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## **Business Communication Courses: Continued Problems and Potential Solutions**

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BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSES:  
CONTINUED PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

E.C.R.S.B. 1981-8

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Why can't business school graduates communicate effectively in spite of the fact that most programs offer a course in business communication? A survey of 112 business executives and personnel managers illustrates our concern and suggest potential solutions. A proposed new course in business communication/research is offered.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSES:  
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Publications are currently focusing on emphasizing the criticism that business schools are graduating students with poor communication skills. In a recent study of undergraduate business education, An Assessment of Undergraduate Business Education in the United States, it was stated that personnel executives of America's largest corporations report that, "undergraduate business students were perceived...very weak in communications, especially written, skills. This view was reflected in the selection of writing skills as the number one priority for additional training by the executives."<sup>1</sup> Other research has shown that even for schools that do offer a business communication course, a great deal of time is spent in reviewing basic writing skills that should have been perfected in a freshman English course.<sup>2</sup>

This continued problem should be surprising given the fact that written and oral communication skills are so vital to initial job employment and long-range success. Allen Blitstein reported in his research that "oral communication skills are even more important in succeeding on the job and receiving promotions."<sup>3</sup> His findings are supported by similar research completed in 1980 by Hunger and Wheelen.<sup>4</sup>

It is disappointing that even with an increased emphasis by business schools in communications (one study reported that over 76% of the AACSB schools surveyed offered at least one business communications course), executives are still finding unsatisfactory work by their employees.

In the study by Glassman and Farley, the authors concluded that students simply need more practice, but with the increased class size due to tight budgets and an increasing emphasis on scholarly research, instructors are less likely to assign written projects or use essay exams.<sup>5</sup> This places an even greater burden on business communication courses. However, the content of most of these courses is not sufficient to provide a student with the necessary skills and/or the instructor is often not qualified to teach "business English."<sup>6</sup>

We cannot, in this paper, solve the problem of large classes or unqualified instructors. They are questions of priority, which are determined by individual universities. The purpose of this research is to develop an undergraduate business communication course, structured around the needs of the business community as viewed by business executives. This course design will hopefully alleviate some of the problems discussed earlier.

#### METHODOLOGY

To determine what communication skills are most important in the business world and thus are deemed most appropriate for study in an undergraduate business communications course, 112 executives were questioned through a telephone survey. These executives, each representing different companies, were either personnel directors or vice presidents.

Representative industries - banking, retail, manufacturing, insurance, utilities, and service - were covered, although there was no attempt at random sampling. Each firm had at least one office located in a large metropolitan city in the southeast and employed over 100 people.

## FINDINGS

It was felt that the best format for presenting the data would be to list the results by question and include any discussion necessary under each category. This presentation would be followed by a proposed business communication/research syllabus structured around the findings of the survey and previous scholarly research.

1. In your opinion, how do recent undergraduates in business compare with the undergraduates of 1970 with respect to their ability to communicate properly? (Oral and written)

Table 1  
1970 Graduates' Ability to Communicate Properly  
vs  
Recent Graduates

| <u>Response</u>   | <u>Frequencies</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| A. Worse          | 72                 | 64             |
| B. About the same | 16                 | 15             |
| C. Better         | 19                 | 17             |
| D. Can't evaluate | 5                  | 4              |
|                   | 112                | 100%           |

The purpose of this question was to ascertain the overall feeling executives in this survey had toward their employees' ability to communicate. The results strongly support that of other research and again point out the problem that still exists in this area, even with our increased emphasis in communications.

2. What types of subject matter do you think should be covered in a business communications/research course?

Table 2  
Subject Matter

| <u>Response</u>                   | <u>Frequencies</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Letter writing                    | 107                | 96             |
| Memo writing                      | 105                | 94             |
| Oral skills                       | 92                 | 82             |
| Reporting writing                 | 54                 | 48             |
| Instructions                      | 48                 | 43             |
| Proposals                         | 47                 | 42             |
| Research skills                   | 38                 | 34             |
| Evaluations                       | 27                 | 24             |
| Outlines                          | 24                 | 21             |
| Speeches/presentations for others | 19                 | 16             |

(There were others cited, but all had a percent less than five.)

