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Designing Educational Tasks for Success in Industry:
A reflection on the evolution of business communication studies in tertiary education.

DONALD JAMES SWANSON
swanson@deakin.edu.au

Deakin University

Abstract

This paper is the result of a "Rip Van Winkle" experience I had concerning the teaching of Business Communication. The paper focuses on the remarkable expansion in the curriculum of the traditional "Business Communication" or "Business Writing" course offered by many tertiary institutions around the world. Based on 25 years of personal observation and experience in a number of educational settings, the paper will trace the increasing sophistication and complexity of the study of business communication from one that covered little more than lessons in the design of hardcopy memos, letters, and reports to one that now covers a broad spectrum of topics such as "emotional intelligence," "intercultural communication," "effective public speaking," as well as the effects of purpose and audience on the design of a wide variety of business communications.

An example of an effective task that involves a number of on the job activities is provided in the form of a ready to use assignment that is applicable in a number of contexts.

Key words: writing, assignments, motivation, communication, linguistics, experience, creativity, preparation for business.

Introduction

This paper is the result of a "Rip Van Winkle" experience I had concerning the teaching of Business Communication. I began teaching the course in the United States during the early 1980s and then in the new millennium after a hiatus of over 20 years. Like Rip who metaphorically slept for a similar length of time, I busied myself in activities unrelated to the subject at hand, and while I "slept" I was unaware of the vast changes occurring in this field of study. It wasn't until I "woke up" by returning to Business Communication as a lecturer with Deakin University that I fully comprehended the sophistication, maturity, complexity, and quality of the present curriculum.
Change is expensive. The '80s curriculum, which focused mainly on business writing skills, seemed to be a sufficient response to the industrial communication needs of graduates going into business. On the job learning was expected to “finish” graduates in the areas of negotiation, conflict resolution, interpersonal and intercultural communication as well as situation specific demands of effective management.

Now, the situation is reversed, and basic business literacy is only a small part of the Business Communication curriculum and negotiation, conflict resolution, interpersonal and intercultural communication make up the majority of course content. While such changes were consistent with my personal vision for the course, I wanted to find out why educational institutions invested in such changes.

During part of my "sleep" I pursued studies in psycholinguistics and in the psychology, pedagogy, and sociology of writing, so it made sense to trace the educational research that redefined educator's attitudes toward students as well as enhanced understanding of the conditions and manner by which people learn. This then led to discovering how the sociological environment and business itself drove curriculum changes in educational institutions. The mix of the two forces from within education and from the world beyond education combining to create a course that most students consider as one of their more valuable is the subject of this paper.

### Background

In 1983 I was teaching introductory technical writing at Illinois State University. Since I was a graduate student I dutifully followed the narrow syllabus, and had the students write a painstaking description of the classroom in terms of its feet and inches, grind out directions for various tasks, and engage in a long report on some corporation that they were supposed to be interested in as a possible source of employment. The avalanche of ennui was crushing.

The students' perfunctory, soporific writings, carefully hedged with vacuity, left little for me to say about anything they wrote. These students were, for the most part, proficient enough to produce drafts that fulfilled the bland tasks without engaging in the
topic. As we were all simply counting the days to the end of the semester, I decided to try something to keep these students from developing a phobic aversion to business and technical writing.

I developed an idea that required students to conceptualize a world where humans had evolved with a prehensile tail and to speculate on aspects of life that would be altered as a result. They then had to invent a tool that would have evolved in response to this new aspect of the human body and its concomitant sociology. The students then needed to respond to a number of business requirements through writing. (Appendix 1)

The assignment created a breath of fresh air. The memos, progress reports, sales letters, diagrams, instructions, and oral reports showed significantly increased involvement and interest. The students were finally discovering the possibilities within the constraints of business and technical writing. When the semester ended both the class and I had learned a great deal about the nature of business and technical writing.

Lessons Learned

One important concept that emerged from the tail projects was that technical and business writing is not particular only to the corporate business world. The students tended to focus their writing projects on things that were important to them at that time rather than on some multi-national corporation.

