

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 15, 1988

COMMUNICATING IN CONTEXT: A SIMULATION FOR LEARNING BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Students can learn oral and written communication best if they actually communicate rather than if they sit and listen to someone else tell them how to communicate. This paper describes a simulation for undergraduate business communication courses in which students learn to write business letters, memos, reports, etc. and to conduct interviews and small group meetings in the setting of classroom companies.

INTRODUCTION

Business communication courses are required at more and more colleges. They have generally evolved out of the Business English courses designed primarily to teach secretarial skills from spelling to formatting to grammar. As secretarial programs have been phased out, managerial or business administrative courses have replaced them. Demands by the public for literate graduates and by students for "relevant" courses have affected their content. So too has the recent research into the composition process, especially by English department faculty, coupled with a scarcity of English department positions. As a result of these movements, business communication courses are often taught by those with training in the humanities or in the secretarial sciences. This history influences both what and how business communication is taught.

THE PROBLEM: LECTURE-AND PRACTICE TEACHING

If we judge by the undergraduate textbooks, students in business communication courses are supposed to learn communication theory, business writing, and oral communication skills. The texts provide information about each topic--for example, what information progress reports contain, how memos are typically formatted--and exercises at the ends of the chapters (or in an applications workbook). This organization implies that teachers will use a lecture-and-practice teaching method: teachers will review and perhaps supplement the information of each chapter, then ask students to duplicate the advice in their own work

This model has presumably been borrowed from English teachers who teach academic composition. In such courses, students are often assigned topics from their experience or from their reading and are asked to produce, say, a comparison-and-contrast essay. The major difference between what English composition

teachers do and what business communication teachers do concerns the subject matter itself: in English courses students are usually taught to recognize and use various organizational categories: induction, deduction, problem-and-solution, extended definition, etc. By contrast, business instructors divide writing topics first by format; separate lessons explain letter, memos and reports. The subdivisions within chapters follow the different organizational patterns: "good news" or "neutral" letters should be direct (or deductive), "bad news" letters should be indirect (or inductive), and persuasive letters should follow a somewhat more complicated but equally prescribed pattern.

After (usually after) they have "finished" learning about writing, business students learn about oral communication in the form of interviews, meetings, and formal presentations. Again, as occurs in most speech classes, students learn about each subject and then practice it. Typical assignments include role playing an interview or a meeting based on an imaginary business situation or presenting a short speech to the class.

there are several problems with this lecture-and-practice model for business communication course. First, the students do not usually get very much practice. Even if they write as often as once a week, they usually practice each format only a couple of times. Watching or participating in one meeting is hardly sufficient to make a student adept in meetings. As a result, they tend to learn about communication more than they learn how to communicate.

Second, the imaginary situations--the cases, as the textbooks call them--can all be "solved" best by saying Of course, it depends on the relationships between the real Mr. X and Ms. Y. In other words, no matter how much detail the cases provide, the students bring their own personalities and histories to the situations and cannot react as if they are 45-year-old personnel managers or stubborn and authoritarian finance directors when they role play or write.

third problem with the lecture-and-practice method of teaching is that it operates from the academic model that students are apprentices learning from expert teachers. On the one hand, this is accurate: teachers do in fact know more than students, and students must show their teachers that they have learned how to do the particular skill under investigation.

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On the other hand, this academic model is inaccurate in business. There the writer or speaker knows more than the audience, and the point of writing or speaking is to provide the audience with information it does not already have. - Learning to communicate well in business is, in large measure, learning to appreciate the importance of the unknowledgeable audience.

THE SOLUTION: SIMULATION TEACHING

The Solution to these problems is an in-class simulation of businesses which requires all students to communicate every time the class meets. A simulation provides students with a meaningful audience, people who won't buy the product if the sales letter is poor and who feel hurt if the employment rejection letter is too strong. Still, each writer is in a protected environment where the audience can report back to him or her on the strengths and weaknesses of the communications.

Second, a simulation allows students to be involved with each other over time so that their interactions can develop histories. In other words, their oral confrontations are real. A student in a supervisory role who yefls at a subordinate" for being absent or not getting the work done on time must live with the results of the subordinate's reaction. From such interactions students can learn which personalities are encouraged by a gentle prod and which need a sound beating. Again, though, an inappropriate interaction really does not cost the supervisor her job, for the company roles last only as long as the college term.

