Rethinking Business Communication Skills Education: Are Communication Courses Preparing Students for the Workplace?

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Abstract

This paper calls for a reexamination of the kind of transferable business communication skills that new graduates require as they enter the workforce. Market needs are studied as the focal point for developing relevant exercises to train towards workplace communication competence. The arguments presented

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in this study are based on an investigation of the communication skills that a sample of Canadian companies in British Colombia deem necessary for new employees. Findings shed light on the importance of bridging the gap between the kind of training offered in business communication skills courses and what the job market expects of new graduates.

Keywords: Business Communication Skills; Communication Courses; Canadian Colleges; Corporate communication; Education.

Introduction

Effective communication skills are not generic personality traits automatically attained from the home environment; rather, they are tools that require training and practice in suitable contexts to help individuals build communication competence for the workplace, which is the driving force of success in business. Anderson and Surman (2007) state that "Communication expertise is one of the key qualifications employers look for when hiring" (p. 4). In Canada, communication skills have been ranked as the highest among the employability skills according to the Conference Board of Canada report *Employability Skills 2000+* (Bovee, Thill, & Scribner, 2016, p. 2). Therefore, business communication skills need to be promoted among students in a way that makes communication courses both attractive and practical for workplace success.

One of the early studies that called for a consideration of what is taught in business communication courses was written by Maddox (1990) who stresses the need for aligning, or coinciding, what is being taught in such

skills, speech perception, ESL, ESP, EAP, testing, academic writing, and speaking skills. She is a faculty member in the Department of English for Academic purposes and in the School of Communication at Capilano University, a sessional instructor for the International Teaching Assistants Program in Continuing Studies at Simon Fraser University, and a sessional ESL and EAP instructor in the English Language Institute at the University of British Colombia.

courses with the communication skills required in the workforce (p. 12). In this regard, Bennett (2002) argues that students must be informed of the qualities they need to develop before they graduate in order to succeed in the workplace (p. 459). Companies rely on educational institutions to provide communication skills training for their potential employees, and each company has its own expectations of the kind of training graduates from different disciplines need to attain before joining their team. However, how aware are course designers and students of these expectations, and is there a dialogue between employers and course designers to begin with? Calonge and Shah (2016) maintain that there is a "mismatch" between the skills that new bachelor's degree graduates have and what potential employers require, adding that this problem is growing on a global scale (p. 82).

Carlgren (2013) adds that the problem starts at an earlier level than college. High school students are facing difficulties with respect to developing communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving due to three main factors: (1) the structure of the education system, (2) the complexity of the communication skills themselves, (3) and the limited competence of the teachers developing these skills (p. 63). Although understandable, this last factor is arguable, especially when teachers are expected to follow a fixed course outline with course objectives that are set by course designers and approved by their departments. As a consequence, both students and teachers are left at the mercy of the course designers, who might not update or teach the courses regularly. Bovilla, Cook-Satherb and Feltenc (2011) challenge the conventional concept of learners being subordinate to the expert course designer,

arguing that academics should consult students and explore ways for them to participate in course design and the curricula. Students' involvement in what they learn and how they learn it challenges them to "demonstrate more active engagement in learning" (pp. 133-134). For most course designers, studying changes in communication trends or being in continuous discussions with teachers and students regarding the relevance of courses' content and objectives is unfeasible, leaving teachers in a situation where they have to abide by a learning plan that does not meet students' expectations and/or current trends.

It is safe to say that, on the one hand, employers and educators must collaborate and share the common objective of defining the skills expected of prospective employees, and on the other hand, course designers, teachers and students need to agree regarding the relevance of the course objectives and how these are best reached. Lack of communication regarding such issues could create courses that are incomplete, lack focus, or have irrelevant objectives, which was the case with two of the author's communication courses.

The problem presented in this paper came about through discussions on learning expectations with business and IT students in two courses, namely, Professional Writing and Technical Communication for Information Technology, at a public college in the Okanagan region, B.C. While some students understood the importance of communication courses and viewed them as sources for training in effective communication, many of them took these courses only to realize that what they were learning was neither relevant nor up-to-date with what companies expect of them. Also, there were students who believed

that companies provide in-house communication skills training for all new hires; hence, taking such courses was not a priority for them.

