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Proceedings of the Academy of Managerial Communications

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HOW TO INFUSE COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGHOUT THE UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends in COBs' organizational structure have resulted in the infusion of communication skills throughout the curriculum. The "Business Communication Framework" is one such method for achieving this integration of business communication skills at every level of student progress throughout the traditional four-year program.

INTRODUCTION

This study reports the results of a two-pronged endeavor to establish a method to infuse communication skills throughout the traditional four-year undergraduate college experience. First, interviews were conducted with faculty members of COBs to determine current practices and any anticipated changes in teaching business communication. Next, a search of related literature also provided valuable support for the foundation of what will be referred to as a "Business Communication Framework" (BCF).

The BCF provides structure for students during their entire undergraduate education. By using a framework for teaching communication, COBs will provide the necessary backdrop that all students, regardless of major, will use in every phase of their undergraduate experience. The ultimate goal of this framework is to enable business majors to communicate information more effectively in their educational and professional encounters.

BENEFITS OF ADOPTING A BCF

By adopting a BCF, COBs will help students to be more effective in their post-graduate positions. Students will also show improvement in school, since communication will be introduced at an earlier time (freshman year) and for a longer time (throughout their undergraduate education). The concentrated effort on communication is especially important to both the global workplace in which they will work and the increased diversity in their domestic workplaces.

The BCF does what most COB communication efforts do not. It is not a "one-shot deal" but a concerted program integrated throughout the curriculum of an undergraduate and treated as a significant part of each school year. Many COBs believe that they have a BCF in place when in reality they do not. Most COBs have courses in place that appear to be part of a BCF; but the fact is that many courses fail to support the goals of a BCF. For example, most universities, and thus COBs, require students to take one or two freshman English classes. However, the typical freshman English course does not address the foundation conceptsnecessary for later business writing. Instead, many of these English classes emphasize reading and interpreting literature rather than writing.

Integration through use of a BCF and other techniques will be essential to developing the manager of the future. If tomorrow's leaders are to be involved in all aspects of the business, foreign and domestic, students must be taught to communicate at all levels. What better training than to teach students to communicate at all levels of their undergraduate experience. Through the application of this supporting concept, major communication efforts are part of this integrated initiative. As a result, students will understand how communication is one of the cohesive points of an effective business education.

PROCEDURES

Data were gathered through telephone interviews with faculty and deans of 29 AACSB accredited COBs in Midwestern universities. A focus group approach was used with one university that included department chairs, curriculum committees, faculty members who teach capstone courses, and undergraduate educational and internship advisers. From these interviews, areas were identified where needed communication skills should be included in the curriculum.

Next, a periodical review was conducted that concentrated on desirable communication skills students should acquire as reported by both academic and professional sources.

Based on the majority responses of interviews and the literature, knowledge/skills were slotted into (a) each school year (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) and (b) the various cognitive domain levels (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) as described by Bloom (Reeves, 1990).

FINDINGS

Business communication is important to the curriculum. First, communication continued to receive support from the interviewees as an essential skill; 76% said that communication skills are very important, and the remaining 26% said they were somewhat important. Second, the interviewees ranked communication as equally important a topic as statistics, computer literacy, and ethics. Third, the primary support (59%) for including communications in the curriculum came from faculty.

The delivery of business communication skills is varied. Before students enter COBs to pursue their majors, most of them will receive some instruction in communication skills. The interviewees (82%) reported that students are usually required to take courses such as freshman English/composition (one or two courses) and speech. However, 71% said that none of these courses focused on business communication skills. Of those who reported that some emphasis was placed on business communication skills, 78% said that minimal success was achieved in retention of skills when students entered the COB.

Based on the survey results, the readings, and an application of Bloom's Taxonomy (Reeves 1990), an outline was developed for integrating business communication into the four years of the undergraduate experience, thus the origin of the BCF concept.

Course work is the basic structure within which students will acquire communication skills/knowledge. Structured course work should, ideally, be offered each year. When certain topics appear in more than one course, e.g., subordination techniques, the replication is not redundant. Some topics, by necessity, need to be addressed more than once and at increasing intensity levels in subsequent years.

Teachers of advanced courses often assert that students lack the necessary written and oral communication skills. Some faculty want to ignore the truth that poorly prepared students are accepted into colleges and universities. Some faculty also blame business communication classes for not producing adequate writers. Furthermore, unless required to take a business communication course early in their program, too many students delay taking the course until their senior year.

Although the BCF should not be considered a remedial program, it can serve as a check of student abilities. Students would have to demonstrate progress at each level before being allowed to advance. For example, if a senior has not mastered junior business communication work, that student needs to continue to study junior-level skills. Students must be required to perform at the desired level before advancing--just as other courses in their field that require mastery of prerequisites before being allowed to enroll.

Course work in the BCF is based on the survey and literature. Following is a general description of what each year's communication experience should entail and example competencies.

The freshman experience stresses knowledge and comprehension. The emphasis at the freshman level is on basic English as well as written and oral skills applied to simple documents and presentations. Because comprehension and application of basic skills are critical for advanced writing courses as well as courses in a student's major, the pass rate in basic courses should be 75-80%. A student can enroll in any classes as many times as needed but not allowed to circumvent the pass rate set by the COB. Example topics include: follow printed directions; write logical, coherent phrases, sentences, and paragraphs.

The sophomore experience stresses comprehension and application. Building on the foundation laid in the freshman year, the emphasis at the sophomore level is increased intensity for both teaching and learning written and oral skills applied to slightly more complex documents and presentations. The one- or two-hour course presents style, mechanics, grammar, and sentence/paragraph structure, thereby, releasing time in the junior communication course to address more advanced concepts. The course addresses topics that students need to know before they enter the COB or enroll in the junior course. Example topics include: incorporate critical listening and reading techniques, proofread documents.

