

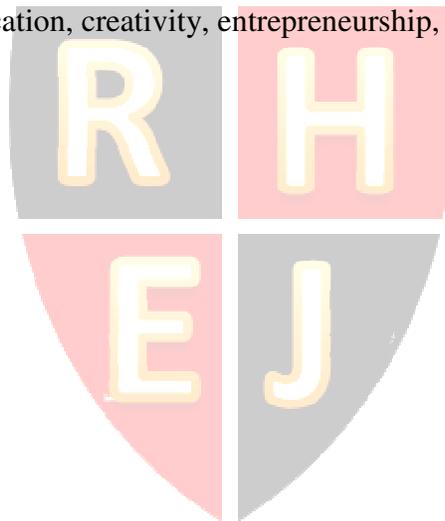
## **Entrepreneurial creativity as a convergent basis for teaching business communication**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century” business skills of communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, creativity arguably receives among the least explicit attention in traditional business core curricula. With that in mind, the context of entrepreneurial creativity is put forth as a basis for teaching business communication. By using creativity as a convergent link between business communication and entrepreneurial studies, coursework can be defined to achieve the conceptual coverage and skill-building objectives of both topics without sacrificing the identity of either. This coursework – grounded in the pedagogical literature and taken as a whole – can provide a cohesive basis for a creativity-framed business communication course.

Keywords: business communication, creativity, entrepreneurship, business curricula



## INTRODUCTION

A recent survey by the American Management Association (AMA) emphasized the importance of “21st Century Skills” – namely the “4C’s” of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Reilly 2011). The survey was followed by renewed calls and prescriptions for an increased focus on these skills as part of financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial education (e.g., Glenn 2011; Gregg 2011).

Business educators have long directed their attention to communication and collaboration via well established core classes such as business communication and organizational behavior. Critical thinking also has received due consideration via traditional problem solving and analysis courses such as business statistics and strategic management. However, creativity arguably has been relegated to a less direct treatment in business core curricula. While this trend may be changing as more business schools directly cover creativity as a specific topic (Shinn 2003), such coverage will need to be balanced within core curricula that are not boundless.

With the goal of incorporating the topic of creativity into traditional business core curricula, the context of entrepreneurial creativity is put forth as a basis for teaching business communication. Ultimately, by using creativity as a link, coursework can be defined to achieve the conceptual coverage and skill-building objectives of both entrepreneurial and communication topics.

## BACKGROUND

Entrepreneurship and business communication each are focused on a defined set of concepts and skills that are framed primarily within the context of business. At the same time, their respective studies lie at the crossroads of several disciplines; and as such, each is not entirely unified in its focus. Underneath it all, creativity can provide a convergent point between the two studies.

### Business Communication

Business communication has been described as a hybrid discipline – originating more from a problem solving mission rather than from a subject matter – with connections to areas such as rhetoric, communication, and management (Shaw 1993). Pedagogically, this has resulted in a range of business communication courses that – while focused on a common set of skills and processes (particularly writing and presentation) – are couched within a varied set of contexts or themes as defined by a particular course’s assignments (Bayless and Johnson 2011; Johnson 2011; Laster and Russ 2010; Mitchell and Durham 2010; Russ 2009).

### Entrepreneurship

Similar to business communication, the domain of entrepreneurship spans numerous liberal arts and business disciplines that have a common interest in certain entrepreneurial themes (Ireland and Webb 2007). In addition, entrepreneurial studies tend to be process-focused (with particular attention given to business plans), favoring courses such as small business management and new venture creation over innovation and creativity (Solomon 2007). This

business-centric imbalance can be potentially problematic in a field that requires more left-brain creative skills; and it has prompted the question as to whether or not business schools can meet the challenge of educating entrepreneurs (Kirby 2004).

## **Creativity**

Creativity is seen as a critical component of business practice and a key to competitiveness (Florida 2004; Junarsin 2009). Yet, business school graduates and recruiters alike report an inadequate development of non-technical skills such as creativity (e.g., Mill 2007). This problem might be resolved via cross-disciplinary efforts that look to go outside of the business school and borrow creativity expertise from the performing and fine arts (Shinn 2003) and from design-related disciplines (Penaluna and Penaluna 2009). Another resolution might look to build upon convergent topics (e.g., managerial creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence) that can be brought together in a single business course conducive to conceptual coverage as well as skill development (Fekula 2011).

## **CONVERGENT COURSE DESIGN**

The convergent characteristics of entrepreneurial creativity and business communication go beyond their multidisciplinary. As noted in Table 1 (Appendix), literature reviews of creativity (Kampylis and Valtanen 2010) and of business communication (Shelby 1993) reveal a parallel set of foundational elements pertaining to individual-level processes and skills that are further defined by their context and outcomes.

