced communication skills required in the workplace. They must also offer innovative ways to teach those skills. By reaching out to professionals in the business community as well as using the resources available to them within the institution, faculty will not only help students’ achieve their personal and professional goals but they will ensure that that are meeting employers needs by improving students’ chances for employability.

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Appendix A: Interview Critique Form

STUDENT NAME _____

INTERVIEWER _____

DATE _____ TIME _____

Please rate the student on a scale from 1- 10 for each question below.

- | | Rating |
|--|---------------|
| 1. First Impression (greeting, eye contact, clothes, grooming, etc.) | _____ |
| 2. Tell me about yourself. How does this applicant explain experience, knowledge and skills? How well does the candidate support his or her comments with experience statements including class projects, leadership positions, activities, and achievements? | _____ |
| 3. Tell me about your weaknesses. Did the person try to minimize the weakness or better yet, turn weaknesses into strengths? | _____ |
| 4. Tell me about your strengths. Did the person tie strengths to job requirements? | _____ |
| 5. Why are you interested in this job? Did the person explain their qualifications? | _____ |
| 6. Where do you see yourself 5 years from now? Were their goals clear and realistic? Did they relate to the job? Will the candidate likely leave the job after a year or two? | _____ |

7. **Describe your leadership style.** Give me examples of your leadership experience. _____

8. **Describe your personality using 3 adjectives.** Does the candidate's interview behavior match the adjectives they used? _____

9. **Do you have any questions of me?** (Can the candidate ask appropriate questions as they relate to the job?) _____

10. **Overall impression of candidate.** _____

General comments:

Total score: _____

The title graphic was designed by Carole E. Scott