The junior experience stresses analysis and synthesis. Emphasis is on application of basic communication skills to short and long business messages as well as oral presentations. The course develops effective communication skills for a variety of business situations and applies basic communication skills and human relations principles to planning, organizing, and producing letters, reports, and oral presentations. Example topics include: use psychological factors in writing (positive words, goodwill); demonstrate a sensitivity to language bias; provide effective coherence and transition between ideas; use subordination and emphasis techniques; compose a variety of message types.

The senior experience stresses synthesis and evaluation. Emphasis is on application of advanced communication principles and techniques involving documents that are longer, analytical, and complex. The senior communications experience can either be a three-hour course or a series of modules that expand on concepts presented in the junior communication course or present new concepts through applied projects. Example topics include: prepare discipline-specific reports which incorporate graphical aids; write complex business reports in collaboration with others; reflect international differences in writing.

A structured approach for students to master business communication concepts provides both students and faculty with the advantage of meeting on common levels. Most advanced classes stress group work. Therefore, students who attempt to complete advanced work with sub-level skills may find they achieve less for themselves and for their partners in assigned tasks. If all students master the communication skills at each level, they will gain more from experiences in advanced classes.

INTEGRATED ASSIGNMENTS TO DEVELOP COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Using a list of topics/concepts required at each level, instructors must use appropriate exercises to develop the skills. Most business communication textbooks contain assignments related to business majors. For example, cases focus on marketing problems that require letters or reports. Reciprocal assignments in marketing courses should include focus on the necessary communication skill for the case or problem.

Dunne, Lusch, and Gable (1995) suggested that instructors go beyond just having students write a report or letter by devoting class time to discussing how students approached and proposed to solve the problem. These discussions serve to help students "vocalize their judgments and perspectives" (xxvi) that are vital skills for future business situations with customers and colleagues. To extend the exercise and improve skills of more students, instructors need to recognize that full-class discussions often result in only a few participants. Instructors may find that dividing the class into small groups of three to five will encourage more participation in the discussions. Also, group members should be encouraged to not pass judgment on ideas but rather to discuss what would be probable results on actions taken. Once several options have been determined, then students would be encouraged to select the most appropriate solution and an alternate to present to the rest of the class.

The basic principles of communication lie in the ability to treat others with respect, which leads to another possible assignment. Instructors could use situations where students practice proper business protocol to ensure that communication does not falter among the parties involved. Mausehund, Brown, and Dortch (1996) discussed methods of incorporating business protocol that can be adapted for business courses.

In a more content-focused approach, combining several assignments provides students with a real-world communication project. One method would be to create one assignment with four substantial parts, e.g., (a) generate or refine a problem and purpose, (b) conduct primary and secondary research, (c) generate written report, and (d) present the findings using oral communication techniques and visual aids. By using the same content for all four parts, students focus more on the business communication concepts required at each stage, instead of focusing on learning new content.

Space limitations prevent all the possible examples of assignments that can be used. However, the assignments should have certain elements in common:

1. Apply concepts from past BCF initiatives to give students continuing practice.
2. Include at least two or more communication concepts, e.g., written, oral, technological, and analytical.
3. Provide opportunities for individual demonstration of communication skills.
4. Provide opportunities to demonstrate communication skills as part of a group.
5. Challenge students to improve on past achievements.

These common elements will reinforce the integrative nature of each assignment as part of the overall business communication experience throughout students undergraduate education.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A BCF

The BCF can accommodate special and innovative topics. The above organization of the BCF is only the first phase of integrating communication throughout the undergraduate experience. Phase 2 encompasses the infrastructure necessary to complete the process. Once again, COBs claim to do this and say they are important, but COBs are not using the phases of a BCF via a college-wide initiative. The process needs a college-wide initiative or the ideas become too diffused to do as much good.

To facilitate implementing a BCF, COBs can adopt techniques or procedures that reinforce the competencies emphasized in each course. The infrastructure necessities, which provide crucial communication consistency for students, include laboratories, style manual, codes, and evaluation guides.

Laboratories should be housed in the COB, not in the English department, or at least staffed with business writing professionals. Because business writing differs from prose or journalistic style, business students need access to tutorial labs staffed with people familiar with business writing. For example, "the primary difference between writing for an English class and for a [business] communication class . . . is what business writing experts refer to as concise, yet complete, writing" (Krapels & Brown, 1997), whereas writing for English classes may encourage more expansive writing.

COBs should use a common style manual for use in all courses in the college. Acceptable communication skills, such as the proper citation style, vary across the business world. Rather than allow students to confuse the possible approaches, COBs can integrate standards for communication skills into all courses. Students would be required to use the manual in preparing documents, and faculty members would be required to include proper use of manual guidelines as one criterion for all assignments. To retain autonomy in the classroom, faculty would have the option to select other formats or style manuals they deem appropriate. However, the goal should always be that students learn to use the chosen style in a consistent manner.

To be more consistent throughout the COB, faculty members should use a common system of marking papers to show students where improvement is needed. For example, Quible (1993) developed a numeric system of indicating areas needing improvement. Wilkinson, Wilkinson, and Vik (1986) presented a marking system based on abbreviations. The symbolic proofreader marks of the printing industry have long been used by educators to mark student papers. Including one or a combination of these systems in the common manual would provide these benefits: a reference for both faculty and students, more understanding of student strengths and weaknesses in writing skills, and an efficient and consistent method for grading papers.

Another form of consistency in the COB would be the use of common evaluation guides. To ensure that students receive consistent feedback, the COB should provide such documents as example evaluation guides for faculty to use when grading written or oral reports. Faculty would also be given the opportunity to attend workshops or training sessions on methods to evaluate the communication skills (written and oral) of their students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHING AND REFINING THE BCF

The above plan for a BCF lays a foundation for ensuring that students continue to improve communication skills throughout their undergraduate experience. Only through implementing and researching the effects of a BCF on students' progress can the BCF be evaluated. Therefore, the following procedure should be considered for COBs that desire to develop strong communication skills in their students:

1. Test the business communication skills of students currently admitted to the COB to establish a base.
2. Design a BCF appropriate for the university program making as much use of existing courses as possible.
3. Develop courses or units for existing courses that will fill in the identified gaps in business communication skills.
4. Test incoming students as they are admitted to the COB.
5. Test students, at one- or two-year intervals, as they pass through the program to determine if a BCF increases the communication skill level compared to the base determined by testing students who did not have a BCF experience.
6. Continue to refine methods for teaching communication skills to business students in all courses.