Technical documents concerned tail-tools used in police work, motorcycling, housekeeping, and health and beauty aids, and aeronautics. Each student had his or her own focus, and all the writings showed increased involvement, revision, and sensitivity to the needs of a particular audience. (Rutter, 1981)

Another thing we learned was that one assumption about business writing that can take control in a classroom is that "fact" and "objectivity" usurp "audience" and "purpose" as primary considerations in writing. Under the assumed weight of the responsibility to be factual and objective, student writers tried to write in a "target language" that is inflated, dishonest, meaningless, and worst of all, garbled. (Levinger, 1978) Many instructors,
even those who had created the syllabus, had never written in an industry based environment and so created assignments and expectations that were also narrow, inflated and unmanageable. Even as a beginning teacher I knew my students generated more engaged and sophisticated texts when assignments appealed to their sense of “fun,” but, as it turns out, imaginative writing is very serious. Frank Smith points out that “Far from being an escape from reality, imagination makes reality possible.” (Smith, 1992)

"A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing" also supports such educational activities. Miller’s article describes the outdated assumptions of the positivist view of science that tries to avoid ‘the confusing and untrustworthy imperfections of words and minds’ causing technical and scientific writing to become ‘the skill of subduing language so that it most accurately and directly transmits reality.’ (Miller, 1979) In place of a “reductionist approach,” Miller offers a “communalist approach” to the philosophy of teaching business and technical writing in which this writing becomes, ‘a kind of enculturation where students come to understand the concepts, values, traditions, and styles which permit identification with [a] community and determine the success or failure of communication.’ (Miller 1979) This explains why fantasy worked so well at that time in those students' lives. The assignment had enough scope to resonate with the differing identities of each student. Within the concept of the change in the evolution of Homo sapiens, all students could respond honestly to his or her own particular community and act out a part in their personal projection of their future. Some saw themselves as future law enforcement officers, some housewives; others as pilots, doctors, engineers, and technicians. All could find an honest voice and envision a real purpose from this most unreal of assignments.

Another refreshing confirmation of the relationship between professional communication and the fabrications created in my classroom was Miller’s examination of the nature of the objectivity and irrefutability of “facts.” She states, "Facts do not exist independently, waiting to be found and collected and systematized; facts are human constructions which presuppose theories"(Miller, 1979). When students can come to grips with this surprising bit of information, they think critically about the information they are selecting and about the significance of these facts. "Facts" that emanate from the
intimidating pseudo-objective tomes of research caused these inchoate writers to assume that factual significance is obvious (or, their significance escapes the student and the student, ashamed, threads through pieces of writing gluing bits of “stuff” together in unabashed plagiarism) In a speculative assignment "facts" are new and therefore students are more likely to explain their significance with greater purpose, clarity, and depth. Students tend to firmly believe in an orderly, predefined universe and so will balk at the idea of "creating facts" which makes it even more important to the development of their critical thinking ability that they understand the creative and consensual nature of fact.

Another conceptual impediment was the perceived abyss between technical writing and creative writing. In her article, "Technical Writing and the Recreation of Reality" Marilyn Samuels presumes, as I presumed, that 'there is no such thing as creative versus non-creative writing. All writers are creative; and everything written is a creation or recreation of reality." (Samuels, 1985) Many teachers accept that premise but to really drive it home to the students, they need assignments that challenge and demand imagination in the most obvious of ways. When students respond to a "fantasy" assignment they are in league with people who have invented and will invent new methods and machines.

When a student made a “tail protector” for a motorcycle it was real in a physical context because she made a prototype or model of it. When the student imagined how it held the tail properly and all the potential problems associated with keeping a tail dry, clean, and safe while on a motorcycle, it became real in a logical context. It makes no difference, though, whether or not such a thing is really real. What is important is that the people who are introduced to technical writing get a taste of technical writing as real writing with the writer in control of the creation, selection and organization of information, that they are presenting for an immediate and accessible audience which is capable of rendering critical feedback and that they are experiencing the power that writing can give to ideas.
The Awakening

So, having translated Miller’s, Samuel’s and other’s theories into a tidy, well packaged assignment, I left teaching at the tertiary level to enjoy many years in the ebullient confusion of the secondary education system. Upon returning to teaching Business Communication at the tertiary level twelve years later, I saw that I was not alone in feeling that there was more to Business Writing than was offered in those early years and many educators have expanded the curricula, so the Business Communication course does, in fact, become, ‘a kind of enculturation where students come to understand the concepts, values, traditions, and styles which permit identification with [a] community and determine the success or failure of communication.’ (Miller 1979) It is interesting to note the varying degree to which schools and faculties embrace the challenge to create such a learning environment, and especially interesting to this author, as a Deakin Lecturer, is the depth and breadth of Deakin’s Business Communication course.

