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The Business and Professional Speaking Course

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DESCRIPTION OF THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SPEAKING COURSE

The business and professional speaking course is taught as a hands-on, practical course. At many universities it is a service course for the business school, the largest subscriber to the business and professional course; and other professional and technical programs. There are large business and professional programs acting as service courses at many two-year, technical and four-year colleges.

Since the course has been largely created at the request of faculty outside communication departments, there is a potential for conflict regarding course content and purpose. That is, who will determine the content of this introductory course? It is our opinion that the faculty in communication departments are in the best position to determine course content, assignments and overall goals and objectives of the business and professional speaking course. However, input from faculty and professionals outside the program are helpful and should not be disregarded.

Accreditation boards exert pressure on many technical and professional programs to have students take more and more communication courses (Blitzstein, 1980-1981; Sorenson
and Pearson, 1981; Becker and Ekdom, 1980; and Mayer, 1982). We are all familiar with the studies that point out that skills in communicating are important to employers, alumni and employees. What are these oral communication skills that faculty in communication have determined to be important in the business and professional speaking course? David Robinson argued, "Let me posit a master criterion: we should strive to give our students the communication insights and skills which will facilitate survival and growth from career entry through the first ten years or so" (6). Joanne Ervin reiterates this perspective in summarizing research by Vince DiSalvo. She writes,

"Even though DiSalvo (1980) does not use, specifically, the term everyday working communication when he reports the results of twenty-five studies designed to discover the communication needs or organizational practitioners, this concept is embedded in the following skills identified by respondents as important: conferences with boss about work, conferences with peers, persuading one person, listening, questioning, giving directions/instructions, interpreting a message from another person and routine information exchange" (3-4).

Instead of relying on isolated experiences, let's take the data to respond to this question from the contents of textbooks targeting the business and professional speaking course. A quick survey indicates that there are many content areas but only three performance areas. The content area include: communication theories and models, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, group communication, persuasion, giving information, leadership, decision making, listening, organization of information, delivery, audience analysis and adaptation, and interviewing. Even though some authors might include additional topics, the performance areas are presentational speaking (persuasive and informative), interviewing (employment and sometimes appraisal)
and group communication (decision making and group presentations).

**PURPOSE OF THE COURSE**

Instructors in the business and professional speaking course make reasonable assurances to other faculty and their students that they work to improve the oral communication skills of the students in a variety of communication settings. Unfortunately, for most people outside the communication discipline, this usually means merely “public speaking.” However, research and experience suggest other communication skills are important to people entering careers.

Students also expect the course to be a modified public speaking course with multiple opportunities to give speeches in a somewhat formal atmosphere. These expectations are influenced by interactions with their faculty, academic advisors, family and friends who are also insisting they take this business and professional course at this particular time. Because of the expectations of our clients requiring the course (faculty and administrators from other programs), communication faculty attempt to emphasize presentational skill development components of the course through course work and assignments; and give only slight attention to other forms of communication.

In attempting to represent the communication discipline, instructors explain the process of human communication to students, with specific focus on organizational and professional settings. Elements of successful communication are explained in detail so students will be able to identify them during their communication skill development exercises in class. The approach adopted in the business and professional speaking class reflects commonly-shared educational experiences that supports the conclusion that communication skill
development cannot be taught sans their theoretical foundation. Ervin writes, "The professional community may devalue theory; just teach students how to do an interview, they say. In the other corner, you [speech teachers] recognize that skill development without a sound theoretical underpinning makes for communication hacks"(2). What is hoped in this approach is that students will remember the communication theories and skills learned in the business and professional speaking course when they enter careers. If so, this background will assist them in a variety of communication situations they will encounter in their personal and professional lives. For example, when facing a presentation to a group of fellow employees, some of the content from the business and professional course will be remembered and the presentation should be better because of it. Similarly, in interpersonal relationships with friends and family, it is hoped that some of the communication skills they have heard about in the business and professional course will assist the development and maintenance of these relationships.

