

Running head: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM

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WHERE HAS IT BEEN?, WHERE IS IT NOW?, AND WHERE IS IT GOING?

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**Abstract**

Business communication curriculum plays an integral role in preparing students for the workforce. In order for students to succeed in the ever-changing world of business, the business communication curriculum must reflect the current trends that are being accepted in the business world. This article reviews studies conducted during the past 30 years that have reviewed what has been included in the curriculum and what employers have expected from incoming employees. This article discusses the purpose and philosophy of business communication and developing a business communication curriculum, which includes what has been included in the curriculum in the past, what is currently being included in the curriculum, and what should be included in the curriculum in the future.

**Introduction**

Business communication has played an important role in many business schools and colleges. For many undergraduate business students, business communication is a required course. As business and industry change at a rapid pace, business communication curriculum must change as well. In order for students to succeed in the ever-changing world of business, business communication courses must reflect the current trends that are being accepted in the business world.

**Purpose and Philosophy of Business Communication**

According to Ralph Tyler's (1949) curriculum model, the first question that should be asked regarding curriculum is, "What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?" (p. 3). Based upon Tyler's question, what is the educational purpose of business communication and what should it seek to attain? Business communication is the basic foundation for many other business classes. It is essential in developing basic

communication skills such as letter writing, memo writing, e-mail construction, teamwork skills, oral presentation skills, report writing and employment documents. Keyser suggested that the objective of business communication is to “analyze the methods of investigation, organization, and presentation of various types of business data” (Keyser, 1972, p. 33). The main purpose, or objective, of business communication is to prepare students to communicate, both in written and oral form, in the business world they plan to enter.

In a study entitled, *The Importance of a Philosophical ‘Mix’ in Teaching Business Communication*, Jeremiah Sullivan (1978) illustrated that business communication curriculum must be a mix of several philosophies, instead of just one predominant philosophy. Sullivan identified the most influential philosophies of education: idealism, classic realism, scientific realism, pragmatism, and existentialism. According to Sullivan (1978), all of the aforementioned philosophies affect the curriculum of business communication. Such things as organization, learning rules, behavioral objectives, pre-testing and post-testing, case studies, and decision-making are all used in the business communication curriculum. Based upon the content that is included, idealism, classic realism, scientific realism (behaviorism), pragmatism and existentialsim are all part of the business communication curriculum (Sullivan, 1978). Even though the content may change, the basic philosophy of business communication has remained unchanged—to develop students’ communication skills to prepare them for the world of work.

## Developing a Business Communication Curriculum

### *How is the business communication curriculum developed?*

As students prepare to enter the workforce upon completion of college, they must have communication skills to succeed. As confirmed by the following studies during the past 30 years, communication skills are absolutely essential to students entering the workforce. “One of the greatest weaknesses we see in the college graduates...is the limitation in their ability to communicate both orally and in writing” (Bennett, 1971, p. 9). “According to Thomas H. Inman and others, communication skill is considered the leading requirement for success in the business world” (Hart, 1972, p. 47). “Employers view effective communication skills as a key to success in business. Consequently, university business school faculty have come to realize that they must equip students with the communication skills employers demand if their programs are to succeed” (Plutsky, 1996, p. 69). “There is little question among educators and business executives that excellent communication skills are requisites for today’s jobs” (McPherson, 1998, p. 68). “Academicians and employers widely acknowledge the need for oral and written communication skills” (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999, p. 33). “Employers maintain that graduates need training in such topics as speaking and listening (Mayes, Weldley, & Icenogle, 1997), persuasion techniques and conflict management (Reinsch & Shelby, 1997), and interpersonal communication (Golen, Catanach, & Moeckel, 1997)” (Wardrope, 2002, p. 61).

Even though technology has changed the way communication takes place, basic communication skills are still needed such as listening, writing and oral presentation skills. The business communication curriculum is developed, in many instances, based

upon the needs of employers. For instance, e-mail is now commonplace in the business communication curriculum. Teamwork skills are also emphasized in the business communication curriculum because such an emphasis is placed on teamwork in today's workplace. It is imperative that instructors of business communication keep their curriculum updated to effectively prepare students for the workforce. For example, students must be prepared to work in a team environment. If students are not prepared by business communication instructors to work with other individuals, then it will be difficult for them to be competitive in today's workforce. Also, students should be able to send a business e-mail message upon entering the workforce. It is the responsibility of business communication instructors to teach students how to use e-mail effectively, so students are not left behind in today's technological workplace.

*What has been included in the business communication curriculum in the past?*

A transition has been made in business communication, primarily because of the changes made by technology. In 1970, a study, limited to 39 professors in the state of California, was conducted by Marshall Keyser (1972) to find what was included in business communication curriculum at the time. The respondents indicated that they included synopsis writing, communication theory, readability studies, library skills and techniques, grammar instruction, punctuation instruction, report writing, report types, graphic aids instruction, questionnaire construction, letter writing, letter types, letter assignments and dictation practice.

In a study conducted by Bennett and Olney in the 1980's, executives deemed oral communication, memorandum writing and grammar the three most important items to

include in the business communication curriculum. Listening and report writing were ranked high as well (Bennett & Olney, 1987).

In 1982, Ober and Wunsch conducted a survey among 350 community college business communication instructors and 350 university business communication instructors to determine what was being taught in the business communication curriculum. Out of the 700 surveys that were mailed, 342 were returned and used for the study. The respondents indicated they included business letters, writing principles, employment communications, report writing, theory/foundations of business communications and oral communications in their courses (Ober & Wunsch, 1982).

