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Do students agree with research-based outcomes for the Business Communication Course? An exploratory study

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Abstract

The Business Communication class has been the center of soft skills development in most schools of business. The outcomes of the class generally are chosen by faculty and professionals to enhance students' opportunities to be successful in the workplace. As students become more involved in the content of their education, the question should be asked if they agree with faculty, professionals and even the literature about the course outcomes. This study was designed to answer that question. Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Business Communication class completed a survey that asked their opinions about the outcomes of the class. Results indicate that students agree with faculty and professionals about the most important items that should be covered in the class.

1. Introduction

New entry-level employees must adapt to a company's culture, make presentations to colleagues and superiors and manage their time wisely (Huhman, 2014). Often, these are the soft skills they failed to develop in college. Traditionally, the Business Communication curriculum focused on the verbal and nonverbal communication skills that will facilitate a new employee's success in early career positions. To ensure students' success, several authors have encouraged professors to work with professionals to develop the curriculum that will help students develop those talents prior to graduation (Faigley and Miller, 1982; Vest et al., 1995). Although those skills should be taught across the curriculum, often they are housed in the Business Communication class.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it examines the effect students' work experiences on their expectations for the outcomes of the Business Communication class.

Second, this will be one of the few studies that asks students to confirm course outcomes based on previous research (Brown and Mausehund, 1997; Penrose, 2002; Wardrope and Bayless, 1999).

After a review of the literature on the business communication course, the method and findings will be discussed. This article concludes with suggestions for future studies that will be of interest to business communication students and faculty.

2. Literature Overview

Conrad and Newberry (2012) conducted a literature review to determine what skills and knowledge students should have to be successful in business organizations. They determined essential skills fit into three clusters: Organizational communication skills that include communication with internal and external stakeholders, leadership communication skills that help students craft messages that build relationships with key stakeholders, and interpersonal communication skills that allow individuals to build relationships with workplace colleagues at all levels of the organization. Others have recommended a competency-based approach to written and oral communication (Sharifi, McCombs, Fraser and McCabe, 2009; Lucas and Rawlins, 2015; Murranka and Lynch, 1999; Penrose, 2002; Wardrope and Bayless, 1999; Wang, 2011).

Another approach to the class is to build value-added skills that enhance workplace productivity. Brown and Mausehund (1977) suggest the class should include ethics modules to help students develop proficiency in leadership, critical thinking and interpersonal communication. Marcal and Roberts (2000) encourage teaching technology in the classroom. Parent et al. (2011) suggest faculty use the on-campus writing centers to help students reduce mistakes such as grammatical errors and plagiarism.

Another stream of research considers methods of instruction. Drury-Grogan and Russ (2013) used a business simulation to introduce students to the communication processes of a senior executive in a Fortune 500 organization. Others have infused the course with assignments and activities that complement career-readiness programs (Addams and Allred, 2015; Hemby and Crews, 2005).

Work experience has influenced course content development. Recent graduates who have honed workplace skills recommend professors teach soft skills via curricular and co-curricular initiatives (MacDermott and Ortiz, 2007). Although not focused on the business communication curriculum, professional engineers who were most satisfied with their collegiate training said oral and written communication were key components of their academic training (Vest, Long, Thomas, & Palmquist, 1995). Hynes and Bhatia (1995) found employed graduate business students who had completed the business communication course rated topics associated with oral, then written communication skills as the most valuable. They placed little usefulness on topics related to international business communication, diversity in the workforce and using technology in the workplace. Feinberg and Pritzker (1985) designed a course for MBA business communication based on feedback from business executives who'd like future employees to communicate clearly and concisely. The executives also wanted executive level guest speakers to enter the classroom and provide business problems/case studies for students to solve.

Students with internship experience found employment—even temporary—was more valuable than course work. Marketing students found internship experience provided a competitive advantage (Cannon and Arnold, 1998). Other interns who were asked to provide feedback about their internship experience recommended employers create an experience with more structure and feedback, provide challenging assignments and communicate expectations

(Rothman, 2007). In addition, the authors found workforce experience helped them become more aware of gender issues, including pay inequities (Sallop and Kirby, 2007).

Substantial research provides recommendations for course outcomes based on academic principles. There is ample research that takes into consideration course guidelines provided by executives and other professionals with workplace experience. Few studies have examined course expectations from current students whose primary workplace experience is based on internships. This exploratory study will take into account the professional experiences and internship experiences of students and their expectations for the business communication class. Two hypotheses were generated based on the literature:

H1: Business students who have had internships will rate outcomes differently from students who have not had internships.

H2: Business students with three or more years of professional experience rate outcomes differently from those who have two or fewer years of professional experience.

3. Method

3a. Procedure

A class activity in a School of Business at a Southern university tasked two undergraduate and one graduate business communication class during the Fall 2016 semester to examine optimal outcomes for the business communication class. Students discussed possible outcomes in groups. After a class discussion, the individuals anonymously completed a 30-item instrument based on the literature described earlier in this article.