It is within these latter two elements – context and outcomes – that the convergence takes on pedagogical implications. Specifically, business communication course content can be framed by the complementary context of entrepreneurial creativity, with the outcomes (or deliverables) defined to accomplish the process-focused and skill-building goals of both disciplines. As such, business communication coursework becomes the foundation of this framework.

### **Business Communication Course Content**

Most business communication courses revolve around a combination of writing exercises and presentations as indicated by the following commonly covered topics (Russ 2009): written communication (including formatting business documents and using correct grammar and structure); public speaking (including using visual aids and delivering individual and group presentations); and persuasive and ethical communication. Specific process-related skills also are among the most covered topics, including: mediated communication (e.g., using email, etc.); interpersonal communication (e.g., giving and receiving feedback); and group communication (e.g., participating in group meetings).

### **Entrepreneurial Creativity as Context**

A focus on specific communications skills and processes (rather than a particular subject area) requires a corresponding communications-intensive context that lends itself to the generation, organization, documentation, and presentation of messages and outcomes.

Entrepreneurial creativity (and innovation) provides such a context. A course on creativity and innovation steps away from the usual tendency of entrepreneurial studies to employ a business plan as the main pedagogical deliverable. On the contrary, creativity and innovation are not business-focused but are more so based on observations, ideas, and solutions – mechanisms that can be readily placed into business communication deliverables.

## **CREATIVITY-FRAMED BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS**

With the above goal in mind, creativity and innovation course topics and exercises are described with respect to specific business communication outcomes, which in turn are supported in the pedagogical literature. These exercises – taken as a whole – can provide a cohesive basis for a creativity-framed business communication course.

### **Exercise 1: Creativity Profile**

Students are paired up to interview each other (see Fellers 2008 for an example) to collect information for a short (1-2 minute) oral presentation at a future class meeting. In addition to collecting background information about the student, questions can include:

- What are your interests; and what are your strengths and weaknesses?
  - Do you think you are creative; and what is the most creative thing you have ever done?
- Follow-up, exploratory questions can be posed to the class (after the presentations), including:
- How would you define creativity? Is it an action (process) or an ability (skill), or both?
  - Why would you take a class on creativity? Do you think creativity is important to business?

The exercise introduces students to each other and to the topic of creativity, with learning points related to oral presentations, interviewing and peer review and editing.

#### Oral Presentations

This exercise does not need to be enhanced by the use of visual tools or technology. Incremental development of oral presentation skills can employ a brief introductory presentation so as to use examples to start the discussion about effective techniques (McNeely and Roach-Duncan 2011). In the case of the introductory creativity profile, a variation of the exercise can even take on elements similar to the introduction of a speaker (e.g., Devet 1995).

#### Interviewing

Student presentations can prompt exploratory questions such as: How well did your classmate describe you; and what worked well during your interview? Discussion of the interview process and teaching interviewing skills are quite fitting to a business communication class – not only because it is an important communication skill, but also because it can be a basis for teaching writing and editing (Decarie 2010).

#### Writing, Peer Review, and Editing

Using interviewing to teach writing and editing can be enabled by a variation on this exercise whereby students write brief memos describing their interviewee. This variation provides an ideal opportunity to introduce editing by way of peer review, a technique that has proven to be an effective (and well established) tool in business communication classes (Rieber 2006). In particular, the interviewees are vested in the peer review as they can offer input not

only about the writing mechanics and structure, but also about the accuracy of the written description (for which they are the subject).

### **Exercise 2: Annoyance “Bug” Report**

Students compile a list of things that annoy or “bug” them with a very brief reason as to why they are annoying (e.g., Kim and Fish 2009). Using group brainstorming, numerous bugs can be increasingly identified and/or selectively pared down. This exercise introduces students to the idea of problems and opportunities with learning points related to brainstorming, categorization (i.e., “chunking”), and writing for the web.

#### Brainstorming

Students can use brainstorming techniques simply by posting bugs via an electronic discussion forum, with multiple rounds of posting (e.g., 10 bugs per student per round) to take advantage of ideas promoting more ideas. Interestingly enough, brainstorming and the Delphi Method were prescribed three decades ago as useful creativity-enhancing tools for a business communication class (Golen et al. 1983).

#### Chunking/Categorization

Students can select (from among the group’s list) the bugs that they consider to be the most annoying, and then use categorization (“chunking”) techniques to organize them by context/subject or type/nature of the problem. The result can be presented in a memo or table using visual layout to take advantage of the chunked information, a skill that is relevant to business communication (Dyrud 1996).