Most of the students had some understanding of the job market communication requirements, and they aimed to build their skill sets in ways that satisfy employers' expectations. Their main complaint, however, was that they could not understand the value of some of the objectives and assignments they were doing, such as writing memos or giving presentations. For these students, some of the assignments seemed fruitless and out of touch with workplace reality. Although most of their assumptions could not be validated, we could argue that they had built these conclusions on personal experiences or from what they heard from graduates.

On the outset, students' arguments seemed quite reasonable to the author, for it was clear that the courses in question were overloaded and had lost their focus. The outlines and descriptions of the courses the author was teaching clearly showed that each was a concoction of two major courses that do not necessarily fit together but were clearly combined for the sole purpose of teaching students an amalgamation of professional and academic skills to hit two birds with one stone. For example, in the Professional Writing course, the course outline detailed how it aimed to help students become better communicators in the workplace, yet one of the main activities in the course was writing an academic paper based on annotated notes and presenting the findings through PowerPoint. Another challenge was that the students had no prior training in note taking and presentation skills, and no time was allocated in the syllabus for such training. Also, in the Technical Communication for Information Technology course, IT

students were asked to use APA style to reference a manual. Because the author had not developed the course and had no support material from the course designer, both author and students found the exercise very challenging to do as it was asking for practice in two unrelated skills, namely, APA referencing and manual writing.

It was evident that many of the students were not receiving what they had signed up for, which left the author with a number of pinning questions:

- Are the curricula reflecting the training that students actually need?
- How can courses sell the idea of practicing effective presentation skills, for example, to an IT student who is uncomfortable with face-to-face communication?
- To what extent is the training offered in communication courses helping new college graduates deal with real-life communication in a company context?
- What is the best way to bridge the gap between students' learning expectations and the expectations that the marketplace has of new graduates?

The underlying query in the above list is: To what extent are communication courses preparing students for real-life communication in the workplace?

Method

In an attempt to create a better learning experience for the students in the author's courses and answer some of the questions that emerged from the discussions with them, a basic survey was developed to understand how companies in the region communicate and what they

expect of new employees. A group of government and private sector companies from the Okanagan region were interviewed during the Eighth Annual Business Expo and Employment Fair at Okanagan College (2015). Since the target of these companies was to attract new graduates from the region, students registered in the author's courses were believed to be ideal representatives of the kind of employees these companies would wish to attract.

Representatives of 32 of the businesses showcasing in the fair were asked, through short semi-structured interviews at their booths, to answer three questions regarding the communication skills generally used in their companies. They were provided with the research questions on paper and asked to give feedback orally if they felt comfortable with the questions. The rationale of the study was explained to them in detail, and the representatives were made aware that their companies' names would remain anonymous. They were also told that their answers should reflect their own professional experience at their companies in relation to their communication policies and procedures.

The interview questions are:

Question 1: What are the most common written or spoken means of communication used in your company?

Question 2: What kind of texts do you and your colleagues often write in your company?

Question 3: In terms of writing skills, what do you look for in a new employee?

Question 1 provides the means to compare the objectives set for written and spoken skills in the courses the author

was teaching to what the prospective graduates would actually do in the workplace setting. The students taking the courses in question were generally inclined to do more written than spoken assignments, and some had not done any public speaking exercises or presentations at school, so it was important to know how much weight written and spoken communication skills were given at the workplace in order to highlight the necessary training in the syllabi.

Question 2 tackles the kind of written texts company employees actually produce. This query was designed to help shape the written activities in the courses, for students found most of the work either too academic, such as producing annotated notes for a business article, or too outdated and irrelevant, such as writing memos which IT students disliked. Question 3 is designed to help shape the kind of writing skills taught in the courses as some students could not see the relevance of any instruction in, for example, syntax or rhetoric.

In order to study whether any of the objectives in the two communications courses were reported by the company representatives, a comparison was made between the course objectives and the representatives' responses. The survey results were then discussed with the students, and some of the assignments were adjusted accordingly.

Findings

The findings below are divided into three sections, each representing a question from the survey. Each section discusses whether the skills reported by the interviewees are covered through the training provided in the author's courses. In other words, the findings help investigate whether the courses are preparing students for the

workplace through comparing the interview results with the skills training given in the two courses, keeping in mind that the author had not developed the course objectives but was merely following pre-planned syllabi.

It is important to note that some interviewees gave simple one-word answers, while others gave more lengthy and detailed explanations of the kind of communication skills used in their companies. The frequent, explicit answers are presented in the figures below, and the additional, more elaborate feedback is integrated in the discussion.

