

TEACHING BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Past, Present, and Future

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This article is based on the theme of the 70th annual convention of the Association for Business Communication (ABC): past, present, and future. In traditional Chinese culture, 70 is a very significant number because it represents a crossroads and indicates that an organization has survived to old age but must now undertake a review to ensure its future existence. This leads me to the theme of my article, in which I examine the teaching of business communication within the theme of the conference: past (representing the establishment of business communication as a teaching area in the United States), present (a transitional period in which we are learning to communicate in a global and multidisciplinary environment), and future (perfecting communication techniques and reacting to new challenges and opportunities).

In this article, I discuss the evolution of business communication teaching and the challenges we face in getting it right in the 21st century. In doing so, I show how the teaching of business communication has been characterized by stability (continually looking to find better and more appropriate ways to communicate) and change (adapting to the challenge of communicating in an expanding and increasingly complex, diversified, and fragmented global multidisciplinary communication environment). At present, we are going through a transition period in which we are adapting and learning how to communicate in this ever changing environment. Our challenge is to build on the fundamental principles and the foundation that were established in the past and develop new teaching methodologies, approaches, and techniques that will allow us to communicate more effectively and efficiently in the present and increasingly so in the future. My intention is to show how the teaching of business communication has changed and evolved over

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the past 70 years (past and present) and project future challenges and development (future). To illustrate, I also discuss how my development as a teacher of business communication has paralleled the evolution and growth in the field and how my "journey" has helped me keep my teaching related and relevant to an ever changing communication environment.

PAST

The teaching of business communication as a formal and distinct discipline originated in the United States (Krapels & Arnold, 1998; Locker, 1998; Rogers, 1996). Business communication has established itself as an important subject area and has become an integral component of business school curricula (whether courses are taught by business professors or as service courses). The overall teaching objective in the early years was to teach American students how to communicate effectively and efficiently in American business and commercial environments. According to Hagge (1989), business communication in the formative period was rooted in the study of rhetoric in the writing of letters and memos, with emphasis placed on the proper forms and correct use of English. The American pioneers of business communication established universal communication processes and principles and placed emphasis on finding the best way of communicating in different environments.

During this formative period, teaching how to communicate in the professional genres of specialized fields was outside the parameters of business communication teaching. The communication environment was relatively homogeneous, stable, and simple, and consequently general language could be adequately used in encoding and decoding messages. The application and examples used in teaching were focused on teaching effective and efficient communication in the United States. The textbooks and auxiliary teaching materials were written by American authors and geared toward native English-speaking American students. The teaching approach was appropriate in focusing on the form, structure, and process of business communication, and there was a fit between what was taught in the classroom and what could be applied in practice by business communicators. As a result, teachers of business communication could focus on teaching a general communication process and were not required to have specialized knowledge of professional disciplines and the communication approaches and styles of the professional genres of these disciplines.

Although this early period of business communication teaching provided the foundation that we still use to guide our present teaching, it also provided incomplete and limited perspectives on the teaching of business communication in a global and multidisciplinary communication environment. In this formative period, the focus was on teaching Americans how to exchange business messages within the context of an American communication environment in which the

communicators shared a common background context (economic, linguistic, social, political, legal, physical, and technological).

I now briefly describe my teaching experiences during this formative period to provide a contextual background for later adaptations in my teaching. I started my business communication teaching career in the United States, where I taught remedial business communication courses in an M.B.A. program. I also taught organizational behavior, with a focus on communication, in which I first used a large-scale behavioral business simulation. Consistent with teaching practice at that time, my approach was to teach American students and international students how to communicate in an American way to survive in the American environment. During this period, I learned how to teach the basic communication process and came away understanding the importance of engaging students in practical, real-world, skill-building learning experiences. My experience during this formative period ultimately provided me with the foundation and confidence to make adaptations and changes that I describe below.

PRESENT

I believe that the present period represents a transitional stage in that we are learning how to adjust our teaching methods to better suit the realities of an ever evolving and more complex, globalized, and multidisciplinary communication and teaching environment. With economic expansion to all parts of world, communicators are faced with the prospect of encoding and decoding an ever larger volume of more diversified messages. In this environment, individuals increasingly interact directly and indirectly in interconnected global communication networks and create interrelated global value-added chains (Porter, 1985) in their roles as producers and customers. This means that their messages may undergo multiple translations through various national languages as they travel upstream, midstream, and downstream within an industry as well as horizontally across industries and with other institutions and constituencies.