#### Writing for the Web

In addition, chunking techniques are particularly useful when writing for the web (Gregory 2004), a technique that concerns structured summarization/presentation and thus is quite fitting to business communication course content. As such, students can translate the chunking effort directly into a web-formatted report, where the content is written specifically for scan-ability and layout (e.g., use of headings, subheadings, bulleted lists, font emphasis, shortened wording, etc.).

### **Exercise 3: Presentation of Ideas**

Students generate, categorize, and organize ideas as possible solutions to problems. Divergent thinking – generating more and varied ideas – is an important aspect of entrepreneurial creativity (Schmidt, Soper, and Facca 2012); and there are numerous visualization methods, including concept and mind mapping, that help to generate creative ideas (see Higgins 1996 for examples). This exercise introduces students to idea generation, with learning opportunities related to the use of concept or mind mapping, audience analysis, and structured presentations.

#### Concept and Mind Mapping

Concept and mind mapping are used to diagrammatically generate ideas via hierarchies or branches that systematically extend an idea into more and/or tangential details. Mapping is not limited as a creativity tool (Higgins 1996) – it also has been used in business communication

classes to generate ideas for reports and presentations (e.g., Maas and Burgess-Wilkerson 2011; McNeely and Roach-Duncan 2011).

### Audience Analysis

In addition to generating ideas, students develop a profile of the likely audience for each of the possible solutions. Appropriately addressing the audience is an important aspect of business communication; and there are various methods and exercises (that would be applicable to this exercise) for identifying, targeting, and evaluating the audience for written or oral reports (e.g., Albers 2003; Callison and Lamb 2004; Holsst-Larkin 2008; Hovde 2000; Magnifico 2010; Smart 2000).

### Structured Presentation

While large presentations often are back-loaded to the end of the semester, such projects can benefit from an earlier placement (Bayless 2004). In this case, the classroom in particular benefits from being able to see all of the different ideas that were generated by each group.

## **Exercise 4: Innovative Solution Proposal**

For the final deliverable, students select one of their ideas as the basis for proposing an innovative solution. The proposal takes on the form of a multi-section report, beginning with a problem statement and preferably including analyses of alternatives, costs/benefits, and ethical implications, as well as an examination of the process by which the solution was developed. This exercise introduces students to creativity as a process, with learning points relevant to proposal writing, ethical analysis, and persuasive (“elevator pitch”) speech.

### Proposal Writing with Exhibits

Proposal writing is well covered as a business communication topic (e.g., Jablonski 1999; Pierce 2007; Reave 2002; Wahlstrom 2002). The proposal format and content requirements should be introduced at the beginning of the semester so that students can begin to piece together the writing as they proceed. In addition, students must incorporate and reference analytical exhibits, a topic also covered in business communication coursework (e.g., Hynes and Stretcher 2008; Saatci 2004).

### Ethical Analysis

As part of the proposal, students analyze the ethical implications of the innovative idea. Not limited to just plagiarism, ethics topics are widely incorporated into business communication classes (e.g., Conn 2008; Johnston 1998; McQueeney 2006; Stevens 1996). In this exercise, the goal is for students to think about how, when, and why the innovation may have a negative impact on stakeholders and non-stakeholders alike.

### Elevator Pitch

The “elevator pitch” – a 1 to 2 minute pitch of an idea – is an important entrepreneurial skill (Jourdan 2012) that follows from oral presentation as a business communication skill. For this exercise, students can prepare and make an elevator pitch to the rest of the class (or to business professionals) on the last day of class or even as part of the final period.

## CONCLUSION

Entrepreneurial creativity is an important skill and topic; but it is not widely found as an explicit or required part of many business core curricula. On the other hand, business communication – also an important skill and topic – is a standard part of the traditional business core. By merging these topics together, business curricula can incorporate both topics. Moreover, given their parallel and convergent nature, both topics can be covered without sacrificing the identity of either one, especially business communications. Ultimately, by pivoting off of the convergence of creativity and business communication, and building off of the pedagogical traditions of the latter, a creativity-framed business communication course can become a realistic part of most business core curricula.

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**APPENDIX**

Table 1 – Parallel Elements between Communication and Creativity

<u>Business Communication</u>	<u>Creativity</u>
1. Applied, interpersonal skills	1. Important ability of individuals
2. Driven by process and approach	2. Considered to be an intentional activity
3. Can be internal or external to organization	3. Occurs in specific context or environment
4. Concerned with messages	4. Generates a product or outcome
<i>Shelby 1993</i>	<i>Kampylis and Valtanen 2010</i>