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Students at the University of Louisville learn to master five essential competencies of business communication.



Toward Better Business Communication

BY KRISTEN LUCAS

ILLUSTRATION BY GORDON STUDER

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE. Business students at the University of Louisville were developing strong technical ability and business knowledge, but they were consistently demonstrating weaknesses in their communication skills. In 2012, leaders at the College of Business decided to address this problem directly—instead of continuing to require students to take the business writing course taught in the English department, they would develop a new business communication curriculum that would be taught in-house.

This move would give the college greater control over the content of the curriculum and the quality of the instruction. And because the course would be filled entirely with business students, an instructor could draw on their shared educational background to infuse the lessons with a strong focus on business.

Five Competencies

At Louisville, we teach students that business communications must be:

Professional. Business communicators represent themselves and their organizations, so they must exhibit care and attention to detail, use a courteous tone, and follow standard business conventions.

Clear. Business communicators must deliver messages that are easy to decipher and act upon. They should put the bottom line up front, organize points in ways that are easy to follow, and use simple and unambiguous language.

Concise. Business communicators must deliver messages that are as short as possible, without being incomplete. At the big-picture level, they cut out extraneous information. At the detail level, they edit their sentences to reduce wordiness.

Evidence-Driven. Business communicators must select and present compelling evidence to support their points. They explain the credibility of their sources or analyses, clearly describe the supporting data, and use data displays to convey complex information.

Persuasive. Business communicators convince others to support a position or take action. They state strong overarching persuasive positions, create logical sub-points, and adhere to ethical standards in their attempts to influence.

▶ [For more information on development of the core competencies, see “The Competency Pivot: Introducing a Revised Approach to the Business Communication Curriculum” by Kristen Lucas and Jacob D. Rawlins, which appeared in the June 2015 issue of *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*.](#)

I was hired to lead the development and maintenance of the business communication curriculum, and I was given a blank slate to design it from the ground up. For inspiration, I turned to the approach known as Communication Across the Curriculum/Communication in the Disciplines (CXC/CID).

In a CXC/CID approach, the curriculum is grounded in the needs and expectations of a specific discipline, and instruction is designed to build unique competencies for communicating in that discipline. Those competencies are reinforced across the broader curriculum and integrated into the oral and written assignments students complete for other courses in their majors.

I was particularly influenced by the work of Deanna Dannels, who is a leading expert in CID research and pedagogy. In 2002, she published a study in *Communication Education* about developing communication skills in the engineering field. At a university where I had previously worked, I had applied lessons from that study to build a successful public speaking course for engineering and technology students. I was eager to use the CXC/CID framework in a business context.

FIVE AT THE CORE

Following a systematic investigation, we identified five core competencies of business communication to place at the heart of our BizComm curriculum: We describe those competencies as *professional*, *clear*, *concise*, *evidence-driven*, and *persuasive*. We framed the competencies in language that reflects business practice, rather than using theoretical or academic terms. This way, students will be more likely to connect what they learn in the business communication course to other professional contexts.

We then developed a set of rubrics that outline excellent, good, adequate, and deficient levels of performance for each competency. The rubrics are intentionally broad so that they can be used for all business commu-

nication messages. We did create separate versions for written assignments and presentations so that the rubric for presentations adds a sixth competency of “delivery skills.” Our goal is for students to become proficient—i.e., good or excellent—at each of the core competencies.

Because we focus on discipline-specific communication skills, our assignments all have a strong business focus. We want students to know how to identify and conform to standard conventions in business correspondence, reports, and presentations; use a writing structure that brings the bottom line up front; streamline content and sentences to make documents shorter; design effective data displays and explain statistical analyses; and adapt messages for favorable versus unfavorable audiences.

We evaluate students on how well they demonstrate each of the core competencies—not on how well they conform to cookie-cutter assignment criteria. We don’t evaluate students’ messages on the number of words they use, the number of sources they cite, or the fonts they choose. Sure, some students are uncomfortable without the specifications, but we want to stay true to business expectations. We tell them, “Your boss is never going to say to you, ‘Get me that seven-to-ten-page report, with 12 sources cited in APA format, one-inch margins, and 12-point Times New Roman font!’ But your boss *will* judge you on how professional, clear, concise, evidence-driven, and persuasive you are.”

We are pleased to see that students are indeed noting connections between what they are learning in BizComm classes and what they are learning in their other business courses. One student came to class and excitedly told me, “I got to write a memo in my accounting class!” (How many students are excited about that?) He continued, “And I got to be professional *and* clear *and* concise.” Another student had been called for several interviews, but had never landed an internship. So during her next interview, she decided she would apply the

five competencies when she answered questions. The strategy worked, and she secured a prestigious internship.