In addition to researching the effectiveness of a BCF, further research needs to be done in the following areas:

1. Determine how COBs define "integrating business communication skills in the curriculum."
2. Determine the use in COBs of such methods as business communication laboratories, common style manual, codes, or standard evaluation guides for quality of writing or speaking for all courses.

Too often communication courses have been viewed as a "necessary evil" by students and faculty. By proving the value added through a BCF, business communication instruction will become a integrated part of the education for all business students.

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HOW TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE GMAT WRITING ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

The GMAT Writing Assessment is evaluated primarily by English professors using guidelines developed for English writing. Also, although numerous studies have identified communication skills as critical in business, little evidence has been provided that the test itself was a predictor of success in Master of Business Administration programs in the U.S. In many ways these two factors are detrimental to the undergraduate business major. This paper reviews (a) the GMAT Writing Assessment procedures and (b) changes in business writing assignments that are needed to prepare undergraduates for the GMAT writing assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Until 1994, the GMAT focused upon the quantitative and verbal skills of prospective Master of Business Administration (MBA) applicants, evaluating those skills with multiple choice questions. In the fall of 1994, the GMAT included an assessment of an applicant's ability to write. The essay writing value and the technical aspects of the assessment process have been discussed thoroughly by Rogers and Rymer (1995a, 1995b). Their discussion is based upon the acceptance of the test results by American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) institutions and upon its use in the admittance process. Little consideration is given to the impact of the scoring upon undergraduate business students. Rogers and Rymer have considered the GMAT's ability to index an individual's ability to write at a graduate level in business school and with the assumption that decisions regarding admission to graduate schools can be made on the basis of this writing experience. This article will discuss both positive and negative factors in the assessment process from an education for business perspective and offer teaching suggestions for improving the GMAT writing assessment of undergraduate business majors.

In October 1994, the GMAT included two writing assignments with its standardized multiple-choice test. Test takers since that time have been asked to write two 30-minute essays which result in an overall Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) score. Two types of essay assignments are given to test takers: argument and issue. Each is offered with several paragraphs of directions for the test taker as well as a *prompt*, the sentences that stand alone and provide the information to be used in the writing assignment. An *argument* is based upon an analysis of the logic used to support the information provided in the prompt. Successful writing for an argument calls for recognition of the unsound reasoning used as well as identification of ways in which the premise could have been logically developed. Writing on an *issue* involves the in-depth development of a perspective on an assigned topic. Successful writing for the issue justifies the position taken on a topic using examples and building a logical foundation for the viewpoint chosen.

Both the argument and the issue essays are evaluated through what is called holistic assessment. Holistic scoring has been identified as "formal procedures for judging student writing, intended to mirror the objectivity of multiple choice tests by helping teachers to make consistent judgments about student writing. . ." (Williamson, 1993, p. 1). Evaluators avoid marking specific errors (such as each individual misspelled word) and assess the writer's overall consistency in broad areas (such as knowledge of English grammar).

A REVIEW OF THE ESSAY ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Essay writing has been a part of the Advanced Placement (AP) English tests for decades, and Educational Testing Service (ETS), as well as the GMAT developers, have developed an extremely sophisticated assessment method over time. Following is a discussion of the GMAT reading process from 1994 to 1998, and a preview of readings process of the future.

Until the autumn of 1997, approximately 400 college and university professors (about 90% of whom are from English) "read" for a three- or four-day weekend beginning the Friday after the GMAT was administered. For the training of readers, about 50 pre-graded essays have been photocopied and packaged in an introductory packet with scoring guidelines and placed at each chair. Also in the packet were the following: scale for assigning a grade; samples of possible arguments, both successful and unsuccessful; guidelines for reading; notes for interpretation; and, hints for newcomers. Scores for the essays were 6=Outstanding, 5=Strong, 4=Adequate, 3=Limited, 2=Seriously Flawed, 1=Fundamentally Deficient, and 0=Unscorable (Perrin, 1995, pp. 10-15). The room leader discussed why each paper should receive its assigned score based upon the scale provided, and time for individual table discussions to clarify scoring decisions was provided. Essays were referred to as either "upper half" (4-6) or "lower half" (0-3) quality. After reading and scoring several groups of essays that table leaders have evaluated earlier in the week, the training was considered complete, and assessment of unread essays begins.

The 0 through 6 scores are differentiated by the writing skill of the test taker. Factors considered necessary for excellence are the usage of correct English grammar, multisentence paragraphs with topic sentences, varied sentence structure, logical organization of information, and in-depth development within the assignment. As the grammatical skills decrease, the organization or development becomes randomized or nonexistent, or the discussion or analysis grows more vague, the score drops.

In the autumn of 1997, ETS started to use regional online readings with individuals driving to the four regional centers to "read" essays on computer. Holistic assessment continues. The "packet" of information to help readers understand the process is primarily on computer and can be brought onto the computer screen through "menus" at any time during the scoring process. Changes include less people at a reading and less social contact between readers. For example, in the Evanston, Illinois office, 12 readers and one table leader can be online. In 1999, the plan is that assessment can take place in an individual's office or home with hourly scales being paid. These fees (approximately $20 per hour) will in all likelihood discourage business faculty who are paid significantly higher salaries than English professors, thereby continuing the under-representation of business faculty.

EVALUATION OF THE ESSAY ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

Although the holistic process has been the focus of writing researchers for decades (see *Validating Holistic Scoring for Writing Assessment: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations*, W. M. Williamson & B. A. Huot, Eds., 1993 for in-depth discussions), no more efficient way exists to evaluate such a great number of written essays in such a short period of time. The function serves the need and is basically a sound principle. Holistic scoring procedures were initially developed to use experts (writing teachers) to evaluate the relative merits of written essays. And therein lies the major problem with the GMAT writing assessment. English professors are reading the tests utilizing, primarily, the same guidelines used for the AP English Exam.