3b. Participants

Of the 69 respondents, the sample was 36% male and 64% female with an average age of 21. The respondents identified as freshmen (1.4%), sophomores (13%), juniors (52.2%), seniors

(11.6%) and graduate students (21.7%). Approximately 95% of the respondents had majors or concentrations in the School of Business. The respondents had an average of 2.5 years of work experience.

3c. Instrument

Each student completed a 30-item research-based survey that asked them to use a 7-point (1=not at all important to 7=very important) scale to rate possible outcomes for the class. Studies that examined the actual and proposed content of the business communication class served as the foundation for the instrument utilized in this study (Lucas and Rawlins, 2015; Brown and Mausehund, 1977; Parent et al., 2011; Conrad and Newberry, 2012; Drury-Grogran and Russ, 2013; Wang, 2011; McPherson, 1977; Wardrope and Bayless, 1999). Respondents rated the importance of possible course outcomes, including improving verbal communication skills with internal and external stakeholders, crafting professional email, using ethical persuasion and incorporating business simulations in the classroom. The final items asked their age, classification, major, gender, internship experience and years of professional work.

4. Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed with SPSS. Each possible outcome was examined for statistical significance. The dependent variables were whether the respondents had completed internships (yes or no) and the respondents' work history (0-2 years or 3 or more years).

The first hypothesis predicted business students with internship experience would have greater expectations for the business communications class than students who have not had internships. Approximately 30% of the business students in this study had completed internships in fields based on their majors. This hypothesis was not supported. Students with internship experience did not express significant differences on any of the survey items.

The second hypothesis expected business students with three or more years of professional experience would have different expectations for course outcomes than those with two or fewer years of professional experience. Analyses indicated two items on the survey reached significance, therefore providing support for this hypothesis. Significant results emerged with respect to teaching skills to upper-level employees [$F(1,67) = 4.07, p = .048$]. Respondents with greater work experience ($M=6.52$) expected business communication class graduates to be able to teach upper-level employees more so than those with less work experience ($M=5.95$).

A second significant finding also reflected the difference of opinion regarding the ability to teach skills to colleagues [$F(1,67) = 6.34, p = .014$]. Respondents with more work experience ($M=6.34$) had higher opinions on this item than respondents with less work experience ($M=5.48$).

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The business communication class has been the center of soft skills development for undergraduate and graduate business students for quite some time. To prepare students to be successful in the workforce, faculty members have introduced workplace ethics (Brown and Mausehund, 1977), technology (Marcal and Roberts, 2000), and career preparation (Hemby and Crews, 2005) in addition to other topics suggested by hiring managers and other professionals. Much of the course's content has been based on academic research and anecdotal evidence provided by professionals. Few studies have examined the opinions of current or recent business communication students (Hynes and Bhatia, 1996). This study illuminated some of the areas of convergence among academics, professionals and students. It also highlighted a few differences.

Overall, these results provide two reasons to be encouraged. First, they indicate agreement about the goals of the business communication class. Respondents believe class

outcomes should include developing clear and concise verbal and written communication skills with internal and external groups, using ethical persuasion and providing performance feedback. They indicate that students recognize they must enhance their written, verbal and nonverbal skills to achieve their educational, corporate, non-profit and entrepreneurial career goals. A second reason to be encouraged is this study found only two areas of difference, though they could be considered two sides of the same coin. On one side, business communication students should be able to teach upper-level employees. On the other side of the coin, business communication students should be able to teach their colleagues. These significant findings reflect many of the expectations of Millennials, the generation of students born between 1980 and 2000. These digital natives already are teaching their parents how to navigate new technology. Sharing their knowledge with colleagues is a natural step for them.

What do these findings mean for professors teaching the business communication class? It means the class is headed in the right direction. It means students understand the value of successfully completing this course. A concern, however, would be whether all of these items can be covered thoroughly in a one-semester class. Some colleges and universities have divided the course content into two semester-long classes. One class focuses on written communication and the other addresses verbal communication. Additional studies should consider the best approach for training students to be business communicators. Is it best to cover all of the topics in one class or does subject-matter comprehension improve when the topics are spread over two classes? An additional area of interest should be whether the Business Communication course would be as valuable to students who have majors outside of the business school. On face value, it would seem knowledge of writing cover letters and interview practices would be just as valuable to students with majors in philosophy, art and mass media. Wouldn't this information

enhance a student's competitive advantage in the workforce? Should this course be part of an institution's core curriculum?

It is necessary to discuss the study's limitations. First, the sample size must be considered. Although encouraging, it may be difficult to make strong generalizations based on a sample of 70 respondents. Second, the respondents' work experience factored into their opinions about the value of the possible course outcomes. This study did not ask respondents to describe their work histories. Individuals with three years of corporate experience may have different opinions than someone who waited tables for three years. Finally, the analyses focused on individual course outcomes instead of grouping similar items to create an index. Although unlikely, such a procedure may have affected the findings of this study.

Even with these limitations, it was the goal of this study to explore if students agree with the outcomes for the course as prescribed by faculty and professionals. These findings suggest all stakeholders are on the same page. Therefore, this goal was accomplished. The Business Communication class provides valuable training that students will be able to adapt immediately to their respective workplaces.

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