MAKING TEACHING MATTER: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF TEACHING BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The importance of students knowing how to communicate in the business world is widely recognized by the academicians and the practitioners. Most business schools require students to take a course in business communication. How effective are these classes? Who should measure the skill mastery of the students? Can practitioners and teachers work together to ensure students' competence in business communication? These are critical questions particularly in a year when ABSEL is working on "assessing the impact of experiential learning and simulations." This paper describes a model used by us in which students' written and oral presentation skills in our business communication class are assessed by an objective/external standard. The paper describes our three year journey and offers a framework for others who want their students' competence to be in line with the business world standards.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of teaching business students how to communicate effectively in the business world is well recognized by the academicians and the practitioners (Pollock, 2001; Robar, 1998; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). Making effective business presentations to others is an essential component of the business communication competency as is the skill of effective writing (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). Business schools, however, often do not get high marks for teaching their students such skills (Pfeffer and Wang 2002) even though group and individual oral presentations and written assignments such as papers and case analyses are often used in business curricula. The fact that business schools even have classes such as business communication, management communication and communication for managers (Knight, 1999) dedicated to teaching communication skills does not seem to have addressed the issue satisfactorily (Pfeffer & Wang, 2002). One has to wonder if a different approach is required to help the students learn what the employers expect. This paper describes a different approach used by a small mid-west university over the last three years. The specific focus of the paper is on an undergraduate business communication class but it will help the reader to know the general background for our efforts.

In the mid 1990's, the college of business and economics at this university was looking for ways to ebb its declining enrollment. It decided to distinguish itself from its competitors by adopting a competency based business curricula. In 1997, it adopted a model of twenty competencies which were divided into college level competencies, discipline level competencies and course level competencies. Two years later, communication was adopted as a college level competency for its general significance for all business students regardless of their majors. The planning taskforce directing the implementation efforts chose to use the training model – teach theory, give opportunity to practice the skill, and provide feedback. In addition, the task force decided to use real world standards to assess the students' acquisition of the competency. While all courses were required to emphasize the communication skill, the business communication class was an obvious target for concentrated effort in this area from the start. The rest of the paper describes these efforts and the results of these efforts in this specific class.

THE FIRST PHASE – WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

The business communication class (BUS 323) had been a part of business core requirements for business students for many years. It was a traditional class for sophomores and juniors where the basics of business communications such as group and individual business report writing, direct and indirect arrangement of letter writing, memo writing, employment communications (resumes, cover letters) writing and interviewing were taught. The students were assessed using the traditional means of written homework assignments, class participation and presentations, special

projects and exams. This class was in addition to the university's general education requirements of freshmen English composition and an introductory speech class. These two classes were pre-requisites for the business communication class. Before communication was accepted as a college level competency, the decision was made to specifically assess the written communication skills of our students in this class. It was a good way to establish a base

line for the skill levels of our students before any interventions were adopted.

ETS on-line EssayPrep was used to objectively measure the students' writing according to an outside standard. The results were alarming. Of the 107 students who took the test in the fall 1998, only 35.5% of them scored a "satisfactory" or higher rating (see Table 1-A).

Table 1-A
EssayPrep Test Results Before the Intervention

Ratings	# of Students	Percentage
Excellent/Very Good	1	2.2%
Satisfactory	7	15.5%
Lower Portion	27	60.0%
Unsatisfactory	10	22.2.%
Total	45	100%

The debriefing session, after the results were returned to the students, seemed to suggest that the students did not take the test or the skill too seriously. In the following semester, it was decided to allow students to write an essay, provide them specific feedback and then have them re-write the essay. The students were offered 5 "bonus" points for resubmitting the essay and an additional 5 bonus points if

they improved their score. The course had a total of 540 points. This intervention strategy seemed to have been effective (see Table 1-B). In the semester where this strategy was used the results before and after the intervention were significantly different as shown in Table 1.

Table 1-B
EssayPrep Test Results After the Intervention

Ratings	# of Students	Percentage
Excellent/Very Good	32	76%
Satisfactory	7	16.7%
Lower Portion	2	4.8%
Poor	1	2.4%
Total	42	100%

We drew some specific conclusions from this early experimentation (Sears & Pittenger, 2002). First, the students need focused, additional attention to assist them in developing their communication skills; second, it is possible to help the students to improve even within the confines of a single course; and third, the students respond to incentives. We believe these lessons are of importance to those who want to improve student writing in their courses.

