

## Workshop-Style in a Graduate Classroom: Teaching Communication to Business Students

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This article describes a four-month-long MBA course on business communication taught at NUST Business School, National University of Sciences and Technology, Pakistan. A workshop-style approach was adopted in the course that helped the students break their emotional glass ceiling and become comfortable in their skin. The course enabled the students to work in teams to learn the art of verbal and non-verbal communication through exercises and case studies spread throughout the semester. The system was also helpful in teaching the students to develop an impactful resumé and improve job interview skills (through mock interviews). The course ended with the development of business communication case studies written and taught by students. Some of the students published their case studies in a UK-based case publishing house. The article describes a unique pedagogical approach for preparing this course and the instructor's experiences during and at the end of the course.

Aristotle (1984) argued, "for the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing" (p. 1103a1132). As a field of study, business administration demands practical applications of the skills that include learning by doing. The social constructivist perspective that human development and construction of knowledge depends on the interaction between social and individual processes inform business administration inquiry (Palincsar, 1998). Therefore, where business students in an undergraduate or a graduate program are taught several courses in management, accounting and finance, marketing, human resources, and information technology (IT), they are also taught business communication. Traditionally, only speaking and writing skills are taken into account in a business communication course. However, I discovered a unique approach to conducting business communication. I found that teaching business communication with a workshop style was very effective. Therefore, I included a wide range of skills in the business communication course taught at the graduate level and designed the system like a workshop. Some of these skills are learning how to make one's self look good; learning how to sit, stand, walk, and behave gracefully; knowing how to portray an intelligent impression by one's expressions, gestures, postures, voice, language, and confidence; learning proper written and spoken English; learning how to be creative, imaginative, and original; learning how to make a resumé; learning how to go for a job interview; learning how to answer different questions on a job interview; learning how to study personalities; and learning how to develop relationships and goodwill. I will continue discussing these skills as the paper progresses.

The paper is based on a business communication course that I taught a few times at the graduate level in the pre-COVID era. Although the pandemic might necessitate a few additions to business communication as a subject - such as how to network with people virtually, conduct meetings and interviews on Zoom or

Microsoft Teams, plan a successful career in the post-pandemic world, track one's online footprint, update one's online brand, and articulate a virtual winning pitch aimed at recruiters and professional network - the workshop-style of teaching would remain relevant. Teaching through exercises and case studies is not a new phenomenon but converting an entire four-month-long graduate course into a workshop is rare. For example, Whalen (2021) discussed the 13 best business communication innovations derived from 13 papers describing business communication pedagogical approaches. Still, it has never been attempted to use all 13 innovations in a single course in a workshop-style. According to Kan and Ismail (2021), "the coalescence of decoding and encoding processes of messages has traditionally been a unified pedagogical approach for teaching business communication" (p. 60). Similarly, Akhtar and Hussain (2019) advocated using experiential theory (ET) to teach business communication. They identified the lack of experiential communication tools in business graduates and tracked it down to the orthodox pedagogical styles in the traditional education of business communication.

The paper is interdisciplinary, and its pedagogical approach should be significant to educators and learners of various disciplines, such as education, arts, engineering, and several natural and social sciences in addition to business administration. For example, Knight (2019) explained how important it is to learn business communication for the proponents of arts and arts education. She argued that since arts students are constantly required to prepare extensive written and correspondence documents and participate in live auditions, they need to be taught business communication. The educational tools, methodologies, and case studies discussed should apply to anyone who wants to sell themselves to the highest employer. A need to develop a positive self-concept, make one's self look good, portray an excellent first impression, market one's self through an impressive cover letter and resumé,

develop good inter-personal skills, practice job interviews, and get inspired by the biographies and autobiographies of internationally acclaimed professional leaders should not be restricted to the proponents of business administration alone but should be the course components of every discipline.