Finally, instructors view it as one of their responsibilities to teach students to recognize communication variables operating in situations and respond appropriately. That is, what things influence communication regardless of situation or purpose; such as: context, topic, audience expectations, environment, occasion, etc. The ability to respond appropriately to communication situations faced in modern organizations or contemporary professions will impact their potential success in their careers. In order for students to respond appropriately to these exigencies, they must be taught to recognize them, articulate a clear description of what communication strategies to implement, and then communicate their ideas appropriately. Robinson concludes, "It is probably more vital for the new employees to learn that the communication environment of the work place is quite different from that of the home or school, and that there is a certain useful survival
value in knowing what kinds of messages should be sent, received, acknowledged, or relayed to or from whom" (6).

**COURSE STRUCTURE**

There are many options in structuring the business and professional speaking course. It is important that the business and professional speaking course on a campus be standardized for two reasons. First, since it is often the required service course, faculty should be interested in having a similar course taught regardless of the section a student is enrolled. Second, since this is likely to be the only communication course for 95% or more of the students, it is important to organize course content and assignments so students get the "best-bang-for-their-buck."

**Syllabus**

The most important thing to do when standardizing the business and professional speaking course is to prepare a standardized syllabus. This provides a common orientation to the course, establishes standard expectations of student performance, and provides each student with common information about the course. Even more importantly, it provides each instructor (whether full-service faculty, part-time instructor or graduate teaching assistant) with a common set of goals to accomplish during the term. The syllabus should not be so detailed that there is little latitude for the individual instructor to be creative and in control of classroom instruction. Within a structured, standardized course, allowing the individual instructor latitude to achieve course objectives is important. For instance, an instructor's method for teaching
the principles of communication or how to prepare and deliver a persuasive presentation may differ from another instructor's method. The important thing to keep in focus is the fact that they are accomplishing course objectives; just using differing approaches. It is important that the course director receive some assurances that the course is similar regardless of individual instructor. That is, that the goals of the course are the same in each section and as long as instructors work to accomplish the goals, the methods the instructor selects are appropriate.

**Student Assignments**

In standardizing the business and professional speaking course, it is important that each student complete a set of common communication performance assignments. Students in the business and professional speaking course will complete presentations, group communication activities and interviews.

The business and professional speaking course serves as a “hybrid” or “blend” course. Instructors teach group communication, interpersonal communication and public speaking. In the business and professional speaking course, there should be at least two presentations — one persuasive and one informative. Instructor emphasis should be on teaching adaptation, information gathering, organizing and presentational skills. Students should also participate in an employment interview — and in more advanced business and professional courses, an appraisal interview. Finally, there ought to be some group communication activities which demand students to arrive at a group decision and/or present a group report to the class. This is important because employees spend a great deal of their work life preparing for and participating in groups.
Course Examinations

Another way to offer a standardized version of the business and professional speaking course is to create standardized testing. This can be accomplished in one of two ways. First, there could be an examination that every student in the business and professional course takes — this could occur as the midterm and/or the course final. Questions could be put together by the entire instructional staff and the course director.

A second option for the standardized examination is to develop a standardized pool of questions from which faculty select the questions they want to include on their midterms and/or final examinations. If this option is selected, every member of the instructional staff should be expected to prepare questions for the pool and be involved in editing the final question pool.

Course Exercises

One of the more difficult things to standardize in the business and professional speaking course is the exercises to be used by the instructional staff. The difficulty comes when trying to agree on which exercises are the ones that should be common to all sections of the course. Who should decide? The basic course director? Or the entire staff?