THE NEXT PHASE – ORAL PRESENTATIONS

The results in the business communication class showed that the improvement in written communication competency as assessed by external objective standards needs intervention requiring focused assistance. It was, however, possible to improve the competency even within the confines of a single course. On the basis of these beliefs, communication was adopted as a college level competency

in 1999. A college wide three tier intervention and assessment system for specifically developing written communication skills, described elsewhere (Sears and Pittenger, 2002), was adopted. The focus of the business communication class was shifted to the development of oral presentation skills.

Again, the decision was to use external evaluation and standards for objectivity. A leading oral communication consulting firm headquartered in the region was hired. The instructor and a consultant from this firm worked together to jointly design a formal presentation evaluation form (see Figure 1) which was a combination of the consulting firm's check list and the instructor's previous form. In spring 2001, the individual student evaluations were videotaped in the classroom and mailed to the consulting firm for assessment. The students were instructed to give a 5 to 6.5 minute presentation on a topic selected by the student from a list (see Figure 2 for topic list) in a professional business attire. The assessment form was briefly reviewed with the students and they were shown a general short video on making

presentations. No specific discussion on how to make a successful presentation took place. The presentations took place in the regular classroom. The assignment was graded by the instructor in combination with the assessment provided by the firm. The student received the assessment from the consulting firm for feedback. At this time, they were also provided a video CD of their personal presentation. The results of this assessment are provided in Table 2-A.

Table 2-A
Oral Presentation Results – Spring 2001

Ratings	# of Students	Percentage
Above Average, competent (4)	3	6.8%
Slightly Above Average, competent (3+)	5	11.4%
Average, competent (3)	14	31.8%
Below Average yet competent (3-)	1	2.3%
Below Average, not competent (2+)	7	15.9%
Below Average, not competent (2)	12	27.3%
Poor, not competent (1+)	2	4.5%
Unacceptable, not competent (1)	0	0.0%
Total	45	100%

Note: Even though the scale ranked from 1-4 in the first version, the ratings used + and – to create greater differentiation.

As was the case with written communication, the student performance was lower than expected. Almost half of our students were deemed "not competent" by the consulting firm.

Again, an intervention strategy was devised. An entire class session (75 minutes) was spent emphasizing the elements of a successful oral presentation. In addition to reviewing the assessment form and watching the video, lengthy discussion on the video was conducted. Also, the students were shown four video presentations of peers from the spring 2001 semester who had received a score of 4 or 3+ from the consulting firm. Discussion was conducted on the characteristics of these presentations as well. The students were also encouraged to use the textbook chapter on oral presentation for guidance when preparing their presentations. Following the initial assessment, the consultant and the faculty member met again to review the assessment form. They agreed that expanding the assessment scoring scale from the original 1 to 4 scale to a 1 to 5 scale would allow greater differentiation resulting in more precise evaluation. In addition, the faculty member felt this expanded differentiation would provide detailed opportunities for improvement and more incentive for students' efforts to "move up" the scale.

Seventy one students were video taped and assessed in fall 2001 on their oral presentation skills. The detailed results are presented in Table 2-B. The intervention strategy was obviously effective. This time only 18% of the students were assessed to be "not competent."

Table 2-B
Oral Presentation Results – Fall 2001

Ratings	# of Students	Percentage
Excellent, competent (5)	0	0 %
Above Average, competent (4)	7	9.8%
Average+, competent (3+)	10	14.0%
Average, competent (3)	41	58.0%
Below average, not competent (2+)	8	11.2%
Below average, not competent (2)	5	7.0%
Poor, not competent (1)	0	0.0%
Total	71	100%

Note: Even though the scale ranked from 1-5 in the revised version, the ratings used + and – to create still more differentiation.

Encouraged by these results, in spring 2002, the intervention strategy was intensified. In the spring, one hundred minutes of the class time were spent on the subject of oral presentations. The assessment form was explained in much greater detail. Peer videos from spring 2001 and fall 2001 were used to illustrate the meaning of competent and not-competent for each of the assessment categories. The students were given explicit information on "appropriate attire." They learned to differentiate between business casual and professional business attire. The importance of correct audience analysis was highlighted. The students were sensitized to the fact that their audience

was the outside "real world" and not the academic community. The presentations were conducted in an executive seminar room instead of the regular classroom. This enhanced the importance of the project. The students were prohibited from using a podium which forced them to use their entire body for the presentation and be more prepared.