3. Using a scale of 1-10 with 10 being very important, what importance do you place on an employee's ability to write or present:

Table 3  
Relative Importance Rating

|   | <u>Average Rating</u> |
|---|-----------------------|
| a) written proposals                                    | 5.7                   |
| b) reports  | 7.1                   |
| c) letters  | 9.2                   |
| d) memos  | 9.4                   |
| e) outlines   | 4.8                   |
| f) speeches   | 6.7                   |
| g) instructions and procedures                          | 7.2                   |
| h) visual aids  | 6.1                   |
| i) oral presentations                                   | 8.1                   |
| j) himself well in group settings                       | 9.1                   |
| k) non-verbal communication properly<br>(body language) | 8.7                   |
| l) basic secondary research skills                      | 6.7                   |

Question 3 was based primarily on responses from question 2 although they did not appear in that order during the survey. Letter and memo writing received a very high rating which is not surprising considering



the number of employees who would be employed in such an activity. However, oral and non-verbal communication skills also received high ratings. Thus, while it may be necessary for business communication courses to emphasize written communication, it should not preclude the learning of a number of verbal and non-verbal skills such as conflict resolution and group interaction. Such skills are also implied by AACSB curriculum standards.

Another area which received much attention and yet is often overlooked in our business communication courses is the ability to display basic secondary research skills whether it be library, industry, or in-house material. This presents a particular problem because "faculty assigned to business writing for the first time are generally unacquainted with business research tools."<sup>7</sup> A suggestion here is that this portion of the course be team taught, utilizing the services of the business librarian. This would facilitate the learning of the students as well as the instructor.

4. What writing skills do you consider most important?

Table 4  
Important Writing Skills

| <u>Response</u>    | <u>Frequencies</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Simplicity         | 87                 | 77             |
| Brevity            | 72                 | 64             |
| Organization       | 48                 | 43             |
| Grammar            | 34                 | 30             |
| Logic              | 21                 | 19             |
| Spelling           | 20                 | 18             |
| Vocabulary         | 19                 | 16             |
| Sentence structure | 11                 | 10             |

(Others cited had a percentage response less than five.)

What writing problems do you see most often?

Table 5  
Writing Problems

| <u>Response</u>              | <u>Frequencies</u> | <u>Percent</u> |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Sentence structure           | 63                 | 56             |
| Clarity                      | 53                 | 47             |
| Grammar                      | 40                 | 36             |
| Organization                 | 38                 | 34             |
| Spelling                     | 38                 | 34             |
| Repetition                   | 21                 | 19             |
| Lack of supporting reference | 18                 | 16             |

(Others cited had a percentage response less than five.)

Business executives seemed to agree that the two most important writing skills an employee can have are simplicity and brevity. It also seems that they are not pleased with the performance of their employees, noting that sentence structure and clarity were two of the main problems they encounter in writing skills.

6. What percentage of your workers' time is spent in written communication?  
Oral communication?

Table 6  
Time Spent in Oral and Written Communication

| <u>Response</u>       | <u>Average Response</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Oral communication    | 44%                     |
| Written communication | 27%                     |

This finding supports further the contention that more time should be spent in the area of teaching oral communication skills. It must be recongnized that even though more time is spent on written subject matter in the classroom, and executives list written skills as most important (Tables 2 and 3), it is apparent that business professionals spend far more time in the art of verbal and non-verbal communication.

7. What other suggestions do you have for improving present undergraduate business communication/research courses?

The two responses repeated most often to this questions were: "Make it more rigorous," and "Require it during the junior year so they can apply it in their senior classes and during internships."