The best approach would be to have a pool of exercises that have been nominated as “successful” by the staff. These should be shared with each member of the staff for potential use in any of the sections. It is paramount the individual instructor maintain autonomy for making instructional decisions to accomplish the goals of the business and professional course.
Course Evaluation

The only way to determine if the business and professional course is meeting the agreed upon objectives is to complete a course evaluation. Evaluation procedures come in many packages. There are student evaluations of the course where the university, department or instructor asks the student to offer an assessment of the course. Sometimes these evaluations are compared to other university courses or are just an overall evaluation of the course and its content.

A second type of evaluation would be to ask faculty in programs requiring the business and professional speaking course to evaluate the course in terms of the improved communication competence. Third, faculty in the communication department could be asked to evaluate the course through classroom visitations, interviews with faculty in other programs, interviews with students or interpretation of some objective measures of communication competence.

Perhaps one of the most enlightening kinds of course evaluation available is to invite outside evaluators to come and assess classes, interview faculty, staff and/or administration, review the texts and course assignments and offer an informed, subjective evaluation of the business and professional speaking course. These evaluators should could be communication professionals from other campuses who have courses similar to the business and professional speaking course on your campus. They could also be local communication professionals who could offer an assessment of the applicability of the interactions in the classroom and the assignments completed by students as to career relevance and application.

The point is that it is important to collect data on the "state of your business and professional speaking course." Without these data, how will it improve? If faculty go about their business believing everything is "OK" with the business
and professional speaking course, then there will be no reason to change. However, if faculty collect data that there are some things to do to improve the business and professional speaking course, then the course director and instructional staff have specifics to work on to improve the course.

**Teaching Methods**

There are various teaching methods to present the course to the students. As in other introductory communication courses, a popular method is the lecture/discussion approach. Instructors in small autonomous sections lecture on course content, expect students to discuss the course material and grade student performances. This is a common scenario for a business and professional class. However, there are other teaching methods appropriate for the business and professional course. These would include large lecture sections with little opportunity for student-instructor interaction or student performances, making the course more of a “business and professional communication theory course;” self-motivated or self-guided learning where students learn and test on course content at their own pace; and, situations where there is a large lecture component with smaller discussion sections staffed by a group of graduate students and/or part-time faculty.

**Assignment Evaluation**

One of the most important activities in the business and professional class is the instructor's handling of student performances. For example, how does an instructor give students feedback about their presentation? Several question
about the evaluation process come to the mind: [1] Does the instructor give immediate verbal feedback to the student in the classroom? [2] Does the instructor save comments until after all the students have completed their assignments for that class period and then offer some over-generalized, over-riding comments? [3] Does the instructor rely solely on written evaluations of presentations? It is not clear that there is any particular advantages or disadvantages to any of these approaches. In fact, there are faculty who rely on a combination of all three approaches in evaluating student presentations. One of the important things to consider is to make sure the students have their evaluations on the same day they perform their assignment.

The questions remain the same for group and interviewing assignments. However, group discussions and presentations pose additional questions for the instructor: [1] What will be evaluated, the performance or the effort leading up to the performance? [2] How will students who do not do their fair share be handled in the classroom? [3] How will students who did more than their fair share of the work be graded? [4] Do all students in the group receive the same grade? [5] Do you ask group members to evaluate each other to influence the grades on the assignment? It is recommended in the business and professional course that instructors give the same grade to each member of the group regardless of group assignment. This better reflects how groups are evaluated in business and industry. At the same time, it is appropriate to recognize that some students work harder and more diligently than others. There are two solutions to this dilemma. First, ask students to evaluate each other at about the midpoint of their group assignment and at its completion. Hopefully what occurs is that students who are not evaluated favorably at the midway point will become more highly motivated during the second half of the project. The second option is that the group has the right and authority to “fire” a group member who is not contributing a fair share. This frees the group of a noncon-
tributing group member, but gives the instructor the problem of providing motivation and work for the “fired” student to complete the class.