Common Means of Communication

The first question focuses on finding out which of the two means of communication, written or spoken, is more common in the workplace; the aim is to see if either one of the two would be in fact chosen over the other or whether they are equally important from the point of view of the interviewees. The number of responses received and analyzed for this question were 78, so keeping in mind that there were 32 interviewees in total, findings suggest that the three most common means of communication in the interviewees' companies, as shown in Figure 1 below, are:

Figure 1 - Common Means of Communication
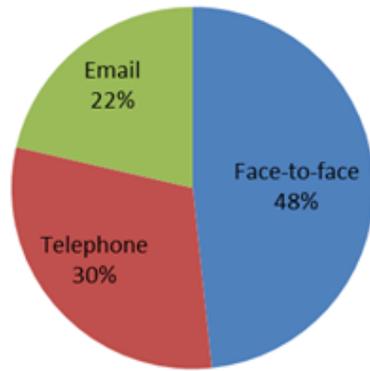
Face-to-face and telephone interactions were reported as the most common means of communication in the workplace, taking 48% and 30% of the responses respectively. These findings suggest that spoken communication, both face-to-face and on the phone, are leading communication skills in many companies. The pressing question is, therefore, are students trained in such skills before joining the workplace?

These findings were shared with the students in the author's two courses. The students have not had many chances to polish their speaking or presentation skills mainly due to the focus of the courses' objectives on written productions, such as memos and executive summaries. Also, they had not had the chance to develop and practice these skills in high school, which only added to their desire to avoid them. As a direct result of these findings, the author added training in public speaking, presentation skills, and PowerPoint presentation techniques to the syllabi; short presentations were also planned throughout the remainder of the term.

Also, 22% of the responses reported emails as common means of workplace communication. This finding helped

the author validate the value of practicing email writing, so emailing principles and exercises were added to the syllabi. This addition was well received by the students, especially with the interview data to support their importance.

In addition to the above responses, according to 37.5% of the interviewees, the kinds of communication used by different employees in their companies mainly depend on the position the employees hold; for example, since top-ranking employees deal with sensitive company information, much of their communication is written. Furthermore, 18.7% of the interviewees reported that they equally use written and spoken communication in their companies; however, they did not provide details or examples to support this. These findings, although not useful to develop the courses in question, were shared with the students to show the need to develop both written and spoken communication skills with relatively equal importance for the workplace.

The above findings echo similar results by other researchers. For example, Maddox (1990) reports that when asked to rank the overall importance of communication skills on the job, first-line managers gave listening the highest ranking importance of the four skills, followed by reading, speaking and finally writing. This correlates to some extent with the actual time spent each month for on-the-job communication which gives listening the highest percentage among the skills at 29%, followed by speaking at 28%, reading at 22%, and writing at 21% (p. 13). It is evident from the latter percentage scale that oral communication skills are of paramount importance for business students. This calls for a need to promote these skills in communication courses rather

than expect them to be developed gradually at work. Bennett (2002) stresses the urgency of promoting presentation skills, in particular, which were reported by 15% of the employers in his sample as important skills to master for the workplace. He argues that presentation skills are not discussed enough in the literature possibly due to researchers' assumptions that they were "subsumed into general 'communication'" (p. 465).

As far as email use is concerned, Hu and Hoare (2017) reach a similar finding with their participants, reporting email as a regular means of communication among colleagues in the workplace (p. 6). Obar (2014) discusses the importance of email for different size businesses, arguing that most large organizations have email lists of more than 10,000 people, while medium to small size organizations have email lists of 5,000 to 100 people. He reports that email is the preferred means of communication and top ranked technology for the 56 organizations he investigated (p. 220). This goes to show how important email is for most companies and the urgency for new employees to master business email protocol (see also Olatokun and Bankole, 2011).
The above shows that speaking and writing are the two basic skills to master for workplace success. There is no doubt that because they are both encoding skills, or language creation skills, these are the most challenging to develop and would therefore take longer to master as compared to reading and listening, which are decoding skills. Anderson and Surman (2007) report Beer and McMurrey (1997) asserting that speaking and writing effectively are among the list of factors employers use when evaluating an employee's job performance (p. 4). Hence, allocating time for these skills in communication courses is highly advisable.