Third, a simulation encourages students to communicate, hence, to collaborate, to take advantage of all the resources at their disposal. In business, employees will often be told to write a report to Sam about that, why don't you?" In such a situation, they must recognize whether or not they know how to carry out the task, and if they do not, they must learn who can tell them. A mature adult recognizes when to ask for help; a simulation encourages students to seek help from colleagues before they have wasted time doing the wrong thing. They learn to regard collaboration as productive rather than to think of it as cheating. Recognizing when they know enough to do an assignment helps them regard themselves as experts instead of apprentices; self-confidence becomes evident in their writing and speaking.

THE SPECIFICS: REPORT WRITING COMPANIES

I have devised a classroom simulation for business communication students in which companies of five or six employees produce reports summarizing business journal articles. In particular the semester-long simulation is divided into an organization phase and a

longer conducting business phase.

Stage One. Organization

The organization period begins the first day when I ask for volunteers to be company presidents, one to head up a company that will produce a compilation of summaries of marketing articles, one for an accounting article compilation, etc. After that, I act as a consultant, invited to all meetings, sent copies of all written communications, and available to help students solve problems. Occasionally, I lecture on topics that I believe need special emphasis.

The presidents begin their work by writing job advertisements and placing them on a table where the applicants can read them. The potential employees write resumes and cover letters and "send" them to any two presidents. As soon as they are ready, the presidents write letters inviting various applicants for interviews, and they reject other applicants. The presidents then interview the applicants and write letters of acceptance to any five they choose. They send letters of rejection to the others.

While the potential employees are waiting to hear whether or not they have been accepted for an interview or for a Job, they examine the journals in the library that pertain to their own major, perhaps finance or management. Based on criteria they devise themselves, students write recommendation reports to the president whose company will be compiling its report on article summaries in their major. This recommendation report suggests which journals should be included in the final report. To clarify, accounting majors write to the president of the accounting report company, suggesting which journals are best for a report summarizing accounting articles. (Of course the accounting report president does not have to choose all accounting majors.) By the end of the fourth week, I assign anyone not yet accepted into a company to any left over positions.

Stage Two: Conducting Business

The next phase of the simulation is devoted to the work of the company, that is, of compiling the final report. Each employee is responsible for writing i characterization of one business journal and for summarizing a specified number of journal articles. In a company meeting, the group itself determines how many articles will be summarized. Each employee must also edit the drafts of another employees summaries. The final report with summaries of, say, marketing articles, is distributed to anyone in the class--or theoretically, outside it--who orders a copy. Students are graded only on the work they do

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individually; there is no group grade for the report produced.

In addition, each student, including the president, receives a job description," listing other assignments and guaranteeing that each student will write a comparable number and type of memos and letters and will participate in interviews and meetings. Each assignment refers the student to readings in the textbook or to handouts in the coursepack. During this phase, employees have different tasks. For instance, while one employee is determining the order of the articles in the final report, another is enticing classmates to order a copy, and a third is writing the transmittal document which will accompany the report.

Although some assignments require writing a memo or leading a meeting, most leave employees free to choose the channel of communication. For example, the enticement to order a report may be a 'direct mail piece' distributed to all members of the class, a billboard notice on the blackboard, a verbal presentation, etc. (One student even pre-recorded TV ad which he showed during class.)

Few assignments have a firm deadline or length. True to the business setting, certain duties must be taken care of at once and according to a prearranged schedule, but many may be done 'any time this week. Students must be responsible to themselves and to those who are dependent on them to yet their work done. I provide a tentative schedule by which students can judge whether they are delaying other employees from completing their work on time. Making deadlines flexible within limits recognizes students as responsible and busy adults; I like to show college students this respect--even if some of them prefer firmer deadlines.

Toward the end of the semester, each employee conducts and is given a performance appraisal. At this time, too, each president resigns and applies for a job at another company. He or she provides letters of recommendation from employees in the original company, thereby also learning about his or her strengths and weaknesses. A search committee interviews candidates and makes an offer to one before the semester ends. In every way each activity has been designed to be as close to the real Situation found in business as is possible and to include every employee in every sort of activity.

Summing Up

During the last week, the simulation is dropped. At this time each individual writes a memo report to me analyzing the company's communication climate and evaluating the communication effectiveness of its employees. Guidelines for writing this memo refer students to the theoretical chapters of the

communication textbook.

This final report forces students to draw generalizations from the dozens of examples of good and bad communication they have witnessed and provided during the semester. It is each student's own 'manual of good communication techniques, his or her mini-textbook. This assignment counts heavily (15% of the final grade) because I want students to recognize what they have learned from the simulation I want them to be able to specify precisely the differences between effective and poor communicators.