The exchange of field knowledge that is coded in professional or field-specific genres (e.g., marketing research reports, legal documents, financial reports) further complicates this translation process. As professionals increasingly use more complex and distinctive professional genres (see Bhatia, 2004), communication barriers are created as these professionals interact with professionals from other disciplines and with nonspecialists. Consequently, messages have to be concurrently translated into many national languages and professional genres and adapted to the competency levels of communicators in the translation process (see also Du-Babcock, in press).

Constant advances in communication technologies mean not only that the volume of messages exchanged has increased rapidly but that messages can be exchanged at significantly lower transaction costs. In this global environment,

individuals representing different cultures and possessing various levels of genre and subject knowledge, language, and culture competency send and receive messages that not only cover an entire range of subject complexity (from the most simple to the most complex) but also need precise wording (from low importance to mandatory). Global competitive pressure stimulates international firms to develop worldwide communication networks within their own firms, with their suppliers and customers, and with other external constituencies such as governmental agencies and special interest groups.

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The concurrent migration of workers and international relocation of production facilities have also created multilingual and multicultural workforces and the need to communicate more efficiently and effectively in multiple languages and in face-to-face communication. Expertise is no longer located solely within advanced countries, because expert workers from developing countries can now be accessed at lower cost. Furthermore, customers from around the world, who drive the competitive process, are adopting both increasingly similar and divergent buying behaviors and preferences in choosing standardized, world-class products as well as customized, culture-specific products.

To succeed in a global and multidisciplinary communication environment, interactants will have to learn how to take into account and adjust to linguistic and cultural differences and competencies. Technical advances in communication technology will speed up and broaden the media options as well as lower the transmission cost of electronic messages. Advances in technology in general will create the need to accurately and precisely transfer complex technical information that is coded in distinctive professional genres that are increasingly differentiated from general language. This means that in an ever widening variety of communication situations, communicators are directly or indirectly exposed to an array of cultural differences, information exchange possibilities, and communication dynamics, which further require them to adjust to the competency levels of their communication partners.

To communicate effectively in such an environment, communicators must learn how to (a) use the new technologies and media and (b) interact from varying competency positions in different language, cultural, and communication

environments. As teachers of business communication, we must learn how to teach in this changing communication environment, in which the basic communication process and underlying communication process remain constant but individuals are communicating via cell phones, videoconferences, and so on, rather than—and in addition to—via letters, memos, and face-to-face meetings. Our challenge is to teach students how to cope with and communicate in this increasingly complex and diverse global, multidisciplinary communication environment.

I now discuss how I adjusted my teaching in this transitional period to reflect this changing teaching environment and the need to teach students relevant coping and communication skills. To illustrate, I provide two personal examples of skill-building exercises. In the first example, I discuss how I adapted a large-scale American simulation to fit the learning environment in Hong Kong. The simulation experience exposed students to business administration professional genres (finance and accounting, strategic and general management, marketing, and human resource management) as they interacted in their assigned roles. This example represents an initial adaptation to the evolving global and multidisciplinary teaching environment and occurred before the recent major advances in communication technologies. In the second example, I discuss how I now use teleconferencing as a vehicle to teach intercultural communication and professional communication in business genres. The second example illustrates a transition from the present to the future, because we can now take advantage of advances in communication technologies to teach intercultural communication in a global environment.

In the first example, I describe how I adapted the American-based simulation to better suit the educational environment in Hong Kong. The adaptations I made were based on the recognition that Hong Kong students have needs and backgrounds that are different from those of American students. The process involved developing supplementary materials and new policies and procedures to facilitate the administration of the simulation while using the simulation materials intact. These adaptations were fully described in *Business Communication Quarterly* (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2000), so I will highlight only a few of the adaptations that I made.

Over a 2-year period, I made adaptations in three areas: language, culture, and context. One of the major objectives in using the simulation was to create an environment in which students would have to use and develop their interactive English-language communication competency and learn to use English alongside their native Cantonese. One of my adaptations was to designate English-only speakers who wore name tags to clearly identify themselves as such. This adaptation was a compromise, because I could have required all communication to be in English. However, in each simulation, I decided to designate half of the students as English-only speakers for two reasons. First, I felt that having a bilingual or multilingual environment more accurately represented the international communication environment in Hong Kong and thereby created a more authentic communication situation. Second, this policy allowed students to compare their communication behaviors in

their first language (Cantonese) and second language (English) because students were assigned as English-only speakers in one run and allowed to use their native language in the other.