#### PROPOSED COURSE

This course proposal attempts to bring together three skills which rest at the foundation of successful business activity as related by the executives in this survey - - research, writing, and speaking. As an upper-level, required course for the business major, it should be seen as more advanced and specialized in its approach to research and writing than the core university requirement in English composition. As an introduction to the theory and practice of oral skills, it should provide a brief look at techniques that could be dealt with more fully in discrete upper-level speech courses. This course does not attempt to approximate in theoretical study or extensive practice the kinds of courses offered in programs which approach business communications as a discipline rather than a service course, and should, therefore, be uniformly incorporated in the junior year business courses.

#### Components

The proposed course comprises seven fairly discrete units:

- Research in Business
- Business Correspondence
- Job-Search Writing
- Formal Report Writing
- Interpersonal Oral Communication
- Small-Group Oral Communication
- Public Communication

Wherever possible, however, it is assumed that time efficiency and liveliness of presentation will be achieved by the instructors demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the various skills through the arrangement of course topics. The following plan is but one possibility of many; it might be useful, however, to represent the general conception of the course.

### Syllabus

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| Week 1  | Introduction to Course: Business Communication Theory   |
| Week 2  | Introduction to Business Correspondence; Direct Request; Business Correspondence: Good News; Business Correspondence: Bad News  |
| Week 3  | Business Correspondence: Persuasion; Introduction to Task Force and Formal Report Assignment (Weeks 8-10); Introduction to Interpersonal Communication and Job-Search Writing |
| Week 4  | Introduction to Methods of Research in Business (team taught with business librarian); Methods of Research in Economics and Accounting  |
| Week 5  | Methods of Research in Finance, Marketing and Management (with business librarian)  |
| Week 6  | Oral Exercises: Role-Playing, Interviewing (Formal Correspondence Unit Due)   |
| Week 7  | Oral Exercises; Resume  |
| Week 8  | Job Application Letter; Introduction to Small Group Communication   |
| Week 9  | Oral Exercises: Task Force, Panel Discussion, Brainstorming; (Formal Job Unit Due)  |
| Week 10 | Oral Exercises  |
| Week 11 | (Formal Report Due); Introduction to Public Communication   |
| Week 12 | Speech Manuscript and Proposal Preparation  |
| Week 13 | Presentations   |
| Week 14 | Presentations   |

## CONCLUSION

The need for better middle management communication skills is implicit and it is the partial responsibility of schools of business to prepare their students in this area. Understandably, it is difficult to give students a full measure when oral and written skills must be covered in a semester course. Most universities schedule only one required course in business communication. Therefore, it becomes necessary to structure it as tightly as possible. It is hoped that the results of this research and the proposed course structure will aid other universities in their endeavor to better prepare their students to meet the communication challenges that will face them as they enter their professional career.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. J. David Hunger and Thomas L. Wheelen, An Assessment of Undergraduate Business Education in the United States (Charlottesville, VA: McIntire School of Commerce Foundation, 1980), p. 29.
2. Myron Glassman and E. Ann Farley, "AACSB Accredited Schools' Approach to Business Communication Courses," The Journal of Business Communication, 16, No. 3 (1979), pp. 41-48.
3. Allen Blitstein, "What Employers Are Seeking in Business Graduates," The Collegiate Forum, Winter 1980-81, p. 7.
4. Hunger and Wheelen, pp. 1-74.
5. Glassman and Farley, p. 47.
6. The reader might wish to turn to the following articles for a further discussion of these problems:  
Karen Davis, Kay Rsaza and Merrill Whitburn, "Three Hours in the Library Now, Or Three Weeks in the Library Later," The ABCA Bulletin, 41, No. 3 (1978), pp. 29-32.  
  
James Suchan and Craig Snow, "Library Research for Business Writing Students: A Model," The ABCA Bulletin, 44, No. 2 (1981), pp. 33-37.
7. Suchan and Snow, p. 33.