The teaching of a business communication course can be challenging as well as tricky. It can be challenging because there are too many practical skills to teach. For example, writing skills include writing memos and letters, speaking skills include public speaking and presentations, and resumé building includes writing resumés and skills related to selling oneself to a potential employer. It can be tricky because there are too many personality-related skills to teach. It is difficult to teach skills related to students' personalities without pointing them out (e.g., mannerism, portraying the correct facial expressions, and shaking hands in the right way), thus keeping the delivery of the course professional.

### **Teaching Philosophy**

My philosophy to teaching business communication is as follows:

#### **Teaching the Bigger Picture**

Teaching for me is imparting knowledge to the learners beyond the confines of the book. I facilitate my students to learn the bigger picture when they leave class (i.e., they take into account the interdisciplinary aspect of learning). They should understand how their subject content fits in the world around them as Dewey (1916) argues that thinking should be connected to action and learning about oneself and the world around them.

#### **Teaching through Parallel Learning.**

During my teaching work experience, I have learned that parallel learning has often proven helpful. Parallel learning is a technique in which you teach the same subject matter by utilizing different teaching tools in every class. For example, when a topic is taught in class, there is always a mix of lectures, class discussions, one or two demonstrations, a case study, and presentations by students. This technique is helpful in three ways: (a) topics are analyzed from different viewpoints, (b) this technique helps address the needs of different kinds of learners, and (c) this technique invokes two-way learning between the teacher and the class.

#### **Development of a Solid Theoretical Base**

Utilizing the constructivist and critical theories of business and adult education, I facilitate my students to build a solid theoretical, critical, and philosophical base.

### **Development of an Analytical Mind**

The development of an analytical mind is essential for a professional. One of my teaching goals is to make my students understand and utilize the education tools and appreciate the underlying ideas behind those concepts.

### **Teaching the Importance of Written and Oral Expression.**

Last but not least, teaching business communication, in my opinion, is incomplete without the ability to write effectively. I invoke excellent writing skills in learners so that they can present their work effectively in front of various audiences and reach a level where their work is published in research journals.

### **Description of the Course**

#### **Overview**

My primary goal in this course was to help students think strategically about communication and to aid them in improving their writing, presentation, and interpersonal communication skills within an organizational setting. Along with my students, I looked at a range of successful practices and guidelines derived from both research and experience. I allowed them to practice their skills and provided them with feedback to help strengthen those skills. As mentioned earlier, I used a workshop-style approach that entails discussions and in-class exercises.

#### **Workshop-style Approach**

I have taken the phrase “workshop-style” from the actual corporate workshops used to train people. Banking on my experience as a corporate trainer and successfully participating in numerous pieces of training myself, I decided to replicate the same corporate training success in the graduate classroom. In a typical corporate workshop, learning is maximized through minimized lecturing. The concepts are introduced through discussions between the trainer and the participants. The concepts are then strengthened in the learners' minds by utilizing several teaching tools such as mini case studies, group exercises, discussions, games, computer simulations, and role-playing activities (Matthews, 2012).

During the design phase of this course, the primary task was how to operationalize the workshop-style approach. Therefore, I decided to make a 300-page course pack instead of distributing handouts in every class. Although other business communication textbooks were recommended as reference books, the course pack

was the primary source of all materials. There were two main purposes of the course pack: (a) to avoid confusion by organizing the vast amount of material from various sources and (b) motivating students to prepare themselves before coming to class. Moreover, since a workshop style is borrowed from corporate training, it is a standard procedure to distribute the course packs at the beginning of corporate training. Therefore, the students were given the course packs on the first day of the semester. Alternatively, the students could purchase these course packs from the university bookshop. The course pack contained the course syllabus and teaching notes on various business communication topics, such as clear and concise writing, conceptual parallelism, giving and receiving feedback, intercultural communication, media relations, style in managerial writing, teamwork basics, constructing an argument, cover letters, difficult conversations, persuasion, using figures in text and as attachments, and non-verbal communication. The course pack also contained assignments, various feedback forms, grading rubrics, exercises, and case studies. At the beginning of the semester, it was imperative to teach the students how to analyze case studies. Therefore, I delivered a lecture (the only lecture of the course) at the beginning of the course to teach the students how to read and analyze case studies. I used *The Case Study Book: A Student's Guide* (Ellet, 2007) for this purpose. Some of the exercises and cases discussed in the course are given below. Please note that each exercise and case study signify a different instructional approach fulfilling a particular learning outcome of the course.