Cultural differences between American and Hong Kong simulation participants also necessitated adaptations. According to Hsu (1981), Americans have a personality-centered orientation, whereas Chinese have a situational orientation. Because of these different cultural orientations, Chinese tend to be reactive in their behavioral styles, compared with Americans, who are proactive. Consequently, for Chinese, establishing the authenticity of situations is vital, because Chinese are likely to wait until their roles are classified before acting. However, the pragmatic Chinese can be encouraged to initiate behavior if they see that a learning experience is useful and can be applied (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). To activate the situational orientation of the Chinese participants, I administered the simulation twice so that they could experience and contrast their experiences in managing their roles at different organizational levels. The first run provided initial exposure to the simulation and the basis for more active involvement in the second run. The participants who held higher positions (e.g., presidents, vice presidents) in the first simulation became more active and engaged when assigned as lower organizational participants (e.g., plant managers) in the second run. These students had familiarized themselves with the simulation activities in the first run and also came to realize that plant managers should be proactive rather than passive and reactive. Those participants assigned to plant manager roles in the first run and higher organizational roles in the second also tended to involve the plant managers more in decision making when they assumed higher level positions in the second run.

However, I later had to also accommodate one major cultural difference: one's view of hierarchy. Americans and Hong Kong Chinese perceive hierarchy differently in that Americans prefer egalitarian relationships, distrust hierarchy, and act independently. Hong Kong Chinese, on the other hand, respect hierarchy and are conditioned by Confucian ethics and therefore act within the parameters established by hierarchy (Redding, 1990; Westwood, 1992). I also had to make changes to the simulation to take account of student behavior observations and analysis of student reports from the first year the simulation was run. Of particular relevance was the fact that those assigned plant manager roles expressed some dissatisfaction and alienation from peers assigned as their superior managers. A common complaint from plant managers was that they were designated "gofers" and ordered to collect and bring data to their superiors. They resented simply being assigned information-gathering tasks and being excluded from the organizational decision making in what they perceived as an overly centralized organization. As a result, they resisted downward communication and caused frequent communication breakdowns and conflicts. The perceived reality of the simulation was therefore compromised, because the plant managers could not see the authenticity of accepting orders from peers and had difficulty separating out and accepting that these

peers were acting out superior organizational roles in the simulation. I therefore introduced vertical communication among participants at different organizational levels (ranging from being a president to a plant manager) to ensure authentic role behavior by superiors and so activate desirable and productive behavior of subordinates. I also added realism into the simulation by bringing Hong Kong local business associates and expatriate managers to the simulation and assigning them roles as presidents and vice presidents.

In addition to these changes, context adaptations also had to be made to help Hong Kong students better comprehend American business practices, terminology, government regulations, and geography and so recognize the significance of relevant contextual background factors in preparing and carrying out their roles in the simulation. The contextual background for the simulation included four broad categories: racism, women's issues, administrative and legal issues, and geography and transportation systems. Context adaptations included the preparation of supplementary materials, including maps and a glossary to enhance students' understanding of U.S. geography and transportation systems. For example, I used a series of maps of the United States to show how goods could be transported among division plant locations and market destinations. Attention was drawn to how the interstate highway system and railroad systems interconnected these destinations and what the relative costs and time of using these transportation systems might be. An 11-page glossary of terms likely to be unfamiliar to the majority of Hong Kong students was also provided on the basis of an analysis of student reports from the very first simulation runs (including slang and idiomatic expressions).

In the second example, I discuss how information communication technology (Du-Babcock, 2003) has enabled me to further develop and use skill-building exercises and projects to teach cross-cultural management and communication. This example can also be seen as a transition from the present to the future for teaching business communication. Technological advances and improvements and a concurrent lowering of costs associated with using the technology have also allowed me to design and use progressively more sophisticated projects.

