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The Competency Pivot: Introducing a Revised Approach to the Business Communication Curriculum

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Abstract

In this article, we outline a competency-based approach to teaching business communication. At the heart of this approach, classroom instruction, assignments, and evaluation center on a goals-oriented and receiver-centric understanding of communication in which students are taught strategies for meeting five core competencies of business communication: professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive. This is not a reinvention of the curriculum but instead a pivot that positions existing disciplinary knowledge and best practices into a clear, memorable, and professionally oriented framework to help students build critical communication skills that can be applied strategically across a range of business situations.

Keywords

business communication courses, curriculum design, competency

One of the most consistent claims about business communication is that it is an absolutely vital skill for success. In a recent survey, U.S. employers from a wide range of industries rated the "ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization" as the most important skill for prospective employees to possess, significantly outpacing "technical knowledge related to the job" (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2012). Likewise, an analysis of 14.6 million job advertisements from across all occupations revealed that communication, including both "oral and written communication skills," was the top requested skill, being specified twice

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as frequently as the next most requested skill (Anderson & Gantz, 2013). It is little wonder why since people spend most of their working hours communicating (Chui et al., 2012; Project Management Institute, 2013; Silverman, 2012). Just taking email into consideration, the average worker receives nearly 12,000 email messages annually and will spend the equivalent of 111 work days reading, responding to, and managing those messages (Gill, 2013). Among business professionals, the number grows substantially, with estimates as high as 27,000 incoming email messages (not counting spam) and 13,000 outgoing messages per year (Radicati, 2014). Add to that telephone and face-to-face conversations, team meetings, videoconferences, presentations, and a whole host of other exchanges and it is easy to see that communication is at the heart of what people do at work.

But what does it mean to have "written and oral communication skills"? For starters, many modern business communication textbook authors draw on rhetorical and/or communication theories to provide a foundation for essential skills (e.g., Adler, Elmhorst, & Lucas, 2013; Guffey & Loewy, 2015; Locker & Kienzler, 2013). Then, in the classroom, instructors guide students in their skills development by delivering instruction, designing assignments, and providing coaching and feedback geared toward common genres of business communication. For instance, a recent analysis of business communication syllabi shows that courses typically are organized around developing students' abilities to compose good and bad news messages, to follow the conventions of particular documents (e.g., email messages, business letters, reports), to deliver individual and group speeches, and to prepare PowerPoint slide decks or other visual aids (Russ, 2009). However, most business communication teachers also would agree that in the business world, being a good communicator connotes something more than being able to compose error-free written messages, to format reports and presentation slides, or to be able to stand up and talk in front of an audience or at a small team meeting. While all these functions certainly are part of being a good communicator, it is too easy to think of anecdotes of individuals who caused conflicts with poorly worded email messages, insulted individuals or groups with misguided attempts at humor, submitted reports that failed to deliver any results, or presented ideas that fell on the deaf ears of a bored audience. Therein lies the ongoing challenge of teaching business communication: how to teach students the basic skills of writing certain kinds of messages frequently encountered in the business world, while simultaneously cultivating a higher ordered mind-set about communication that transcends particular genres and persists within students long after they have left the business communication classroom.

Toward this end, we have developed a competency-based approach to the business communication curriculum, which we outline in this essay. We began by assembling a vast body of work represented in textbooks, pedagogical publications, and research articles that has long guided the business communication curriculum. We then pivoted this knowledge by framing it in the language of the business community, structuring it within a scaffolded pedagogical approach, and privileging competency development over message production. Below, we provide background on competency-based education and outline our methods for deriving the core competencies. Next, we identify the superordinate principles on which our curriculum is built and detail each of the five core competencies. Then, we describe our steps for curricular implementation. Finally, we conclude with a summary of benefits for students.

Competency-Based Education in Business Communication

There are several different views of what constitutes competency-based education (van der Klink, Boon, & Schlusmans, 2007). Here we review some of the approaches taken in communication courses. For instance, Lynch and Murranka (2002; Murranka & Lynch, 1999) advocated a competency-based approach that centers on criterion-referenced, self-paced instruction. In contrast to traditional classroom teaching in which students are evaluated in norm-referenced ways (i.e., graded in relation to other students' performance) and move lockstep through the curriculum as a whole class, in competency-based instruction, students are evaluated on individual demonstration of competencies and move at their own pace often, but not necessarily, assisted by computer-based instructional tools. This system allows for students to focus their time on the content areas in which they need the most development and to move quickly through—or even "comp out" of—areas in which they are able to demonstrate competency. Another approach to competency-based instruction is one in which instructors develop learning objectives and assignments to prepare students to meet specific industry-identified competencies. For instance, Sharifi, McCombs, Fraser, and McCabe (2009) built a graduate-level, competency-based accounting communication course to develop a specific set of written and oral communication skills identified by professional accounting organizations. Another approach to competency-based instruction is suggested by communication-within-the-disciplines research by Dannels (2002). In her research with engineering teams, she identified five core features of speaking competence. These specific competencies, then, could be used both as the content of instruction and as quality markers for evaluating students' speaking ability.