### ***Exercises & Cases***

**Strategy Exercise.** The strategy exercise is usually conducted at the beginning of the course. In the first class, the students are divided into pairs and are asked to come in front of the class and introduce themselves. The question is what to include in their introduction. Each pair of students are asked to devise a strategy on what to include in their introduction. While developing this strategy, they must consider who their audience is. What are their objectives of communication? How do they establish their credibility while introducing themselves? What would be appropriate to say in this context? The time limit for strategy exercise is 3 to 4 minutes for each pair of students (MIT, 2020).

**Handshake Exercise.** I usually start my business communication course with the handshake exercise (pre-COVID). Following the strategy exercise on the first or second day of the course, I go to every sitting student of my class and shake hands with them. After the handshake, I explain the significance of the handshake, different types of the handshake (normal handshake, dominant handshake, and submissive handshake), and the subsequent impressions that people might take from

those handshakes (Rahman, 2004a). Hopefully, we will be able to continue to use the handshake exercise in the post-COVID era.

**Listening Exercise.** In the listening exercise, the class is divided into groups of four. Two are given the roles of conversationalists and two observers. Depending upon the time and the size of the class, each student can be given a chance to play both roles. It is interesting and useful to choose a controversial topic. Such as, one of the controversial topics can be, "Are men or women better listeners?" Each conversationalist should express their opinion on the subject and try to provide evidence in their support. Each conversationalist should learn to listen attentively and try to understand the opposing point of view. The observers should focus on each of the conversationalists. After five minutes of the conversation, the observers should give feedback on the conversationalists: Did the listener seem interested? Encouraging? Engaged? Did they listen non-judgmentally? Did they help the other person clarify their thinking? Did they do anything specifically to help the other person communicate their message (include nonverbal communication here)? The conversationalists should also give feedback: Were they able to listen non-judgmentally? What did they do to help the other person clarify their thinking? Did they feel they did anything to help the person communicate their message (include nonverbal communication here)? (MIT, 2020)

Some other listening exercises can also be used in class. For example, an English conversation can be played in the class. The class can then be asked to listen to the conversation and then write what they have understood or retained. This exercise is good in explaining the difference between hearing and listening (Rahman, 2004a).

**Persuasion Exercise.** This exercise is meant to teach persuasion to students. The duration of the activity is 15 minutes. Six participants are sitting in a circle in a boat. There is a marine biologist (the person who knows how to survive in the sea and what to eat). There is a medical doctor (the person who can be helpful in emergencies). There is a second officer of the boat (the person who is an expert on navigation). There is a mullah/priest/father/rabi (a religious person). There is a woman with three children at home (this character involves an emotional backdrop since her three kids are back home with no one to look after them). Finally, there is a janitor (this is the person who belongs to the lowest cadre of the society).

Now, the situation is such that a boat is sinking in the middle of the sea, and the six people mentioned above are onboard. The problem is that if one person out of these six people dies, the rest of the five can be saved, as the boat cannot withstand the weight of six people, but it can withstand the weight of five people. These six people are having a discussion, and they are deciding

which person should die. Everyone is defending themselves.

Some important points to consider are that no one can volunteer to die; both males and females should be involved in this activity regardless of the roles, which means that the role of a woman with three kids at home can be given to a male. This activity can be more interesting if the first three roles are given to those who do not have excellent communication skills. The last three roles are given to those who already have good communication skills. The first three roles are indispensable, as people on the boat cannot survive without them. The last three roles are the most difficult to defend.