Grading the interview assignment poses some problems for the instructor. For example, usually one student is asked to role play the interviewer. How will that person’s efforts be evaluated? The student-interviewer’s performance (albeit role played) influences the performance of the student-interviewee. How much influence will be afforded this when evaluating the performance of the individual student? What happens when one student prepares for the assignment and does well and the other student fails to prepare and does poorly? Do both students receive the same grade for the assignment? If not, how will the grade be determined? Instructors tend to evaluate the two students separately, using different criteria for the interviewer and the interviewee. This approach to grading attempts to address many of the issues raised above.

The questions about performance evaluation are all related to teaching approach and teaching method. These are important questions to both students and instructors in any introductory communication course.

**PROBLEMS IN THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL COURSE**

**General Problems in the Business and Professional Speaking Course**

Perhaps the greatest problem in the business and professional speaking course is its duration. Instructors face the students only thirty to forty hours per term. The instructor must plan the course for the students within these time constraints. They both must use the time available for
communication skill development and communication theory understanding. There is little time to waste and actually only a few things to be done to streamline the instructional efforts in the class. Time utilization becomes important to the students not only inside the class but with their work outside the class as well. Focusing the class on the development of communication skills must become the priority of all participants — instructor and student alike.

The second constraint in the business and professional speaking course is the size of the classes. As primarily a communication skill development course, sections should be small enough to maximize the time available for performance assignments. As a result of these communication application opportunities, a small percentage of class time is left for other things like lecturing, activities, field trips, etc. Instructors must attempt to focus class time and energies on using multiple skill application exercises. For example, students can be encouraged to develop better listening skills and critical skills as they witness other students’ performances. In addition, students can be placed in groups to develop a better understanding of group dynamics while preparing for presentational speaking opportunities.

Although certainly not a complete listing of all the constraints facing instructors in the business and professional speaking course, these are the most frequent ones encountered. Each instructor or each course director must design strategies to address each of these constraints and many more that emerge in the course. The instructor will work to reduce the potential influence of each one in her or his classroom.
Course Specific Problems in the Business and Professional Speaking Course

One difficulty when teaching business and professional speech stems from helping students recognize that the business audiences they will face in the future are more than happenstance aggregations of people. They have assembled for a specific time in a certain place for a known purpose. Ervin contends,

"The difficult part about cultivating skill in everyday working communication is that, under traditional instructional methods, it is difficult to engineer a set of circumstances whereby the student receives information on the conventions governing this type of communication, has little opportunity to practice the skill under conditions where he or she can be observed, and then receives feedback on performance with an eye to enhancing future performance" (4).

Communication skills seem easier to teach when instructors consider students to be general registrants in a course. When students deliver presentations, they are students talking to students. The challenge to student audiences often seems merely to bear up under four or more presentations or other assignments today. Of course, the challenge for the instructor is the ritual of incantations about abortion, capital punishment, taxes, study tips and birth control.

The leap to business and professional communication is large. No longer can instructors be concerned with communication as a personal activity of students, but rather it must be viewed as an affair of the work place. Guidelines for producing and for evaluating such communication events emerge from the work setting and from those who populate it. In business and professional communication courses, the focus is on communication skills as they affect specific work audi-
ences, not just as they relate to the students who happen to be in the business and professional classroom. This fact creates a quandary. To go beyond the basics of delivery and organization, instructors have to illustrate the expectations of a business audience when listening to communication and the restrictions which the business particular setting or occasion imposed on the business communicator. Ervin suggests, “Without an organizational context, the delivery of work instructions, a report on work progress, a proposal, or an interview or meeting loses much of its direction and force” (5).

Thus, the business and profession course requires that students consider business communication settings, that they anticipate a business audience, and that they be able to evaluate business speaking from a business perspective. Creating this in the business and professional class creates tremendous challenge for instructors and students alike.

So what means of persuasion does a real business speaker have that a student in the business and professional classroom typically does not? There are at least three: [1] organizational roots, [2] access to people and resources, [3] access to shared organizational and member visions of the future. The common notion that a business presentation is an event happening within an organization might be misleading. Rather, it’s important to think of a presentation as part of an ongoing organizational process, the communication actually becoming and being the organization in development.