Common Text Types

The five most common text types reported by the interviewees, as shown in Figure Two below, are:

Figure 2 - Common Text Type
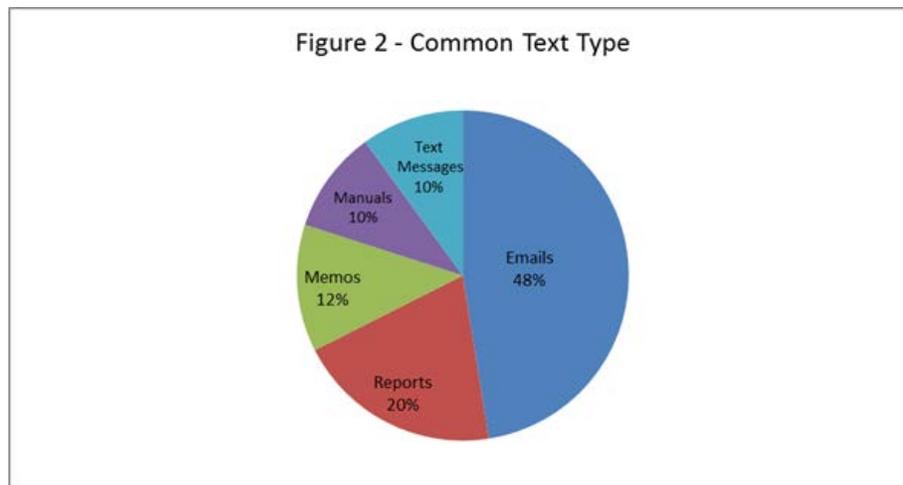
Findings emphasize the importance of email for company communications, which supports the results given to question one above. 48% of the answers to this question give email as the common text type use in their companies. This clearly shows the need to include training on email literacy and etiquette in the syllabi; this finding was shared with the students who were not all keen on practicing this skill. As mentioned above, readings on email etiquette and best practices were introduced, and with the support of these findings, students embraced the fact that mastering everyday communication tools, such as email, could have a powerful impact on their careers.

The four other forms of common texts reported by the interviewees, namely, reports at 20%, memos at 12%, manuals at 10%, and text messages at 10%, were also discussed with the students. The fact that memos and manuals were reported in these findings were especially useful for the students taking Technical Communication for Information Technology, as these two forms of text

were some of the required assignments in the syllabus that the students claimed to be irrelevant and outdated. These findings helped reinforce the need to practice these rhetorical patterns as part of the communication skills training in the respective course.

Other texts listed by the interviewees were not as prevalent as the above. These are: meeting minutes, brochures, letters, proposals, logs, contracts, forms, and provincial, municipality, and customer contracts or agreements. These findings were shared with the students; they were asked to explore these text types on their own, as they were not part of the syllabi. One of the skills that students in the Professional Writing course had objected to, i.e. executive summaries, did not appear in the interviewees' reports, which was welcomed by the students. Therefore, executive summaries were merely discussed in the context of a scenario rather than developed in detail.

New Employees' Writing Skills

The number of answers given to this question is 43 in total, the most frequent of which, as Figure 3 below shows, are:

Figure 3 - New Employee's Writing Skills

Professional Writing 14%
Conciseness 18%
Sound Grammar 46%
Legibility 22%
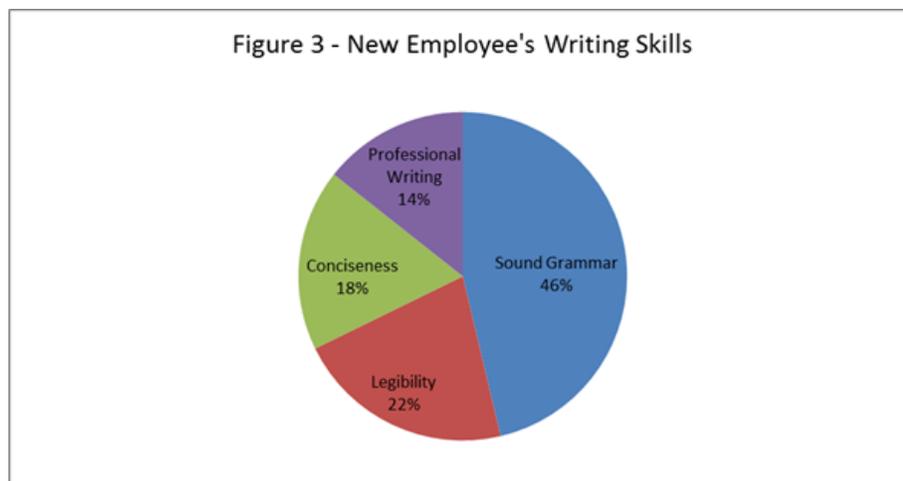
It is clear that accuracy takes the leading position among

the writing skills required of new employees. 46% of the responses to this question maintained that accurate grammar is an important skill to guarantee effective communication. Next in importance is legibility (22%), which is connected to accuracy. Conciseness and professionalism take 18% and 14% respectively which indicates that companies are conscious about the importance of time and professional communication.