There is an ideal solution (not to be disclosed to the participants). Although it is doubtful that anybody would reach the perfect solution. Yet, the perfect solution is that everyone in the boat puts himself/herself in water for 15 seconds while holding the boat with one hand, one by one, until they reach their destination and no one dies (Rahman, 2004a).

**Interview Exercise.** In the interview exercise, I design a set of 10 to 15 questions and ideal answers to those questions. Some example questions include the following: Tell me something about yourself? Why are you applying for this job? Why do you want to work here? How much do you know about this company? What contributions do you see yourself making to this job/company? Why did you leave your last job? Why have you changed so many jobs? How would you describe your personality? What is your greatest strength? What is your greatest weakness? Would you be willing to relocate? Would you prefer working alone or with people? How well has your performance in the classroom prepared you for this job? What are the qualities of an ideal boss? How would you describe your role as a team player?

Then, I contact two or three of my colleagues/friends to join me in forming a mock interview board. I give mock companies to each student and conduct mock interviews, each interview being 10 to 15 minutes in length. This activity can be done at the end of the course spread over two, three, or four days depending upon time and the class size. At the end of the interview exercise, I give feedback to the students based on the following points: Did the person appear confident, enthusiastic, and energetic? Did the person answer questions succinctly and clearly? Did he or she provide enough detail to make his or her answers persuasive? Was there evidence the person did his or her "homework" about the company and the position? Did the interviewee attempt to control the process at any time? Finally, if I gave the person a chance to ask questions about the position, were those questions reasonable, intelligent, and well informed? (Munter & Hamilton, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2011).

**Meeting Exercise.** A meeting is arranged, and a team of ten students is seated around a round table in a conference room. A meeting agenda is given to the team to discuss (e.g., office renovation, purchase of a new university or office building, provision of a company-maintained car, a crisis in the case of a customer/product). The meeting is carried out in the following way:

There is a CEO who is supposed to be the head of the meeting and responsible for the overall agenda. There is a finance manager, a marketing manager, a procurement manager, an MIS manager, and five assistant managers. One student will play the role of the CEO. Another student will play the role of an "annoyed member." The annoyed member is also late in the meeting because he or she had an exchange of harsh words with someone on the way to the meeting. One student will play the role of a "member in a hurry." This member always agrees with most of the people because he or she is always in a hurry. One student will play the role of "pain in the neck member." This member is irritating and annoying and disagrees with most of the people most of the time. One student will play the role of the "quiet member." This member never speaks, gives ideas, or expresses himself or herself. The rest of the five members are given different conflicting ideas to discuss. In addition to the above scenario, there is also a cold war going on between two members of the meeting. (Rahman, 2004a, p. 5)

This exercise should be taken very carefully on a few aspects. For example, the meeting duration should not exceed 20 minutes, and the students should remain focused on the fact that this is a communication exercise and not get carried away by the parts they are playing.

The exercise is valuable in teaching interpersonal communication, conflict management, persuasion, and direct vs. indirect speech. The CEO is responsible for ending this meeting in precisely 20 minutes with some valuable results (Rahman, 2004a).

**Bob Fifer.** Bob Fifer is a Harvard case study that is inspiring and gives valuable advice on self-concept, interpersonal communication and career development. As Thomas and Cohen (1994) described,

It explores the life and concerns of Bob Fifer, HBS class of 1979 and CEO of Kaiser Associates. It explores the many influences on Bob's development and his subsequent career choices. It is written as a biography with extensive quotes from interviews with Bob. He describes the role of his upbringing and Jewish ethnicity in the formation of his early self-concept. Highlights the career-related choices he makes, including college at Harvard, attending business school, and entering consulting. After years of success and driven workaholic behaviour,

Bob experiences disillusionment and personal tragedy. (p. 1)

Another inspiring case study that teaches communication, management, and leadership skills to be considered is “Leadership: An Islamic Point of View” (Rahman, 2004d). This case is based on a letter written by Al-Tahir, a military general (as a piece of advice on leadership) to his son Abdullah when he was appointed the governor of Egypt.