CONSISTENCY ACROSS CLASSES

At Louisville, students take the three-credit business communication course in their sophomore year. The traditional face-to-face course meets twice a week for a full semester. Enrollment in each section is limited to 25 so students may receive sufficient attention from instructors. But smaller class sizes mean that we must offer many sections, which leads to one of our biggest challenges: maintaining consistency throughout the curriculum. We want to ensure that all students take courses of similar difficulty and learn the same baseline set of communication skills, regardless of who is teaching their section.

Schools frequently rely on rules and regulations to impose conformity in multisection courses. They may require common assignments, tests, and quizzes; create day-by-day course schedules; and/or conduct grading consistency checks.

While this sameness may be welcomed by faculty colleagues and students, limits on autonomy can be highly demoralizing and demotivating for instructors who teach the course.

Our approach enables us to create consistency through shared vision and accountability. Instructors have great latitude for crafting their courses, as long as they work within the core competencies framework. They design their own assignments, plan their own lessons, and determine how much time to spend on each competency.

We find that this flexibility sparks classroom innovation. For instance, one of my colleagues has designed a semester-long project in which student teams deliver presentations to a panel of economic development officers and elected city officials on businesses they might want to attract to Louisville. The panel provides

each team with real-world feedback. In my own classes, I have students deliver fast-pitch speeches to persuade me to donate to the nonprofit organizations of their choice. I donate to the organizations that are most persuasively pitched.

In other classes, students have delivered presentations in the PechaKucha style, which is a format that demands conciseness by limiting the presentation to exactly 20 slides that advance at 20-second intervals. They've also practiced their communication skills by engaging in service learning projects, creating infographics, and reporting their analyses of real customer complaints collected on social media.

Because students focus their attention on being professional, clear, concise, evidence-driven, and persuasive—

no matter what specific assignments they complete—they come away having developed the same basic competencies. And because faculty are using a set of common rubrics to evaluate assignments, we gather important and consistent information about the effectiveness of our teaching strategies.

INSIGHTFUL DATA

Assessment of communication skills is inherently challenging. It generally requires instructors to reread papers and/or re-watch a library of recorded speeches to spot qualitative patterns in student performance. The process can be extremely time-consuming. But when schools take shortcuts—for instance, when they use assignment grades as proxies—they gain limited insights.



Coached to Succeed

One of the key features of our BizComm curriculum is our use of coaches, who offer students one-on-one help with writing, speaking, visual aid design, and team communication. Coaching is available to all students in the College of Business, not just those currently enrolled in the business communication course.

Guided by our CXC/CID approach, we strive to deliver consistent messages to students. Therefore, we train BizComm Coaches to use the five competencies to frame their feedback to students. For instance, they might say, "Let's look at strategies for making your writing more concise." Students also are able to request competency-specific help, such as setting an appointment to work on being more evidence-driven.

We recruit coaches from the English department, hiring PhD candidates who have completed their doctoral coursework in rhetoric and composition, taught composition, and worked in the campuswide writing lab. We provide BizComm Coaches with an office at the College of Business, where they meet with students during scheduled appointments and drop-in office hours.

When they're not assisting students, BizComm Coaches are available to help faculty. For instance, they can provide copyediting services or act as resources for teachers who are assigning reports or presentations. The coaches also can deliver guest lectures on topics such as how to write professional memos and how to create evidence-driven data displays.

We believe the BizComm coaches benefit from their efforts as much as the business students do. Because they've worked in a business school, engaged in professional development activities, and mentored faculty, we expect our BizComm Coaches will be prime candidates to become business communication faculty after they graduate.

However, our competency approach not only is efficient, it also generates useful insights. Because we grade students throughout the semester on their ability to demonstrate competencies rather than fulfill the arbitrary specifics of an assignment, the data we need for assessment already are included in our feedback to students. And because our course management system, Blackboard, allows us to use embedded online tools, we can download data with a simple point and click.

For the purposes of annual course assessment, we use pre-test and post-test assignments that are different, but comparably challenging. In each assignment, students are given a short writing prompt and supporting data. For example, we have used the prompt, “Should your advertising agency recommend that clients purchase a Super Bowl ad?” We evaluate students’ writing by the same

standards in both time periods, meaning that we don’t score them more gently at the beginning of the semester.

We then have assessment data that show what percentage of the class performed at excellent, good, adequate, and deficient levels for each competency, and we can compare differences between the start and end of the semester. (See “Assessment at a Glance” below.) These comparisons can help us identify specific competencies where our students need improvement and provide the baseline data for determining if we are on the right track with interventions.