In 2001, I collaborated with a U.S. institution in a joint Hong Kong–U.S. research project to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of information communication technology as a marketing research tool that facilitates or hinders cross-cultural communication processes (Du-Babcock, 2003). Back then, internet protocol systems were not available, so videoconferences needed to be transmitted through phone lines, and the cost was extremely high. Although the project achieved its purpose of exposing students to native English speakers and broadening their intercultural awareness, students experienced many hiccups associated with technology breakdowns. In the past 4 years, however, changes and advances in available technology from Internet communication systems (only text could be transmitted in 2001) and in videoconferencing technology (text, sound, and images can be transmitted) now facilitate rather than hinder intercultural collaborations. For example, nowadays, the cost of holding videoconferences is

relatively low and the image system has also greatly improved. These advancements in technology parallel the evolution in my own way of teaching business communication. As a result, I have been collaborating over the past 4 years in various projects, ranging from one-off settings to semester-long collaborative projects.

The framework of business communication that has been developed in the past and present periods should now be used as the platform from which to extend and enrich our discipline and our teaching.

In the one-off collaborations, students met at the videoconference without prior contact. They held a board meeting on the basis of a one-page case scenario and decided whether the company should withdraw a detrimental and potentially fatal antibiotic product from the market. In contrast, the semester-long collaborative projects required students from Hong Kong and the United States to (a) collect data on business practices in their respective environments, (b) exchange field research data with each other in e-mail documents, and (c) hold videoconferences to jointly decide what business practices could or could not be transferred from and to Hong Kong or the United States. Consequently, through the use and support of information technology, students in the United States and Hong Kong successfully engaged in a joint research project and communicated virtually but in real time.

Adopting projects such as these that I have briefly described represents the transition to the future in the teaching of business communication. In particular, these projects focus on building skills and enhancing students' communication competency in that the project designs (a) allow interdisciplinary integration (e.g., the fields of professional, organization, business and management, and media communication) and (b) provide students with direct experience of intercultural business communication.

In sum, the present transitional period can be divided into two stages. The first part of the transition, represented by my first example, was the adaptation of American materials to different environments around the world. The second part of the transition, represented by my second example, involves the initial attempts to adapt to and adjust teaching methods to help students develop skills and competencies to better communicate in a more interdisciplinary, multinational, and global environment.

FUTURE

I now turn to the future period and comment on the future challenges and opportunities that we will face as business communication teachers. In this increasingly globalized and multidisciplinary communication environment, we need to introduce new theory and build new teaching approaches into our pedagogy while continuing to stress the fundamentals of effective business communication. This means continually taking into account advances in communication technologies, even more complex knowledge in the professional genres, and the need to adjust messages to the varying competency levels of interactants as messages are translated across national languages and professional genres. Our challenges to the future are to learn how to communicate in an information-overloaded environment, how to encode and decode messages within interactants at varying competency levels, and how to use and choose among communication media and technologies. The framework of business communication that has been developed in the past and present periods should now be used as the platform from which to extend and enrich our discipline and our teaching.

A key factor in the need to adapt to and embrace the future is the advancements made in technology. Current technologies are influencing not only the way businesses communicate globally but also the way in which teaching, learning, and research can be done collaboratively. For example, as illustrated earlier in this article, advancements in technology (e.g., the Internet, videoconferencing) have allowed me to provide students with global visions and involve them in collaborative joint research projects with several U.S. institutions. My next challenge, and one we all face, is how to incorporate new technologies into the way we deliver courses to a mass audience in ways that will enhance teaching and learning efficacy as well as providing instantaneous feedback to students.

Irrespective of the role technology has to play, I believe that there are four inter-related considerations we must take into account as we move into the future.

Research Input

The knowledge and theory base that we will have to teach will continually expand as business communication researchers discover how to better communicate in specific situations and how to accomplish specific tasks, with interlocutors at varying competency levels. With continuous research input, we will be able to keep business communication teaching relevant and related to the ever changing and evolving global environment. Frameworks and models are needed to organize this knowledge so that we will be able to generalize the research findings into principles and guidelines that can guide communication practice. New research findings can be integrated into these frameworks and models so that, in the process, our knowledge and theory base can be continually updated, kept relevant, and made usable and operational. In sum, business communication research has to play

an increasingly important role in the future and must become even more tightly integrated with teaching. Research results and new models can expand the subject areas of business communication and keep what we teach related to real-world communication.