In the spring semester fifty two students were assessed. The detailed results are provided in Table 2-C. This time 100% of the students were assessed competent by the consulting firm. Obviously, there are lessons to be learned here.

Table 2-C
Oral Presentation Results – Spring 2002

Ratings	# of Students	Percentage
Excellent, competent (5)	0	0%
Excellent, competent (4+)	4	7.7%
Above Average, competent (4)	16	30.8%
Above Average, competent (3+)	15	28.8%
Average, competent (3)	17	32.7%
Below Average, not competent (2)	0	0.0%
Poor, not competent (1)	0	0.0%
Total	52	100%

Note: Even though the scale ranked from 1-5, the ratings used + for differentiation.

CONCLUSIONS

The experimentation and experience in our business communication class illustrates that the value of written and oral communication skill is not intuitively obvious to the students despite the common rhetoric about its importance. In addition, they are unable to perform up to the external standards without concentrated, focused and additional efforts on the targeted skill by the instructor. This helps explain why the employers often find the business school graduates lacking in communication skills they consider essential for effectiveness in the work place. The encouraging news, however, is that the situation can be remedied even within the confines of a single course. Many times the efforts are made to overhaul curricula, which can be tedious, time and energy consuming and beyond the efforts of an individual faculty member. This paper shows that an individual faculty member can make changes within his/her course to improve the students' communication skills. The suggestions are true for not just the communication class but for any class in which an instructor chooses to emphasize communication. On the basis of our results, here are our recommendations:

1. Define the specific aspects of the communication skills in operational terms. It may not be possible to sharpen student skills on all components of business communication in a single course. In that

case, one has to prioritize and focus on the highest priority item or two. For example, we chose essay writing in terms of written communication and effective individual oral presentation in terms of oral communication.

2. Select an outside assessment tool for objectivity and validity. No matter how we grade our students, eventually they have to perform according to the outside world standards. Actually, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) argue that grades are not a very good measure of students' learning. One can think of other advantages of using an outside assessment as well.

3. Go beyond explaining the general importance of the skill. Take the time to help students comprehend the elements of the measurement. Pryor and Schaffer (1997) argue that college graduates with higher "functional literacy" are better employed than the graduates with lower functional literacy. In other words, individuals perform better when they are better able to understand the information being presented to them.

4. Provide students with helpful resources specifically related to the skills being developed. Use a variety of medium to convey the information and allocate the necessary time to ensure discussion and comprehension of the materials. The resources can range from specific textbook chapters, journal

articles, videos, examples of good and poor performance on the skill and so on.

5. Provide students appropriate incentives for doing well. The targeted skills need to have appropriate weights and importance in the course design. For example, the importance of oral presentations seemed to have been enhanced in the students' eyes when location of the class was changed to a seminar room for video taping. As we all know, rewarding the right behavior is important in order to get the expected results (Kerr, 1975).

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FIGURE 1
XXXX UNIVERSITY / XXXX SPEAKER'S ASSESSMENT FORM

STUDENT NAME_____DATE_____
COURSE NUMBER AND TITLE_____

Circle the most appropriate response using the following scoring key:
5 indicates **excellent and competent**
4 indicates **above average and competent**
3 indicates **average and competent**
2 indicates **below average, not competent**
1 indicates **poor/unacceptable, not competent**

PART I: Evaluated by XXXX and Faculty

ORGANIZATION & PREPARATION	5	4	3	2	1

Clear, action-oriented objective, stated up front	5 4 3 2 1
Complete and accurate audience analysis; develops rapport	5 4 3 2 1
Ideas sequenced logically and smoothly	5 4 3 2 1
Comfortable with material; key-word outline—no manuscript	5 4 3 2 1
Questions answered skillfully	5 4 3 2 1
Effective ending summarizes and/or makes call for action	5 4 3 2 1
Time limit observed	5 4 3 2 1

VISUAL AID USAGE	5	4	3	2	1

Appropriate to audience and setting	5 4 3 2 1
Appropriate to presentation topic and content	5 4 3 2 1
Readability assured through adequate size and clarity	5 4 3 2 1
Paraphrased rather than read visual	5 4 3 2 1
Design simple, clean, appealing	5 4 3 2 1
Error free	5 4 3 2 1