In the guidelines for scoring or evaluation of the essays, readers are told to consider the following factors as critical in the assessment process:

For the argument, the suggestions include:

1. Analysis of the logic used in the prompt to support the basic premise must be found in the essay.
2. Recognition of the unsound reasoning used in that logic must be supported.
3. In-depth identification of other ways in which the premise could have been supported should be supplied. A single example could be used but must be extensively developed.

For the issue, suggestions include:

1. Statement of the position taken by the writer must be clear.
2. Consideration of different perspectives regarding the issue should be contemplated in the analysis.
3. One or two in-depth examples to illustrate support for the position chosen must be developed.

In the computer assessment menus, there are samples of inadequate, adequate, and well-developed ways in which these goals could be accomplished by the writer. Also included is a page with interpretation suggestions. For either essay, the writer is not supposed to be penalized for taking the unexpected side of the issue or argument (except if the writer does not understand an illogical argument); if the essay is well-written and logically developed, the writer should receive full credit. On the argument interpretation sheet, the reader is reminded that extemporaneous factors unrelated to the argument itself may become the focus of the essay.

For the most part, these scoring characteristics are ones which all business professors, just as their English cohorts, also examine when evaluating writing skills of students. However, English professors encourage their writing students to write in a somewhat different manner than do business writing professors. Methods that business or management communication professors promote may, in fact, be counted as deductions by GMAT readers. The primary difference between writing for an English class and for a business communication class is what business writing experts refer to as concise, yet complete, writing.

This conciseness in many ways contradicts what the English professors, who make up a minimum of 90% of those reading for the GMAT, are going to view as mastery of writing. Effective writing by the English reader will include well-developed paragraphs with syntactic variance--in other words, use all different types of sentences in long (by business standards) paragraphs with topic and transition sentences. While dissertations within the business disciplines should be encouraged to follow these guidelines, the doctoral student's committee members may have more time than the average businessperson. At the GMAT, the student who remembers business writing class rather than freshman English and writes a one-sentence, opening paragraph will probably receive an automatic deduction.

Another characteristic of business writing that was specifically brought to the readers' attention by room leaders as acceptable (and a way of writing that was not to be given a deduction) was enumeration with bullets or listings of ideas. Business writing classes encourage itemizing points for emphasis of specific issues within a long document or for easier understanding of a number of concerns within shorter documents. Then the writer is to develop each point in greater detail if further amplification is needed. Readers from English departments would prefer to see paragraph form used with items in a series within the sentence. Bullets, in particular, are considered intrusive; after all, from English teachers' perspective, paragraph development is a major part of effective writing. For those readers from English who truly dislike enumerations in any format, a business undergraduate may be assessed with a resulting "horn" effect--the reader unconsciously is more critical of the overall essay because of the listing format used.

Another problem that was noted by readers with business writing backgrounds was a contradiction between the directions and the scoring. In the issue while writers were told to use one or the other (for example, "Explain your position, using relevant reasons and/or examples drawn from your own experience, observations, or reading" (Perrin, 1995, p. 3)), the room leader and examples inevitably used both reasons and examples as an example of an essay that should receive a top score of 6. Business students are being trained to follow directions to avoid wasting production time. By not going off on a tangent, one can complete a job more efficiently. In this case, following directions and using "or" as it should be considered, could result in a lowered score as several essays with simply reasons had received in the training.

Perhaps one of the most critical areas having an impact upon business undergraduates is related to the argument writing assignment. Case study teaching methods have geared business students toward solving the problem presented in the written text. The format of an argument is unfamiliar to business students. Understandably so, all test takers are expected to read the directions and to follow them. However, in a test situation, where time is scarce, students tend to fall back on familiar ways of writing. Once in 1995, when the argument included illogical statements about a copycat manufacturer, marketing majors attempted to solve market share problems through advertising and sales promotions. These writers forgot to identify the illogical reasoning used in the prompt. Because of that omission, they were immediately bumped to a 3 or down to the "lower half." The essays could have been well-written, used excellent syntactic variety, been organized logically with fully developed paragraphs, and yet the act itself defeated the test taker. While it is true that each issue or argument has no single correct answer, the methodology behind the writing assignment itself is also being evaluated and is weighted heavily. An English undergraduate major definitely has an advantage from this standpoint, and the weighting is illogical from a potential MBA perspective.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS EDUCATORS

As previously stated, the concept behind the GMAT is sound; the assessment process, overall, viable. The reason for a critical need for business educators to become aware of the problems surrounding the exam rest with factors that some do not think are valid criticisms. ETS has been scoring essays this way for many, many years and can "prove" the reliability and validity of the methods used. However, none of this proof addresses issues related to the use of English guidelines for assessment of potential skill in business writing.

Business professors should make an effort to contact ETS about reading for the GMAT. Taking part just once would provide business professors with an ability to develop assignments that would enable business undergraduates to compete successfully in GMAT writing assessment.

While the basic rules of grammar are the same in both writing for English and writing for business, development of thoughts and format for organization is not. Business needs graduate students who can organize their thoughts logically, a feat the issue essay writing assignment can measure. However, responding to an illogical argument may be penalizing students when what is needed to be measured is the ability to analyze points and develop alternative solutions to a problem, such as in case study analysis. Even though the functional value of the test and its relevance within a business education framework are questionable (Rogers & Rymer, (1995a, 1995b)), ETS will continue to invite readers to assess the GMAT writings. To prepare undergraduate business majors for possibly taking the test in the future, business professors must develop writing assignments that will better prepare the students for the demands of an unusual writing task. Mention of the GMAT can be made when describing the assignment in class.