The Disadvantages

Although the simulation I have developed does solve the problems mentioned above, it does not solve every problem and, of course, it even creates certain problems of its own. First, the teacher loses a certain amount of control. Within their companies, the students themselves make a tremendous number of decisions about the final report: they write the guidelines for the length of each summary; they decide how many (above a minimum of two) summaries each person must write; they decide if the report will have a theme; they decide the journals from which the articles to be summarized may be chosen; they decide how up to date the articles must be; and they decide whether the summaries will have headings, will be single or double spaced, etc. They can also call meetings during class when they want to (unless I am lecturing)

Sometimes students make decisions (or fail to make decisions) that destroy group cohesiveness. In the role of consultant, I am often torn between leaving the president alone to deal with a problem (say, the absenteeism of an employee) or interfering before I am called in. (After using the simulation for several semesters, I now step in as soon as I see a problem developing. Most of the presidents are inexperienced enough that they cannot solve a problem that has been allowed to grow.)

A second problem is that students are still actually writing for a teacher expert. They send their employment letters and resumes of to the presidents, and they hope they will be accepted for an interview--but they hope even more that I will like the material they sent. There is no way around the fact that the teacher is responsible for grading students. And when my judgment differs from that of a president, the notion that grading is completely subjective is reinforced. This is a problem for which I do not know a solution.

From my point of view, these are the only major problems. Colleagues ask howl can tell if each student is doing what he or she is supposed to do; they want to know whether the class is chaotic. The classroom looks chaotic sometimes, but it really never is.

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The tentative schedule tells me what each student should be doing; I have enough time during class to check with each student periodically to determine if the work is getting done. In addition, each student must copy me on all written work and invite me to see all oral work; if three letters corresponding to a certain assignment are in my file of papers to be graded, I seek out the student with the same job in the fourth company to find out where the same assignment is. This is not difficult since I set my grade book up according to job title.

Colleagues have also asked me what I do if the number of students is uneven or if someone stops attending midterm. The simulation is designed so that one person's position interacts with other employees less than the rest. For example, during the job appraisals four of the employees are paired so that each appraises another's work and has his appraised by yet a third employee. The student in the less interactive position is assigned to ask the president for a raise instead. During the interview that follows, the president appraises that employee's work. Later, that employee writes a letter of recommendation for a presidential candidate, thereby appraising someone else.

Each company ideally has five employees and a president, but some presidents are advised in the first weeks not to hire for the less interactive position. Students wanting extra credit can do some of the work assigned to this position; if no one wants extra credit and I think the president will not face a situation of appraising someone, I sometimes ask for a raise as consultant. At worst, the assignment is skipped. Since students end up adding assignments to their job descriptions regularly, I do not worry about this.

Although I have not lost a student during the semester yet, two solutions to this problem come readily to mind. The student in the least interactive position in another company could be hired into the vacancy, or students within the company could do the work and earn extra credit. In addition, a president can always fire an employee as long as at least one company has the less interactive position open.

Finally, colleagues ask what happens when the president is not a strong leader. Just what you would expect: problems develop and I intervene more. Natural leaders take over the meetings, and group cohesiveness usually suffers. No one in the group is hindered from earning a top grade, though, so most students simply make the best of the situation and wish they had been hired into another company. The reports analyzing the company often show that the students in a poor company have learned more than those in a good one.

FINAL ADVANTAGES

The simulation I have designed is flexible. Any of the standard business communication textbooks is compatible with it. Instructors can make changes to the schedule to accommodate 50-minute class periods, 90-minute classes, or 3-hour classes. It can be modified for 10-week quarters or 16-week semesters.

More importantly, individual teacher preferences can be incorporated. I lecture now and then on my pet topics; others might want to lecture more or less. I require all students to learn and use word processing software. I allow any assignment to be handed in for my comments in draft form as long as this is done before the assignment needs to be sent to its "real audience." could make the deadlines less flexible. Some terms I give exams on the material in the textbook; some terms I do not. On the days I do not lecture, I allow students to leave the classroom after I have taken attendance and (distributed the mail and homework. Some terms I grade everything students write; some terms I pick out certain assignments that I will grade and let them pick out three or four other ones; the rest they must do (to keep the companies going) and show me, but on these they get only a check, check plus or check minus to indicate my evaluation of the quality. Finally, some terms I build in a non-simulation class now and then in which we assess the advantages and disadvantages of the simulation from the "outside."

Because the simulation is a novelty, students generally like it. Even in a public state university, they like to become acquainted with each other, and they appreciate not having the same method used in every class they take. Most seem to improve their writing skills at least as much as they do when the teacher uses the lecture-and-practice method, and they unquestionably improve their oral skills in meetings and interviews much more. I'd never go back.