DELIVERY—OVERALL	5	4	3	2	1

Eye contact used	5 4 3 2 1
Irritating "nonwords" (fillers)/annoying speech habits avoided	5 4 3 2 1
Stories and language appropriate to audience	5 4 3 2 1
Appropriate, tasteful dress exhibited	5 4 3 2 1
Body language appropriate, meaningful	5 4 3 2 1
Confident appearance exhibited	5 4 3 2 1
Conversational tone—not recited	5 4 3 2 1
Clear articulation	5 4 3 2 1

PART II: Evaluated only by XXXX

DELIVERY—SPECIFIC	5	4	3	2	1

Relaxation	5	4	3	2	1

Easy open posture, strong not slouched			5 4 3 2 1		
Head centered on shoulders, gaze level			5 4 3 2 1		
Body centered and grounded			5 4 3 2 1		
Muscles loose and easy; movement free and natural			5 4 3 2 1		
Face, including jaw, relaxed			5 4 3 2 1		
Breath deep			5 4 3 2 1		

Energy	5	4	3	2	1

Strong projection, not forced			5 4 3 2 1		
Emotional commitment to ideas (passion)			5 4 3 2 1		

Focus	5	4	3	2	1

Maintained strong connection with audience			5 4 3 2 1		
Developed rapport with audience			5 4 3 2 1		
Adjusted presentation to accommodate needs of audience			5 4 3 2 1		
Watched / "listened" to audience throughout presentation			5 4 3 2 1		

PART III: Evaluated only by professor

CONTENT	5	4	3	2	1

Information accurate and current			5 4 3 2 1		
Major points included			5 4 3 2 1		
Major points adequately supported and developed			5 4 3 2 1		
Statistics, anecdotes, quotes used appropriately			5 4 3 2 1		

OTHER	5	4	3	2	1	NA

Required references			5 4 3 2 1			
Required written documentation			5 4 3 2 1			

FIGURE 2
ORAL PRESENTATION TOPICS

Write your name to the *left* of the number of the topic you select.

1. Interview someone who is successful in the field you hope to enter. Profile this individual's background. Explain what makes him or her successful. In what ways can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track?

2. Interview someone who is successful in the field you hope to enter. Profile this individual's background. Explain what makes him or her successful. In what ways can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track? (Interview different individual.)

3. Interview someone who is successful in the field you hope to enter. Profile this individual's background. Explain what makes him or her successful. In what ways can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track? (Interview different individual than previous interviews.)

4. Conduct an informational interview with human resources or someone in your specific field with a company for which you would like to work. Profile this company. Explain why you think it would be a good employer. What constitutes a good employer?

5. Conduct an informational interview with human resources or someone in your specific field with a company for which you would like to work. Profile this company. Explain why you think it would be a good employer. What constitutes a good employer? (Different company than previous topic.)

6. Interview an entrepreneur. What "road" did this person follow which led to the current position? How can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track? Be specific.

7. Interview an entrepreneur. What "road" did this person follow which led to the current position? How can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track? Be specific. (Different individual than other interviews.)

8. Interview an entrepreneur. What "road" did this person follow which led to the current position? How can this audience use this information to develop a successful career track? Be specific. (Different individual than other interviews.)

9. What is the state of the "Glass Ceiling" in the workplace today? Review several types of occupations/careers. Include specific information. Then interview women in different types of positions at a specific company to learn their perceptions.

10. Interview the Dean of the College of Business and Economics. What is a competency? What are the competencies that are important to XXXX the College of Business and Economics? Why? How are they important? How are they assessed? How do they fit into the strategic plan?

11. Interview the Director of Student Activities, and/or the Director of Orientation and Greek Affairs; and one Student Intern in the Student Activities area. What process does XXXX use to develop and market student involvement? What types of activities are available? How might these enhance the career path? How can student involvement be increased?

12. Interview an individual from a non-English speaking nation that trades with the United States. Inform the audience of customs specific to that country that would have a definite impact on businesspeople. Ex.—clothes, food, gifts, names, letters, holidays, appointment times, high-context culture (less on words and more on context of nonverbal actions and environment to convey meaning) or low-context culture (rely more on words, less on circumstances and implied meaning). How would you communicate? Show how cultural differences can lead to miscommunication.   Be specific.

13. (Select a country from a *different continent* than the previous topic.) Interview an individual from a non-English speaking nation that trades with the United States. Inform the audience of customs specific to that country that would have a definite impact on businesspeople. Ex.—clothes, food, gifts, names, letters, holidays, appointment times, high-context culture (less on words and more on context of nonverbal actions and environment to convey meaning) or low-context culture (rely more on words, less on circumstances and implied meaning). How would you communicate? Show how cultural differences can lead to miscommunication. Be specific.