For example, we were troubled by a trend indicating that students are not gaining sufficient competence at creating evidence-driven communication. To remedy this problem, this year we’ll be incorporating new in-class activities and adjusting homework assignments throughout the semester

to give students more opportunities to work with evidence in their reports and presentations. Our assessment data at the end of this year will let us know if these adjustments were effective or if more work needs to be done.

Additionally, we are able to use assessment data to do more fine-grained analyses. For instance, we can evaluate the effectiveness of individual instructors or spot patterns in student performance. We also can gauge the effectiveness of various assignments by comparing student performance across semesters or sections.

BIZCOMM AND BEYOND

In the CXC/CID approach, it’s essential that what students learn in the communication course is reinforced throughout the rest of the curriculum. One of our colleagues described our challenge best when he said, “We need to make

students realize that what happens in BizComm shouldn’t stay in BizComm.”

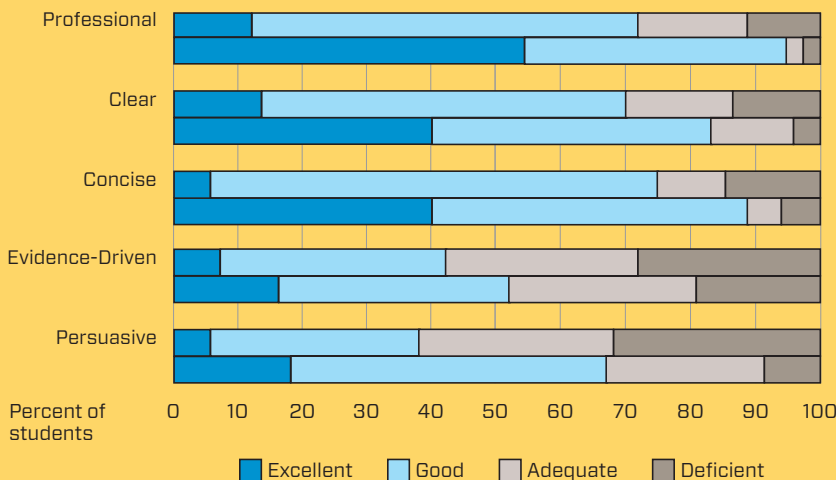


To this end, we have made our rubrics available to other faculty in the college. Although the rubrics are not universally adopted, faculty in CIS, economics, finance, marketing, management,

and accounting have used them to grade written assignments. When students see that their reports and presentations are being evaluated by the same criteria they were introduced to in the business communication course, they have a better understanding of the importance of the core competencies. Some students have expressed a strong desire for the rubrics to be adopted more universally so that they always will know what to expect in terms of being graded. We hope our rubrics eventually will be used for consistent assessment of writing and speaking across the College of Business.

We also have shared our BizComm curriculum with faculty at other universities. So far, four schools have adopt-

Assessment at a Glance



Each semester we use our core competency rubrics to assess students’ communication skills at the beginning (top bars) and end (bottom bars) of the semester. We then summarize competency data to detect meaningful patterns. For example, data from the previous year show that students have improved across all competencies, but many are still deficient in the evidence-driven category. We now are targeting that competency for special curricular attention.

ed our curriculum in their programs, and six more have at least one faculty member using our rubrics. Another 12 universities have requested the rubrics and additional information from us, and faculty from 24 universities have attended one of the pre-conference workshops we've taught at the Association for Business Communication. Some of the interest has come from Canada, the U.K., Singapore, New Zealand, and Nigeria, and we are hopeful that our rubrics can be adapted to many different programs around the world.

Although we are still in the relatively early stages of our rollout, we are pleased with our progress. We are getting positive feedback from students, faculty, and alumni who appreciate the course's strong business focus, and our business

communication faculty are staying engaged in teaching and innovation.

Of course, we have much work ahead of us. As we move forward, our priority will be launching advanced communication modules that apply the core competencies to specific business challenges—such as communicating about financial information, communicating with employees and customers, and storytelling with data. Other possibilities we are exploring include offering an online version of the course, using adaptive learning technologies to provide a more customized educational experience, and providing badges or microcredentials that can be shared on social media or in professional portfolios.

Building business communication competence is a lifelong endeavor. We

hope that the changes we're implementing at the University of Louisville will help our students get a jump start on that process and that the skills they develop will help them launch successful careers in business. **D**

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D For a sample of how one student's work improved after he took the course, see www.bizedmagazine.com/archives/2017/1/features/toward-better-business-communication.

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