For the argument, using a message such as one in which a customer has demanded a refund when some critical factor(s) in the situation make it a definite "No" would require the logical thought processes necessary to identify an illogical argument. Writing a response that takes specific points within such a request and builds upon them to develop the logic for the negative reply (implied or otherwise) will help students identify sound rebuttal to illogical reasoning used within an argument in the GMAT. In other communication in business classes, effort must be made to discuss writing efforts from the identification of supporting points on issues, the acknowledgment of both sides of an issue, and the recognition of illogical reasoning.

For the issue, a good selection might be emphasizing the descriptive development of detail in a message such as a memorandum informing employees that complimentary or "comp" time is good or bad. The students could take either the company or the employee point of view. This type of assignment is not just for business communication classes but can occur in a compensation class (human resource managers debating pros and cons) or a collective bargaining class (presenting the management or union sides). Information necessary to support or oppose comp time could be stressed with mention made of the GMAT test writing requirements. Being able to develop an idea using point-by-point identification, specific business examples, or personal experiences is superior to simply stating a fact. For business communication classes, this would fit well in persuasive writing assignments.

When evaluating case study reports, reward writing that uses logical development of important information. Omitting critical factors in analysis will always receive a deduction from strategy professors, but organization of ideas might not. Now is the time to add that component to an evaluation. The current under-representation of business faculty in the reading process gives business little input into changes that might be made in the GMAT assessment. If more business professors participate and voice their concern, perhaps GMAT will consider the criticisms that have been made by business writing professionals regarding the Analytical Writing Assessment. Contact: Educational Testing Service, ATTN: Essay Reading Office, P.O. Box 6666, Princeton, NJ 08543-6923.

In any business school, the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid or Keep it Short and Simple) should continue to be the primary factor in evaluating writing assignments. The key in that aspect of writing is the word complete. By making sure that students include all relevant or important information, their organization within the writing process will improve. Students who are trained to write effectively can do well in a future GMAT assessment.

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YES, LEADERSHIP SKILLS CAN BE TAUGHT IN THE BUSINESS WRITING CLASSROOM!

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ABSTRACT

The following paper addresses how the business writing course can develop managerial qualities, such as leadership, by restructuring the classroom as a business organization.

INTRODUCTION

The business writing course can develop managerial qualities by restructuring the classroom as a business organization. Conducting either the class or a specific exercise like a business will enable students to both (a) develop those managerial skills that business increasingly demands of employees; leadership, ethical behavior, critical-thinking, and a global attitude and (b) practice writing and speaking for different organizational levels--horizontal, vertical, and lateral communication.

WHY RESTRUCTURE

Traditional business writing classes are designed to effectively impart their theories, however,

> Theories learned in college are not always sufficient to manage novel situations. Skills in synthesis require practice. In our educational system it would seem that the lack of appropriate practice must surely account for many shortcomings in the development of synthesis abilities . . . Bloom believes that educators need to provide students with processes or methods for application and for critical thinking. After learning a process, students can more easily transfer their training to the solution of new problems (Reeves, 1990).

Students are learning principles, but not enough class time is spent *applying* principles, i.e., case discussion, in-basket exercises, simulations. By restructuring the classroom to learn how to apply managerial skills, students will have an increased "feel" for real-world activities and have the opportunity to "practice" what we educators "preach."

HOW TO STRUCTURE THE MOCK COMPANY

The classroom would be organized as a business. A fictitious or real organization could be chosen as the pseudo company. Outside research is made easier because well-known companies are written about in newspapers and periodicals. Also, if companies are located near the educational institution, a company representative may be called upon to speak with the class about how the company might address the skill area under study.

The class would be divided into groups that coincide with the departments/majors offered in the business school, such as accountancy, finance, management, marketing, etc. Each "department" consists of a "vice president"or group leader and a group of students. Example topics, situations within which to examine the topics, and the groups that could lead the exercises are:

Topic	Situation	Group to Lead Exercise
Leadership	Enact New Policy	President
Ethics	Insider Trading	Board of Directors
Global	Foreign Subsidiary	Marketing
Types of Letters		
Good News	Stock Options	President
Bad News	Product Tampering	Management
Persuasive	Early Retirement	Accountancy

WHAT METHODOLOGY/PROCEDURES TO USE

Although leadership is specifically discussed in the following paper, there are certain characteristics that should be present when learning any managerial skill.

Case Method and Non-lecture Formats Are Appropriate For Studying Managerial Skills. Reeves (1990) states that the "case method. . .stimulate(s) discussion of anticipated ethical dilemmas that allow participants to practice their responses." Additional technique suggestions are student originated cases, national case studies, and current event news items.

Groups Should Represent Different Levels of a Corporation. The restructured classroom should, "foster team work because teams learn faster than individuals because each member learns from others ("Survey in Management Education," 1991)." Discussion and assignments should include, "panel discussions, where students represent a certain perspective of executive-level cases such as CEO, union representative, general management, and the employee (Strong and Hoffman, 1990)."

Logistics are Important in Order to Avoid a "Three-Ring Circus." Although group work is recommended, energy is often poorly channeled, siphoned off, and drained by friction. To lessen this difficulty in focusing, key factors which contribute to committee success are listed (Nisbet, 1990; "Creating the Superteam," 1990). The number in a group should total between five and eight people. The group composition, if task-oriented, should be heterogeneous. If the task is complex with no clear outcomes, needing a consensus, the group should be homogeneous. The leader should have a strong personality. If possible, let a natural leader emerge. The teacher or facilitator should provide clear guidelines and expectations. However, the group should create its own clear charter and objectives. The teacher should get the discussion started, keep the lid on, and stay out of the way, i.e., facilitate, not preach. Active management involvement or interference can kill a team's creativity and morale. Team spirit is vital. Try to reward a successful team publicly and quickly.

WHY DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS

The following discussion considers how leadership could be addressed in the mock company framework. The statements on leadership are based primarily on a study that analyzed leaders of large, complex organizations. The subjects of the study included 204 presidents of companies listed in the 1989 edition of *The Corporate 1,000*. Letters and surveys were written to vice presidents asking them to evaluate their president in different categories.