14. Review four web sites for the job search. How do you use them? Describe their content. Are they helpful? When? How? Select the best two sites. Review their links.

15. Visit the Toastmasters' Web site **www.toastmasters.org** or **www.toastmasters.com**. Review the linked pages about listening, speaking, etc. Evaluate the information for the class. What tips for successful public speaking do they offer? How could Toastmasters help improve your communication skills?

16. Persuade XXXX sophomores or juniors to complete an internship at the company or organization where you completed your internship or are currently employed. What are the advantages at that specific company? What are the responsibilities of an intern? What skills or learning can be acquired here?

17. Persuade XXXX sophomores or juniors to complete an internship at the company or organization where you completed your internship or are currently employed. What are the advantages at that specific company? What are the responsibilities of an intern? What skills or learning can be acquired here? (Different company than previous topic)

18. Interview the Director of Community Service. What service opportunities are available? Where is the greatest need for volunteers? Persuade the audience that all college students should be required to complete a stated number of hours of community service during the junior/senior year. Provide details, including number of hours. How would this enhance your career path?

19. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of telecommuting. Use the company where you are currently employed or completed an internship to demonstrate the feasibility of doing so. Select companies who do encourage telecommuting as examples.

20. Telephone vs. e-mail—which is a more effective way for communication a.) with other employees and b.) with customers. Discuss priority given to e-mail vs. telephone. Give specific company examples. Discuss e-mail etiquette—what is it? Provide tips and specific examples.

21. You are a family member and an employee in a family-owned business. Explain to the audience why you are qualified to speak on this topic. Inform the audience of the advantages and disadvantages of employment within a family-owned business. Be specific. How will you use your background in your chosen career path? What are your future opportunities?

22. You are a family member and an employee in a family-owned business. Explain to the audience why you are qualified to speak on this topic. Inform the audience of the advantages and disadvantages of employment within a family-owned business. Be specific. How will you use your background in your chosen career path? What are your future opportunities?

23. You are an employee but *not* a family member in a family-owned business that employs other family members. Explain to the audience why you are qualified to speak on this topic. Inform the audience of the advantages and disadvantages of employment within a family-owned business. Be specific. How will this background benefit you in your chosen career path? What are your future opportunities?

24. Anderson Consulting recently renamed its company to Accenture. Why? Detail the change: how they educated employees and informed the public.

25. Persuade the audience to join the student chapter of your professional organization. Be specific and persuasive. Analyze cost vs. benefits, etc. What programs/speakers are scheduled?

26. What is the employment outlook in three career areas of interest to you? Be specific and detailed--beginning and average salary information, forecasted number of openings, geographic locations, future opportunities, impact of local and national economy on job market, etc.

27. What franchise would offer the best investment opportunity for an entrepreneur in your field? Contact this franchise for relevant, up-to-date information. Provide specific details for entering the franchise, locations, opportunities, etc.

28. What kinds of gifts are appropriate for businesses to give clients and customers? What seasons do companies consider are appropriate for giving gifts—i.e., what is considered the holiday or gift-giving season? Give specific company examples. How does culture impact this?

29. Interview XXXX Athletic Department, the Marketing/Public Relations Director and/or the Director of Athletics. Describe how XXXX markets its athletic events to a.) the community and b.) the students. What suggestions would you offer to increase attendance at athletic events?

30. Interview the Vice-President of Enrollment Management and/or the Director of Admissions. Explain how XXXX markets itself to prospective students. Show samples of marketing materials. What suggestions do you have to enhance this strategy?

31. Interview the Director of the Writing Center or a Writing Assistant to learn how to benefit from the Writing Center. Be specific. Review the XXXX Writing Center Web Site. What does it offer XXXX students? What links does it offer? How can this site help students?

32. Using one of the companies discussed in the text, do additional research to analyze the company's culture and communications. Are the text examples and information up to date? If not, why not and what needs to be changed? Examine the company's web site--to what audience is it geared? Is it appropriate? Useful?

33. Describe and demonstrate three different types of visuals that are appropriate for oral presentations. Demonstrate the benefits and limitations of each. When would each of these be effective and appropriate?

34. What scams are on the Federal Trade Commission's List of Top 10 Consumer Scams? Why do people fall for them? How can consumers avoid falling for them? Explain in detail one or two of these scams.