Skill Building

Developing communication competencies will become an ever more central focus of our teaching responsibilities. We need to develop exercises, projects, and cases so that students can apply communication theory and use communication technology as they learn to communicate in the multidisciplinary global communication environment. Teaching new theories and models without the associated application materials will lead students to see the field of business communication as abstract and irrelevant, so it is vital that we develop the skill-building materials that go hand in hand with and illustrate theory.

Institutional and Disciplinary Collaborations

Teaching and research collaborations can facilitate the development of the discipline and improve our effectiveness as teachers. We should work not only within our discipline with teachers from other cultures and countries (providing firsthand experience in intercultural and multidisciplinary communication) but also outside our discipline with teaching and business professionals in other disciplines and fields (providing exposure to the knowledge bases and professional genres in different professional fields). These collaborations will allow us to undertake research and teaching projects that we could not do individually but also place us in a collaborative and supportive environment to guide our development as researchers and teachers.

Activities

Activities should revolve around developing research projects and include disseminating research results and sharing good teaching practices. Such activities are an integral and critical part of guiding the future development of business communication teaching. I see the ABC as playing a central role in these activities through our journals (the *Journal of Business Communication* and *Business Communication Quarterly*), conferences (regional, national, and international), and member communications (interest groups and informal discussions). In doing so, the ABC can serve as a learning community that provides a formal platform allowing members to develop research projects and share good teaching practices and research results.

These four areas for consideration are interrelated and as such are crucial for our future development as teachers of business communication. I perceive integration of research and teaching as the key to the future because student learning

experiences and benefits need to be and can be informed by collaborative, interdisciplinary teaching and research projects. Teaching and research are often seen as separate entities, even though they are interdependent, especially classroom-oriented applied research. Through research, scientific measures can be used to provide objective outcomes and to prove and strengthen teaching and learning efficacy. In return, classroom teaching can also guide the direction of teaching-related research. I have always drawn on my research findings when designing teaching materials and focused on the application of the action-learning cycle in cultivating the interconnectedness of teaching and research in business and management. For example, the continual adaptations I have made over the years to the American simulation as well as the videoconferencing projects mentioned earlier in this article have enabled me to create learning and teaching opportunities that better fit the Hong Kong business communication environment. Consequently, I have also been able to keep my business communication teaching relevant to the changing global environment.

In moving to the future, I feel that most of us are still in a transitional stage in terms of our business communication teaching practices. The challenge for us is how to move into the future stage when we are still learning how to adjust our teaching to better suit the realities of an increasingly complex and diverse global communication environment. As teachers of business communication, we should focus on developing and training our students to adapt and communicate effectively in current and future communication environments and develop their competencies to:

1. interact in a multilingual and multicultural environment in which individuals possess various levels of language proficiency and use different professional genres,
2. adjust to the varying linguistic and cultural competencies of their communication partners, and
3. use communication technologies effectively to provide real-time information and message exchange with counterparts in remote locations and in virtual organizations.

In sum, the major challenges we face as teachers of business communication include first the need to integrate new knowledge and technology into our teaching while showing how this knowledge and use of technology is related to and is consistent with the fundamental principles and process of business communication. Second, we must focus on skill building so that our students can use their knowledge to guide them toward becoming more effective communicators. Third, we should become engaged as researchers, contributing to the knowledge and theory base of our business communication discipline (conducting both basic research and teaching related studies). In meeting these challenges, we need to strive for a balance of stability, continuity, and change. Our goal should be to provide students with competencies, skills, and knowledge bases to communicate in an increasingly complex and diverse global communication environment. This skill set would mean that communicators develop the ability to adapt their communication strategies and

methods to fit differing situations and tasks as well as the varying linguistic and communication competency levels of their interactants.

To conclude how I envision the future of teaching of business communication, I would like to use the “California sushi roll” analogy. The California sushi roll was invented in California to adapt a traditional Japanese food to American taste and use American ingredients by merging local and international ingredients (such as sea urchin, cucumber, avocado, and seaweed). Consequently, the California sushi roll can be adapted into various forms depending on the source availability and local taste while still being identified as a sushi roll. Likewise, business communication should be seen as a universal or global product but taught in line with local practices and environmental factors. Teaching adaptations and new techniques need to be continually added to fit our teaching to the changing global and multidisciplinary communication environment, including the use of advances in technology, while the basic communication process continues as the foundation and framework of business communication teaching.

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