What Is Leadership? "Leadership is all about influence, persuasion, and motivation--about making people want to do things your way (Crofts, 1991)."

Can Leadership Be Taught? "One of the problems with standard leadership courses is that they focus exclusively on skills and produce managers rather than leaders. Managerial skills can, of course, be taught. And they are useful skills for leaders to have. *The ingredients of leadership cannot be taught, however. They must be learned.* At bottom becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself (Crofts, 1991)."

Which Aspects of Leadership Should Be Avoided? "Leadership courses can only teach skills. *They can't teach character or vision* . . . Developing character and vision is the way leaders invent themselves (Crofts, 1991)."

Personal characteristics and traits are either in-born or are outside the purview of the business communication classroom. These traits are identified as (Truskie, 1990):

1. Dependable
2. Imaginative
3. Mature
4. Cooperative
5. Fair-Minded
6. Intelligent
7. Inspiring
8. Ambition
9. Competent
10. Honest
11. Caring
12. Loyal
13. Courageous
14. Determined
15. Forward-Looking
16. Straightforward
17. Broad-Minded
18. Independent
19. Self-Controlled
20. Supportive

Which Aspects of Leadership Should Be Addressed? "*Persuasiveness* is an attribute which few are born with, yet can be learned by most people (Crofts, 1991)."

Effective leaders were rated higher than the less effective leaders in each of the following ten skill areas rated. The most prominent difference was in the skill area of persuasiveness. Effective leaders stand out on this particular skill. Along with persuasiveness, other leadership skills that can be practiced in the business communication classroom are:

1. Persuasiveness	6. Listening
2. Analytical Skills	7. Creativity
3. Decisiveness	8. Diplomatic
4. Conceptual Skills	9. Self Planning
5. Speaking	10. Group Planning

How Can Leadership Be Practiced? "We create *case studies* in which delegates have to persuade one another. It could mean persuading people to do something they don't want to do, or motivating someone who has a performance problem -- tackling the poor performer (Crofts, 1991)."

Assignments could consist of writing and analyzing a case based on students' own work experiences, creating leadership guidelines or company charters, researching leadership styles of executives, or interviewing key management personnel (Strong and Hoffman, 1990). Students can also be given exercises which put them into leadership positions, and allow them to demonstrate how they approach tasks and hope to achieve results.

EXAMPLE EXERCISE TO PRACTICE LEADERSHIP

The following exercise shows how leadership could be addressed.

Class Topic. Leadership in the Workplace

Group Leading the Exercise. The Board of Directors group issues a letter advising of an internal audit of ethical behavior in the firm. The industry has been under fire for unethical practices. Therefore, each department, assuming leadership capacity, must report on (a) what departmental unethical behavior might be anticipated, and (b) how to address that behavior in the department and in the company.

Other Groups' Responsibility. Each group responds to the Board's letter by tailoring the response to its particular department's perspective. Each group will have experience deciding the lead it will take on ethical behavior.

Exercise. Each group submits a response to the Board. VPs have five minutes to present their departments' ideas at a senior management meeting. The "company" watches the proceedings. VPs try to persuade the company to adopt action plans or a code of ethics. The Board votes on which team's idea will be implemented. If a similar exercise is used three or four times during the school term, each person in the group will have a chance to be the leader and practice persuasion along with other leadership techniques. Students will come away with some new tools in their armory, and some definite ideas on how they are going to use them.

HOW TO EVALUATE THE OUTCOME

"Education is what you remember when you have forgotten what you were taught. It is very important that our courses help people to *change their behavior and use new skills* (Crofts, 1991)."

At the end of the leadership exercise the class will examine why the winning team was successful, and what leadership qualities were shown. A general discussion about the nature of leadership should naturally follow. In addition, classroom evaluation techniques could consist of the following: identifying leadership skills and behaviors in case work; studying successful leaders; consulting with company representatives to see how student generated action plans compare to a company's real solution.

WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF THE LEADERSHIP EXERCISE

The above exercise demonstrates how students can have experience in leadership in the business writing classroom. Along with leadership, students also have practice in: critical thinking, ethics, persuasion, interpersonal skills, written and oral communication, and realism.

Managerial skills, especially leadership, are important for students to practice before entering the business world. Students cannot be expected to effectively demonstrate a skill they have seldom practiced. The business writing classroom, as effectively as any business classroom, can assist students with leadership development experience.

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DETERMINATION OF EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENT COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES: AN INTEGRATED MARKET RESEARCH APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized market surveys and focus groups to develop business communication course content. Survey data collected prior to focus groups indicates that business communication faculty and employers, who would participate in the focus group, perceived interpersonal skills as the number one competency. Both groups ranked competence in the use of communication technology last. Placement of the five remaining competencies varied between the groups. Data provided by surveys completed by participants after the focus group indicates that both group changed their first ranking to cross-cultural communication with communication technology remaining last. Post focus group rankings by faculty placed oral communication competence second while the employer group ranked writing mechanics second. The remaining five competencies were ranked the same by both groups. Data gathered during the process provided the faculty a focus for course objectives, faculty input measurement, and methods to assess course outcomes. The entire process assisted the school in modeling continuos improvement while meeting accreditation requirements of AACSB.

THE CHALLENGES (AND PROSPECTS) OF PRESENTING A SEMINAR IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS COURSE ON-LINE

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ABSTRACT

The researchers describe the development and evaluation of a pilot course titled Seminar in Business Communications offered on-line as part of the MBA program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. While student evaluations were generally positive, the strongest reactions were to technological difficulties, as well as to the whole concept of "asynchronous collaboration," i.e., students contributing to on-line "discussions" at different times. Implications for this and other internet-based courses are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a dramatic increase in the past five years in the number of graduate and undergraduate courses that are taught via distance learning (James, 1997). Many of these courses use the internet as the primary means of communication between faculty and students, as well as among students. A recent article directed at Human Resource professionals discussed on-line master's programs at ten of what were described as the "best distance learning graduate schools," including Bellevue University, Colorado State University, George Washington University, Purdue University, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Maryland, and the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (Phillips, 1998).