But, how and why did Deakin’s faculty of Business and Law and others develop such a comprehensive, rich and engaging unit of study? The beginning of the answer to that question requires a look at the general evolution of studies in the psychologies of reading and writing. Then we must consider the subsequent application of these findings and theories in educational settings which have eventually made their way to the avant-garde of today’s business and technical writing courses.

In 1908 Edmund B. Huey, a cognitive psychologist and creative pioneer in the psychology of reading published a text called The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading. Huey was an inspired scientist who felt, “Problem enough this, for a life’s work, to learn how we read.” (Huey, 1908) No less amazing and controversial than Copernicus’ discovery of planetary motion was Huey’s discovery that, ‘the message the reader obtains from printed text is not put together in his mind as a faithful but passive uptake of words in the order in which they appear on the page...but...what the reader understands from what he has read is the result of a construction he makes and not the result of a simple transmission of the graphic symbols to his mind.’ (Huey, 1908) In other words, reading and writing is thinking, not machinelike encoding and decoding. This concept had and
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has tremendous implications for the educational curriculum of all language-based courses. Unfortunately, as Frank Smith points out, 'the pioneer research was neglected by experimental psychologists for nearly half a century and is still widely unknown in education. The educational community maintained a tunnel vision concentrating on decoding . . . at the expense of comprehension. (Smith, 1971)

Gradually the sense of Huey's research began to emerge in English classrooms through the publications of psycholinguists until the idea that reading and writing are just different expressions of thinking and educational methods and materials began to respond to this profound human capacity.

Ideas and Action

I can think of two possible explanations for why Business Writing courses were insulated from this revolution of thought and practice in primary and secondary English classes. One is that Business Communication is housed in tertiary Business Faculties that were not exposed to research in educational psychology to the degree that secondary and primary English teachers were. Another could be that the prevailing paradigm in management made educators in the field slow to understand the value of clear, tactful communication to an organisation.

Ever since the industrial revolution, management theories generally considered employees merely as adjunct machinery with increased production through "scientific management" as the ultimate goal. It wasn't until the 1930s that the Hawthorne studies on employee behaviour and sentiments 'played a significant role in changing the dominant view at the time that employees were no different from any other machines that the organisation used' (Donnelly and Green) The Hawthorne studies were not eagerly embraced by corporate managers and represent only the very earliest stimulus of interest in the human factor in determining output.

Forces other than compassion and common sense would have to be brought to bear on industry before the corporate world would consider employee satisfaction as a factor in corporate success. However, individual managers were not so slow on the uptake of
sensitivity to human interaction. Dale Carnegie’s teaching had tremendous impact on millions of people in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s. Essentially, Carnegie said that the way to success was through the cooperation of others. (Donnelly, 2000 p. 54) Although his tenets are shaped more by personal philosophy than objective research, they were widely adopted on an informal basis. The concept of cooperation is central to the present curriculum of many Business Communication courses.

So, while the educational community was experiencing a renaissance in the study of how people learn, think, and communicate; the business community was quietly, incrementally acknowledging the profitability of adopting a more synergistic approach to managing workers. Individual managers were covertly putting Carnegie’s and Hawthorne’s theories into practice and beginning to think seriously about the relationship between effective management and communication. Between 1900 and 1929, ‘only nine periodical articles (in the USA) were included under the heading ‘Communication and Traffic’ . . . all of them having to do with some form of mass communication and transportation.’ Between 1930 and 1955 there were still few articles relating to oral and written communication and these ‘were often devoted to speech defects or disorders.’ Significantly, about the time of Carnegie’s second printing, 1951, ‘the interest in listening had expanded to the point where thirty-four articles were written about this aspect of oral communication.’ (Haggblade, 1982) From there the field really opened up, and articles specific to managerial communications were published by the hundreds. Titles such as “Communication in Management,” ‘Are you getting across to employees?’ ‘Those Telling Executive Gestures’ and ‘Tomorrow’s Electronic Messages’ heralded the advancement of research and discussion about communication in and beyond the workplace. (Haggblade, 1982)