Hence a presentation is part of the ongoing affairs of the institution doing what it does and/or being what it is. The occasion for most organizational communication is produced by the organization itself. This notion is important because the real speaker may see a presentation as an organizational reply to an organizational question, a corporate action following a realization of corporate conditions, or an organized inquiry into institutional activities. The real speaker, being a participant in the organization, is party to the question, to the
conditions, to the activity, and to the history and background data. Real speakers understand the organizational significance of their presentations. The challenge to the instructor is to create this feeling for the students — not an easy task to accomplish.

The real communicator, within a business and professional setting, has access to roots, people and organizational vision and the fact that they come into play in several ways. First, the business communicator probably has a sense of how this particular organization is similar to and different from other organizations. Communicators know what efforts have led to success and what have failed in the past. They know the stated goals of the organization, as well as having access to information about the private interests of individuals within it.

Second, communicators are privy to the special "language" of the organization, its product names and numbers, its in-jokes, its mannerisms, its values. Communicators are part of the organizational community. They know whether to wear shirt-sleeves, whether a pastel shirt and jacket or whether a dress is the rule. They know the rituals, the influential decision makers, the right things to say and much more about the organization because of their membership. Giving this sense of organizational reality to students in the business and professional class is a challenge for the instructor.

Third, communicators in organizations know that communication about a particular issue probably has already taken place in advance and thus are in a position to find out much of what it was and that more will take place after the presentation. So, while a presentation might be defined within a particular time and place, the communication which relates to the issues at hand extends both before and after it. In addition, the audience already has a base level of information about the speech because they have organizational roots too. Giving students the sense of this historic information poses a challenge to students and instructor. The challenge
for the instructor is to generate this information; the challenge for the student is to assimilate the information provided.

And fourth, a real communicator has an organizational reputation to consider, one which might be used constructively to enhance the message or which might have to be overcome. The organizational communicator has many opportunities to affect messages, to hone communication skills, and to practice public communication. Rarely does an employee have to give a life-or-death speech the first time called upon to deliver a presentation. There are many situations where successful communication in the business and professional setting can and does influence the success of the communicator.

FUTURE OF THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL SPEECH COURSE

The future of the business and professional course appears bright. There continues to be opportunities for growth because accreditation boards continue to pressure faculty in technical and professional programs to place communication courses in curricula of college programs across the country. The diversity of textbooks being published by major publishers indicates their view that the business and professional speaking textbook market is large enough to sustain their investments.

The biggest problem facing the business and professional course in the future is that there is little agreement as to what the course ought to be. Should the course be an outgrowth of organizational communication theory? If so, how much? Should be course be solely presentational speaking? Should students be expected to participate in groups and one-to-one communication situations?
A related problem facing the business and professional course is the diverse audiences at two-year colleges, technical programs and four year colleges and universities. How is the course to address these diverse students? Should there be separate instructional approaches at these different types of institutions? Should there be a common theme that holds all of these business and professional speaking courses together? The answers to these questions and other issues are not easy; but they will be an ongoing concern in the future of the business and professional speaking course.

As one of the newest introductory communication courses, course directors of the business and professional course can learn a great deal from the growth and decline of interest in other introductory communication courses over time. Popularity in introductory courses appears cyclical. At times, public speaking is the most popular introductory communication course, the hybrid or blend course is growing in popularity, and, at one time, the interpersonal communication course was much more popular than it is currently.

Because there is a solid enrollment foundation for the business and professional speaking course in technical and professional programs, there is tremendous opportunity to build interest and enrollments in other academic programs in the future. How faculty and administrators interested in the business and professional course address this real and potential for growth will be interesting to participate in and watch.

REFERENCES

The Business and Professional Speaking Course