One point stressed by Phillips (1998) is that these "on-line universities" provide students with the flexibility to take classes, while at the same time maintaining their work and home responsibilities. A unique feature of much on-line learning is "asynchronous collaboration," i.e., students and faculty can interact with each other and the course material at a time convenient to them, without the necessity of being in the same place (or even on-line) at the same time. This is obviously in strong contrast to the synchronous environment prevalent in most classroom settings.

Some researchers have suggested that the intensive use of technology will transform the manner in which management and business education is conducted (Alavi, Yoo, & Vogel, 1997). Alavi et al. (1997), for example, described an innovative approach by instructors at two universities to team-teach an internet-based information technology course, with students at both universities taking the same course at the same time. They present case study data indicating that this provided students with a superior mode of learning that what would be available in a traditional course taught by either instructor alone. Further, Fulk and DeSanctis (1997) have argued that electronic communications provide the following advantages over traditional, lecture-based education: increased speed of communication, lower costs, increased potential for media enrichment (e.g., multimedia), and ease of access to communicated messages.

Despite the many potential advantages of internet-based courses, there has been a lack of systematic research on the relative effectiveness of such courses vis-à-vis traditional, classroom-oriented courses (Moesel, Dass, Werner, & Fouts, 1998). Kroder, Suess, & Sachs (1998) described issues they faced in launching a web-based graduate course in a collaborative effort between the University of Texas-Irving and Pace University in New York. James (1997) described a survey of MBA graduates of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater on their reactions to a planned emphasis on on-line course offerings.

In this manuscript, we will describe the development and evaluation of the first MBA course to be offered on-line at the same university described by James (1997). Our results highlight both the challenges, as well as the prospects, of on-line course offerings, especially for business communications seminars.

BACKGROUND

The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater began planning an On-Line MBA program in the Fall of 1996. After researching several long-distance delivery systems, the LearningSpace software developed by the Lotus Corporation was selected as the primary instructional tool (IBM, 1996). As described in a White Paper entitled, “Distributed Learning,” the LearningSpace software includes five sections or work areas: schedule, mediacenter, courseroom, profile and assessment manager (IBM, 1996). These will be described briefly.

Schedule. The Schedule presents the instructional design and structure for the course as created by an instructor. From here, students are presented with a syllabus, learning objectives, exercises and reading materials. The Schedule can be designed on a modular or weekly basis. Schedule allows the instructor to structure the course around specific time frames, or provide a self-paced learning environment.

MediaCenter. MediaCenter is the second work area in Learning Space. The MediaCenter serves as the shared resource center, providing students with URL links, video clips, audio presentations, graphics, computer-based training (cbt), simulations and other multimedia applications. The MediaCenter can also allow instructors the ability to present additional information beyond assigned course content to allow students to explore intuitively, and hopefully learn in a way that is consistent with individual learning styles and needs (Kolb, 1984).

CourseRoom. The CourseRoom is an interactive learning environment in which students have discussions among themselves and with the instructor, as well as collaborate on team tasks and assignments. The CourseRoom allows asynchronous discussion among team members and with the instructor in a private or public environment.

Profiles. The Profiles work area is in effect a “home page” for the student. In their respective Profiles, students can provide as much or as little information about themselves as they feel comfortable doing. Common information found in a Profile includes contact information, photographs, and information about education, experience, and interests. Profile allows students to understand their virtual classmates better and better identify students with similar interests in the class.

Assessment Manager. The Assessment Manager is an evaluation tool for instructors to privately test and give feedback on student performance. Surveys, exams, quizzes, and self-study tests can be posted in the Schedule for students, and can be e-mailed back into the Assessment Manager module for private review by the instructor.

DEVELOPING THE ON-LINE BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS SEMINAR

In the Summer of 1997, Bambi Statz, a business communications faculty member, was given an informal two-day training session on how to use LearningSpace software to provide long-distance education. In the Fall of 1997, the first On-Line MBA course, Seminar in Business Communications, was offered. The majority of the course was taught over the internet. Two traditional course meetings took place at week 8 and week 15 of the semester. The course consisted of 12 full-time students and 7 part-time students. Twelve of the students were pursuing an MBA degree, while seven were pursuing other master's degree programs. On the final class meeting, students were asked to fill out a course survey. All students except one completed a survey.

GENERAL SURVEY RESULTS

Because of the experimental nature of the course, the students all lived within a commuting distance from the school and were able to attend a 2 ½ hour training session on using the LearningSpace software. Survey results indicated that thirteen of the students believed the training was sufficient, while six students did not believe the training was sufficient.

Students were able to access the course via two different methods: using an internet browser or using a lotus notes client. The advantage of using a lotus notes client is that it allows students to copy the course to their hard drive and then work off line. Once the student has completed his or her assignments, s/he can log on to the server once again, and replicate his or her work to the server for others to view. Five students used the lotus client to access the course, while 11 used the internet browser.

A computer lab was set up to allow students access to LearningSpace from the university if they did not have a computer. Five students accessed the course primarily from the computer lab, 11 students used their home computer, and 2 students used an office computer. Unfortunately, 15 students revealed that they had difficulty accessing the class more than 25 percent of the time.

The general portion of the survey asked student opinions based on a seven-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with "no opinion" as the midpoint.