**Note on Hiring & Selection Process.** This was a note published in Harvard Business Review. It gives an excellent explanation and a model on the process of hiring and selection. It also defines the motivations of the interview board and how the interview board members view candidates coming for an interview (Roberts, 1993). This article can help students prepare for their mock interviews at the end of the course. Some of the other case studies that can be taught are “Berger Soft in Pakistan” (Taufiq et al., 2006), “HRM – Three Short Cases” (Rahman, 2004b), and its “Teaching Note” (Rahman, 2004c).

### During the Course

Throughout the course, I used a workshop style of instruction. Although I used some slides from time to time to stimulate the class discussions, I did not use any lectures. Each class started with a knowledge of that day’s topic(s) and instructions from the course pack. Then, the class was divided into groups, and the work started. The role of the instructor was the role of an intermediary. The instructor was also responsible for the overall organization of the class, providing feedback to the students, and directing the class in the proper direction. No student was spared from the uncomfortable position of being put on the spot. In a way, this course brought the best in everyone to the surface. Since I had already prepared various feedback forms for this course, I, the students, and some of my colleagues filled out these feedback forms and discussed them collectively with the class and individually with the students. Some of the feedback forms were the following:

- presentation with Q & A evaluation,
- presentation with interaction evaluation,
- editing cover letters: a checklist,
- editing the meeting maker assignment: a checklist,
- team questionnaire,
- team progress report,
- team presentation evaluation,
- team presentation (individual) evaluation,
- report feedback form, and
- presentation evaluation form (Munter & Hamilton, 2014).

I discovered at the beginning of the course that graduate business students found it difficult and discomforting to come in front of the class, be put on the spot, and learn, as well as teach to all the stakeholders involved: the students, the course instructor, and other instructors who were involved in some of our activities such as the interview exercise. Their difficulty underlined some of the variances between “the Disciplines of Teaching, Learning, and Culture” (Mangelsdorf & Ullman, 2020, p. 351). The graduate students in this course came from different teaching, learning, and cultural backgrounds. The class demographics included students from urban as well as rural backgrounds. Some of them had conservative cultural and academic backgrounds where power distance between the instructor and student is valued. In contrast, others had more liberal backdrops that appreciated free speech and interactivity. Therefore, it was an exciting mix that added to the rigour of the course. In short, the course was so exciting and fun that the students who felt uneasy at the beginning of the course started eagerly waiting for this class each week (as was evident by two teacher evaluations in the middle and end of the semester).

### End of the Course and Conclusion

The course ended with the term project, which was to develop a short (5 - 7 page) business case study on a real-life organizational scenario. The case study was meant to be on an issue related to business communication. Each group had three students responsible for developing the case study. After the interview exercise, three days were dedicated to the students’ case studies at the end of the course. Each group was given a chance to teach their case study to the class in 15 minutes. Students were also instructed to develop a teaching note accompanying the case study, which was submitted to the instructor for grading. During the entire semester, the students were encouraged to find a publisher to publish their case studies. Throughout the semester, I, along with my teaching assistants, also guided how to write effectively. Three groups managed to publish their case studies in a UK-based case study publishing house. Publication of case studies carried extra marks.

Teaching business communication in a non-traditional workshop-style highlighted various pedagogical techniques that I learned. For example, writing and speaking skills are necessary for a successful career, but students polish communication strategies and methods by discussing principles, examples, and cases. Moreover, several written and oral assignments primarily based on materials from other subjects - such as human resource management, human resource development, organizational behaviour, and career

development - add to the students' ability to understand the bigger picture (Rahman, 2020).

Another takeaway from such a teaching methodology is that workshop-style teaching helps the students break their emotional glass ceiling and make them comfortable in their own skin. In this course, on the one hand, the students practically learned about verbal and non-verbal communication, resumé building, and interview skills. On the other hand, they learned the value of being a good writer and a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction in publishing.

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