New forces were emerging that would change the nature of Management and require managers to take on far more complex and sophisticated roles, and, as industry changed, educational institutions had to respond by developing their curricula to prepare students for the challenges of modern management.
Globalisation now requires managers to be more open minded and sensitive to intercultural issues. Workforce diversity requires organisations to ‘ensure their motivational programmes and techniques are appropriate for diverse age groups.’ (Donnelly, 2000) and managers will need training to hire employees from other countries. ‘We now recognise that employees do not set aside their cultural values and lifestyle preferences when they come to work.’ (Donnelly, 2000) This requires effective intercultural communication skills and so such a topic is now part of many Communication courses.

The increasing awareness of empowerment of employees as an effective management technique requires managers to be skilled in communicating positive messages to workers. ‘Throughout the first three quarters of the twentieth century many organisations stifled the capabilities of their workforce. They overspecialised jobs and diminished employees’ motivation by treating them like unthinking machines.’ However, ‘today’s workers are far better educated and trained . . . and . . . are often considerably far more knowledgeable than their manager about how best to do their jobs. Managers then must be able to motivate individual workers to make job related decisions. (Donnelly, 2000) This requires effective communication skills so the study of positive messages as well as tactful negative messages is now part of many Communication courses.

The Future

There is an aphorism concerning teachers, “Computers will never replace teachers but computer literate teachers will replace teachers who avoid computers”

This easily applies to managers as well. Computer literacy is another required, effective communication skill. With voice recognition software, user-friendly word processing programs, and increased sophistication and complexity of the job of secretary, the days of someone taking dictation or even typing are fading fast. Managers must be able to create documents and presentations efficiently and effectively. Business Communication courses have responded by including specific instruction relating to the composition of
email messages, building electronic presentations, CAD systems, conferencing, and reporting systems.

This educational innovation is also a response to the burgeoning force of technological change. In addition to simply teaching computer applications, whole courses and even whole universities have gone on-line.

*This process has occurred much more rapidly than other aspects of the curriculum.* From military defence projects in the '60s to scholarly research in the '80s to the present day household use the "sharing of the network technology has allowed the Internet to spread across the globe in a phenomenal manner. According to the 1997 Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the early 1980s there were 213 registered hosts. By the end of 1987 this had grown to 28 174 hosts. In January 1995 there were 4.85 million registered hosts, and the last estimate in January 1998 was over 29.67 million hosts connected to the Internet (Network Wizards 1998). This figure does not include personal computers that access the Internet, just the servers that act as hosts for Internet users. In 1997, computer ownership in Australia was estimated at 34% of households, with 2.6 million computers. Of the estimated 4 million home computer users, 7.5% access the Internet." (Goodwin, 1998)

With so many computers and so many people "connected" it is no surprise that whole businesses and entire universities exist solely online. Presently, I have 240 students completing every aspect of Deakin's Business Communication course online. One of the most challenging aspects of the on-line learning environment is the group work regarding the creation of a formal business proposal. The students are placed into a group of six, given the task and a very short timeline in which to complete it. After some initial hesitancy, groups tend to successfully organise themselves, develop a project, divide the labour, negotiate conflicts and produce some outstanding proposals, without ever meeting each other face to face. When some students voice discomfort in this environment, I am happy to point out that this is exactly how I work at Deakin. I am part of a four-member team of lecturers who run all aspects of the Business Communication course from three widely distributed campuses. In the three years that I have worked with my colleagues I
have spent about twenty hours in a face-to-face situation. Essentially all University business concerning our course is conducted through the internet, internal post, or the telephone, and it works very well.

On campus students also gain experience with electronic messages by having an hour a week practical lesson in Deakin’s computer labs. They are required to create, modify, and send business messages as well as take tests online. This aspect of the Business Communication course evolved in response to lecturers’ observations that even at this latter stage of the cyber-revolution, a significant percentage of students did not know how to properly open, save and close basic Word documents, or to create and rename folders, or even use basic text format functions. Before arriving at the university they learned such sophisticated computer applications as: downloading “cracks” to play pirated games, finding titillating web pages, and navigating a number of chat rooms but had missed the more practical, business oriented aspects of computer use. Fortunately, their dilatory experiences make them quick to learn these practical functions as well as seek out even more subtle Word functions like “insert comment” and “animations” of words.