TABLE 1: GENERAL OPINION SURVEY RESPONSES*

		SA	A	MA	NO	MD	D	SD
1.	This on-line course was as effective for my learning as traditional classroom courses I have taken.	3	12		1	1		1
2.	I was able to ask the instructor questions as often as necessary in this on-line course.	10	8					
3.	I felt the instructor's feedback on assignments was timely in this on-line course.	8	9	1				
4.	I had sufficient opportunity to interact with other students in this on-line course.	5	7	4		1	1	
5.	I felt I had adequate technical skills to succeed in this on-line course.	7	7	1	1	1		1
6.	Technical assistance was available as needed in this on-line course to remedy access or other problems.	2	3	2	5	3	2	1
7.	This on-line course included applied learning and problem-solving experiences.	8	9					1
8.	The materials in this on-line course were presented in a manner that made learning enjoyable.	5	9	3				1
9.	This on-line course offered an effective delivery method for the way I like to learn.	5	4	6	2			1
10.	I had sufficient time to complete assignments/projects in this course.	10	5	1		2		
11.	The course content in this on-line course was covered in the same depth as the content in a traditional course.	6	6	2	2	1		1
12.	The instructor was as accessible to me as an on-line student as she was to students enrolled in a traditional classroom course.	8	7	1	1	1		

13. I was comfortable with the degree of self-discipline required to participate in a course of this type.	7	9	2				
14. I plan to take another graduate course using this technology.	7	4	1	3		1	2

*SA= strongly agree; A= agree; MA= moderately agree; NO= no opinion; MD= moderately disagree; D= disagree; SD= strongly disagree

As students enrolled for this course, they expected a traditional meeting course. Two weeks prior to the course beginning, they were mailed a letter explaining the experimental nature of the internet course and were asked if they would be willing to participate. Three students dropped the course after receiving the letter, while 19 remained. The researchers expected a bias against the internet format because of the late notification of the course methodology, and because of some of the concerns raised in the feasibility study described by James (1997). The researchers hypothesized that students who signed up for a traditional course may not possess the qualities best suited for an internet course. If students believe they are best suited for traditional learning models, they may inherently resent the on-line teaching model.

For example, Marylhurst College in their publication "Succeeding with on-line courses" (Marylhurst College, 1997) asks student the following questions to see if on-line courses are right for them:

- Do you like to work independently?
- Do you need convenience and an adjustable schedule?
- Are you comfortable asking for clarification and continuing to ask when you need more information?
- Are you comfortable asking for clarification and continuing to ask when you need more information?
- Are you comfortable working at a computer?
- Do you have experience surfing the World Wide Web?
- Would you be comfortable e-mailing, phoning, or faxing your instructor if you had problems with anything in the course?

Even with the traditional course methodology bias, the overall course evaluations were positive. Sixteen students indicated that they would recommend taking this course using LearningSpace to a friend. Fifteen students agreed or strongly agreed that the on-line course offered an effective delivery method. Finally, 14 students agreed to some extent that the on-line course was covered in the same depth as the content in traditional classroom courses. Students averaged 6.1 hours of homework per week in the course.

While technical assistance appears to have been weak, the majority of the students felt they had adequate technical skills to succeed in the course. It is clear from this and other research that technical support is essential for students to view the on-line learning experience in a positive manner (Moesel et al., 1998).

Overall, students were pleased with their ability to ask instructors questions on-line, interact with other students and gain instructor feedback. The majority of students also believed the material was presented in an enjoyable manner and they had sufficient time to complete assignments.

Students were asked to rank the extent to which various components of the course were beneficial. The case studies, readings, and final project were perceived as the most beneficial aspects of the course, followed in descending order by the midterm project, discussions, a written journal and quizzes.

Finally, students were asked to provide additional comments. The following is a sample of some of the more common statements made by students concerning the on-line course:

"Basically, I like the course. What I don't like is the technical problems."

"Use more interactive tools like video, chatting with instructor and students."

"Directions could be clearer. Overall very good course and very convenient. I learned a lot."

"Get more involved discussion - arrange forum in 'real time' - like a chat room."

"Improve software when accessing this class over the Internet."

"The Internet course has been an exciting experience to me. I can allocate my time at my convenience. Hands on experience with current technology."

"Make the server run faster. I love Replication (via the lotus notes client)."

"I think the technical instructions at the beginning of the course could have been more thorough and perhaps everyone should have practiced getting in and out. The main frustration at the beginning of the course was accessing the class. I thought the content was good. I did enjoy physically meeting a few times so I could put names with faces."

RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO THE ON-LINE COURSE

Several changes are recommended based on the results of the student survey and faculty input:

1.Technical assistance will be improved through the use of video training segments provided on a course cd-rom. Students can launch the video segment and learn how to use the technology at their own pace.

2.Students will be encouraged to use the Lotus Notes client and replication for the courses, rather than the Internet option. Many students found slow access time due to using older computer hardware or a poor internet provider. Replication will allow these students to avoid most of the delays which caused considerable frustration for many students.

3.Faculty will be required to take a formal four-day workshop on developing on-line courses. The workshop will emphasize technical and methodological skills. The purpose of the workshop will be to teach faculty to use the technology to provide an optimal learning environment for the students.

4.Faculty audio and video lectures and demonstrations will be provided through the use of cd-rom technology. These lectures and demonstrations will provide students with the opportunity to view and hear explanations of complicated ideas. We believe the audio and video segments will also allow the student to develop a closer attachment with the instructor through the use of the student's visual and hearing senses.

CONCLUSION

The development of on-line curricula is a constant challenge. Selecting the appropriate long-distance educational delivery tool is only the first step. The lack of sufficient technical knowledge by both faculty and students presents many obstacles which must be overcome. The greatest barrier to overcome is in faculty and student perceptions concerning methodological changes, i.e., what a graduate course is and how it should be undertaken. Only if both parties can successfully change their idea of a "traditional" course can an on-line program be a success. Fortunately, many of the recommendations made above are being implemented in the next round of on-line courses offered at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Future research should examine the extent to which students' individual learning styles facilitate or hinder their abilities to function in an internet-based course. For example, David Kolb (1984) describes learners as varying along a continuum from "active experimentation" to "reflective observation" (see also Simon & Werner, 1996). It is expected that students with stronger preferences for learning via active experimentation would outperform students whose preferences are stronger for reflective observation. It is hoped that future evaluation efforts will provide answers to these and other questions. In any event, our initial efforts at evaluating an on-line Seminar in Business Communications course must be expanded and refined to help us and other educators provide the best possible on-line learning experience. Despite considerable interest (and even excitement) about on-line coursework, more work is clearly needed to refine and better evaluate the effectiveness of such efforts.

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