Other skills that the interviewees reported are: polished email and document writing skills, facts/factual writing and documentation, business writing skills, process writing skills, and persuasive writing. These findings were not surprising, and they reflected what was planned in the syllabi, so they came as a confirmation for the students that they should pay more attention to these aspects of writing.

However, not all of the 43 answers were related to writing skills; some interviewees indicated that their companies care more about informal spoken than written communication. 16.3% of the answers to this question indicated that the interviewees' companies look for employees who possess good listening, communication and presentation skills rather than good written communication skills. The focus on presentation skills in these findings was important for the author, for it emphasized the need to include more oral presentation skills practice in the syllabi. This also enforces the findings of the first question in this study which showcase speaking and listening as common means of communication and are, therefore, necessary skill to develop before joining the workplace.

Other studies have reached similar conclusions. For

instance, Bennett (2002) found that language skills were reported as important in 10% of the job advertisements he studied (p. 465). Bovee et al. (2016) state that clarity and conciseness are among the important responsibilities of an effective communicator. Clarity helps produce specific responses, such as wishes, expectations, or possibilities; conciseness shows respect for people's time which encourages positive responses. Also, importance is given to factual and persuasive information for effective business communication (p. 3). Rindegard (1999) adds that in business communication, grammar, clarity, and conciseness are "25 percent of your effort" (p. 78). This shows the need to develop an understanding of the basic rules of sentence structure and rhetoric which are part and parcel of communication courses. As far as the author's students are concerned, this finding validated the need to allocate space in the curricula to these aspects.

Despite the need for accuracy, depending on the context in which the communication is taking place, some companies would have more interest in the quality and meaning of the message than the way it is communicated. For example, for companies which use internal text messaging systems, conciseness is more important than accuracy. Hu and Hoare (2017) report that while most workplace communication requires writing accuracy, in internal communication, simple writing mistakes are tolerated in some companies as the employees are not communicating with the public; hence, the possibility of damaging the company's image is low. In internal communication, as long as the employee can get the idea across, the communication is deemed acceptable. Also, employees who deal with technical issues within the company are expected to care

about technical skills rather than language accuracy (pp. 8-9). All in all, it is the prerogative of the company to choose the communication criteria that work for their context and employees, so the rule of thumb is to be prepared to communicate effectively, keeping in mind that companies operate and communicate differently.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The survey results have helped promote a better understanding among the author's students of the importance of some of the skills they felt were irrelevant or secondary to their success, such as writing professional emails or giving effective presentations, to name a few. The findings also stressed the value of these skills overall and supported the need to master them through evidence from the local workplace context.

Although these findings might be limited to this region and might have slightly changed since the time the interviews were administered, i.e. 2015, the aim of this paper is to encourage course developers and teachers to reevaluate and update what they are including in their syllabi to guarantee an evolving and current discipline. Such consideration is important not only for growth, it also helps to take into account students' perceptions, questions, and tendencies and address students' doubts, which could be justifiable and reasonable, hence serving the program as a whole.

Post-secondary educational institutions could provide better and more practical training for their graduates through continuous cooperation with the companies hiring them. Communication skills training should not be left for the employer to handle on his own, and students should not be expected to discover proper email

etiquette and sentence structure, for example, on the job. The choices of what to teach in communication courses should be based on a rigorous annual needs analysis of what the job market requires. It should not be left to chance or professors' teaching preferences or experience, and it should definitely not exclude the student from the discussions of what to add and emphasize in the curricula. There is no doubt that in order to ensure effective training, workplace communication skills requirements need to be clearly communicated with the students to justify what is included in the syllabi. Communication course designers and teachers should declutter courses from the irrelevant, outdated objectives that have been passed down from previous years; they should aim to teach towards the ever evolving market needs to maximize student engagement in learning and future success.

We call for a reconsideration of the relationship between course developers and the job market since continuous collaboration between all parties involved, i.e. course designers, teachers, students, local businesses, international businesses, and government organizations, can not only enhance the students' learning but also develop new teaching practices and theories that could develop the quality of education overall.

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