Technology also has the capacity to give students more on the job experience through interactive “learning objects” and web based simulations. Just as pilots use flight simulators, business students will use stock market, negotiation, business decision simulators such as the one at http://www.zap.ca/course.htm created by the Stitt Feld Handy Group from University of Windsor Canada. Their motto is “Life Experience through Simulations” and I found the subtly required in the negotiation simulations and advice given after a simulation to be quite realistic and educational.

Even more realistic on the job experience occurs at school through universities Business internship programs that are gaining wider academic acceptance. Deakin’s internship program awards full academic assessment and credit. Such reality based learning enables students to gain an understanding of the business workplace environment and consolidate the link between theory and practice. It also fosters the university’s contacts with business, government and community organisations. I think the inclusion of industry based, university assessed activities will be a growing trend as the educational and
cultural values of integrating theory with practice becomes increasingly recognised. A clear indication of this trend is Deakin having granted this author $20,000.00 in the form of a strategic teaching and learning grant to electronically document a best practice case study of communication and management at a local packaging plant. The resulting product will become part of Deakin's suite of online learning objects available to all students. It will give students insight into real managers and real employees sharing their feelings about real communication events. (Swanson and Creed, 2005)

This is all very good news for employers of recent and future graduates in Business. They can expect well rounded managers who can respond with more immediacy to the real world problems without extensive and expensive on the job training. They will bring a repertoire of communication skills, strategies, and resources enabling them to connect with a range of audiences. When managers have engaged in healthy conflict resolution activities, practiced ethical negotiation, understand the importance of non-verbal cues, have trained themselves to be active listeners, created and edited various business documents, and are skilled at computer applications, business should proceed much more smoothly and profitably.

It would be interesting to trace the careers of recent graduates to see what sort of managers they become, which of the skills and attitudes encouraged through university courses are maintained, and what caused certain management communication techniques or ideals to be ignored or avoided. "Shaping flexible leaders for the long term" (Farrelly, 2003) represents a start on this inquiry. Her article reports on the findings of Human Synergistics International (HSI). It highlights the failure of the prevailing styles of management, avoidance and aggression, but contextualizes such behaviour in the present corporate climate focussed on, "short term results." She states that "emotional intelligence" is the key to successful leadership and cites Harvard psychologist, David McClelland with "being the first to link aspects of emotional intelligence to business results." Though Dale Carnegie articulated such links as early as 1936, he would be pleased that David McClelland was credited as the first to arouse interest and give credibility to "emotional intelligence." Mr. Carnegie's rule 7 for winning people to your way of thinking is, "Let the other man feel that the idea is his." (Carnegie, 1936)
I am sure he rests in peace knowing such research, publications, and curricula further cement the relationship between learning diverse and effective communication skills in academia and success in industry.

References


Appendix A

Creative/Technical Communication Assignment

1. The world, as we know it, does not exist. Human beings have evolved with a prehensile tail, a tail adapted for seizing and grasping. People can even hang from this appendage.

2. Consider all the aspects of human society - speech, work, leisure, transportation, medicine, fashion . . . (brainstorm and come up with at least 50 different aspects)

3. Pick one aspect of your many and enlarge upon it. Write a 2 to 5 page description of how the tail would alter this aspect of society.

4. Create a tool that would have been invented and used in your aspect as a result of the tail’s impact on human existence. (for the purposes of this assignment, a tool is defined as any physical object that is made by humans from paperclips to satellites)

Now you are going to sell your invention

5. Create a business card
6. Create a detailed diagram of your tool with labels and captions
7. Write a set of instructions for using this tool
8. Write sales letters to various target customers
9. You are the factory representative and the class is a group of local retailers. Present a three-minute sales pitch for your invention to the class
10. Be prepared to submit progress reports and memos responding to the needs of the various interested parties

You are going to merge with another tool factory

11. Write a press release concerning your merger
12. Create a budget report for the first quarter
13. A new president takes over, thinks your operation and tool is superfluous, and wants to curtail everything to do with you. Write a report that defends the value of your tool to the company and society
14. Although your report was highly persuasive, the president still dumped you. Turn your report into a grant proposal to get needed funding for research on some aspect of your tool.