In 1986, Ober repeated the study that was conducted in 1982. A total of 700 surveys were mailed—350 to community college business communication instructors and 350 to university business communication instructors (Ober, 1987). According to the surveys returned, the respondents indicated they included business letters, writing principles, employment communications, report writing, theory/foundations of business communications, oral communications, word processing, telecommunications and international communications (Ober, 1987).

As can be seen by these studies, letter writing and report writing have remained constant in the business communication curriculum, while shorthand dictation practice has been dropped from the curriculum. Also, telecommunications and international communications were recognized as part of the curriculum in the 1986 study conducted by Ober (Ober, 1987).

*What is currently being included in the business communication curriculum?*

Technology has played, and will continue to play, an important role in the curriculum of business communication. As trends in the workplace have changed, the business communication curriculum has changed as well to include the newest forms of communication and technology; however, basic communication skills such as writing and oral presentation skills have remained as the foundation for the curriculum. In 1995, a study conducted at California State University, Northridge, by Susan Plutsky, showed that the faculty in the College of Business Administration and Economics rated English usage, which included grammar, sentence construction, and etcetera, as the top-ranked items to include in a business communication course. Also, Plutsky's study revealed that the respondents rated the inclusion of technology, which included electronic mail and teleconferencing, low (Plutsky, 1996). As a note, however, when Plutsky's study was conducted, electronic mail and teleconferencing were not used as frequently in the workplace as they are today.

In a study conducted by Wardrope and Bayless (1999), Association for Business Communication (ABC) members were surveyed to rate the importance of business communication concepts. The researchers "distributed a questionnaire to the 1,170 United States members of the Association for Business Communication listed in the *1997 ABC Directory*. Of the 1,170 surveys sent, 229 business communication instructors returned usable responses" (p. 34-35). The main concepts the business communication instructors were asked to rate were theory, written communication, oral communication, employment communication, technology and ethics/cultural diversity. Of the six areas listed, overall, written communication was ranked with the highest importance, with memos being ranked as the topic within the area of written communication that received

the most coverage. Also, correct grammar and sentence structure was ranked as the most important area in written communication (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999).

In 2002, Wardrope conducted another study relating to the perceptions of department chairs, in the areas of accounting, computer information systems, economics, finance, management, and marketing, related to business communication. Wardrope (2002) included:

a 41-item, closed ended questionnaire requesting demographic information and itemizing business communication skills in seven areas (writing, speaking, interpersonal, group/team communication, listening, technology-mediated communication, and cultural competency) that was sent to 1,850 department chairs at four-year institutions in the U.S. Respondents returned 306 questionnaires; 280 questionnaires were usable (p. 62-63).

According to the department chairs who responded, written communication was ranked the most important among the communication skills, while using correct grammar was ranked the most important in the written communication category. Although oral communication skills were ranked the lowest among the communication skills, department chairs ranked making oral presentations, which fell under the category of oral communication skills, as one of the highest areas of importance. The reason why oral communication skills were ranked lowest overall was because department chairs rated the individual rating scale areas of answer audience questions, control speaking anxiety, use nonverbal communication, use slides/projection equipment and prepare presentation handouts low (Wardrope, 2002).

As can be seen from the previous studies, written communication has consistently been ranked as the number one priority in the business communication curriculum by business communication instructors and various department chairs alike. The number one text of many business communication instructors, *Business Communication: Process*



*and Product*, (4th ed.), by Mary Ellen Guffey, emphasizes writing by accentuating the 3-x-3 writing process, which includes prewriting, writing, and revising (Guffey, 2003).

Also, oral presentations are an essential part of a business communication curriculum, according to both business communication instructors and department chairs.

*What should be included in the business communication curriculum?*

According to White and Myers (2001), “As instructional technology evolves and becomes more available, faculty must adapt to new teaching practices” (p. 95). Adapting to new teaching practices is absolutely critical to the curriculum of business communication. Not only does technology change in education, but technology also changes even more quickly in the business world. There are several areas that will require more focus in the business communication curriculum in years to come.

One area that has already been included in the curriculum is that of e-mail. E-mail is used every day by many organizations worldwide. Many businesses are now using e-mail to correspond with their employees, customers and suppliers. “E-mail has become the primary communication channel for internal communication” (Behind the numbers, 2003, p. 66). If this is the case, more emphasis must be placed on such things as grammar, appropriate structure and etiquette when using e-mail. The basic writing process that is emphasized in business communication cannot be forgotten when using e-mail.

Another area that will become more prominent in the business communication curriculum is instant messaging. The second edition *Business Communication Essentials* textbook by Courtland Bovee and John Thill (2005) states, “instant messaging lets you know who on your list of contacts is online at the very moment you are. Multiple

messages may be sent back and forth in real time, without having to click through all the reply and send steps that e-mail requires. Instant messaging is a recent entry into the corporate communication scene, but it may soon surpass e-mail as the more commonly used tool for communicating with business associates and customers” (Bovee &Thill, 2004, p. 143-144). As instant messaging becomes more widely used, the business communication curriculum must include more information on this new, technological phenomenon.

Even though technology, such as e-mail and instant messaging, are becoming commonplace in today’s workforce, the concept behind each has not changed. Written communication will still be the basis in both of these areas and must continue to be emphasized in the business communication curriculum.

### Conclusion

As technology continues to play a key role in the workplace, business communication curriculum must continually be updated to reflect the current technology-based workplace. Although technology will continue to change the business communication curriculum, the basic concepts of writing, grammar, spelling and oral presentations must remain in the business communication curriculum. Based upon research that has been reviewed in this article, the conclusion can be drawn that written and oral communication skills have been of key importance to employers and business communication instructors alike during the past 30 years and that without the basic communication foundation, individuals will be unable to advance in the technological workplace.

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