Particularly in the field of vocational education, competency-based education is viewed as an educational approach to bridge the gap between school and the workplace (Biemans et al., 2009). In this approach, the curriculum is derived from an analysis of work performance, such that the content of courses and identification of competencies are designed in conjunction with the needs of the labor market (Wesselink, de Jong, & Biemans, 2010). The essential steps for developing a competency-based framework include identifying important competencies, translating those competencies into curriculum development and assessment of prior learning, and specifying measurable learning outcomes or competency standards tied to a qualification (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011; Wesselink et al., 2010).

In recent years, there have been several studies identifying key business communication competencies. By competencies, we refer to Jeffrey and Brunton's (2011) definition of "capabilities needed for effective practitioner performance" (p. 58). For example, Conrad and Newberry (2012) reviewed academic and practitioner literature and found a range of outcome-based competencies that clustered around organizational, leadership, and interpersonal communication skills required by business professionals. Within the category of organizational communication skills, they included writing business correspondence ("the ability to produce written communication used in business including letters, memos, bulletins, and reports") and making convincing presentations ("the ability to provide informal or formal talks delivered to decision-making groups to convey information or make a point"). Similarly, Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, and Marcia's (2012) content analysis of business press publications revealed key communication competencies to include relationship and interpersonal communication, mediated communication, intergroup communication, nonverbal communication, speaking and listening, and communication of enthusiasm, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit. Based on surveys of accounting firms in New Zealand, Gray (2010) identified the specific oral communication needed by new graduates. She found that listening attentiveness and listening responsiveness were the most important skills.

While all of these skills are undoubtedly important, they are too broad to translate into curriculum development (at least within the scope of a single course) and too vague to be tied to measurable competency standards. To begin, the range of skills is so broad that the competencies could not be covered in a semester-long course, or even a sequence of courses, for that matter. It includes writing, speaking, listening, negotiation, social media management, conflict management, nonverbal communication, communication technology proficiency, corporate communication management, and more. The range of skills and contexts would be extremely overwhelming for students and instructors alike. The breadth of topics most certainly would come at the expense of depth of coverage. Moreover, there is an inherent vagueness in these skills—particularly when it comes to quality markers. For instance, one of the competencies is "making *convincing* presentations," but what does it mean to be convincing? Furthermore, what does it mean to be competent at "writing business correspondence" or to be competent at being "attentive" and "responsive" when listening? The broadness and vagueness of these competencies are not unique to business communication. Wesselink et al. (2010) warned that "describing the jobs of professionals using the concept of competency resulted in detailed lists of fragmented and assessable elements that cannot provide guidelines for curriculum design because of the detailed level of description" (p. 22). Instead of a specific "reductionist" approach, they encourage a more comprehensive or integrated approach to understanding competencies and how they can be applied to relevant contexts. Therefore, our goal was to develop a comprehensive and integrated set of competencies that would be manageable within the context of a semester-long course. Additionally, we aimed to identify competencies that simultaneously were broad enough to apply to a range of business communication tasks and were specific enough that quality standards could be clearly defined.

Method

To compensate for some of the limitations of different approaches to competency identification, we used a blended approach of practitioner assessment and scholarly teaching (see Pope-Ruark, 2012). This methodological approach involved practitioner consultation (talking with alumni and business professionals, reviewing professional and trade publications), programmatic assessment (reviewing syllabi, consulting with faculty across the curriculum), theoretical interrogation (examining scholarly articles and business communication texts), and instructional observation and testing (critiquing our own teaching practices, grading student assignments, making modifications to preliminary designs). Drawing from these sources, we defined a preliminary version of the competencies and developed a rubric for each competency. With this framework in place, we piloted a single section of a business communication course to test how well the competencies worked in pedagogical practice. In this course, we used competency-based rubrics to evaluate student work throughout the semester.

At the end of the semester, and as the next step of the process, we reversed our evaluation efforts from evaluating student assignments with rubrics to evaluating our rubrics with student assignments. Specifically, we used samples of student work to evaluate the accuracy, completeness, and usability of competency-based rubrics, which in turn enabled us to assess the conceptualization of the overall competency framework. In this process, we examined a sample of graded student work to determine whether the rubrics adequately captured the strengths and weaknesses of students' messages. This process resulted in some initial recrafting of the overall competencies. For example, "receiver centric" initially was positioned as a competency; however, after interrogation of student assignments, we realized that receiver centric was a higher ordered principle in that it was inherently referenced in each of the other competencies. Therefore, receiver centric was repositioned as a guiding principle and each of the remaining competencies in the rubric was tweaked, as necessary, to include a receiver-focused orientation as essential for meeting the highest level of competency. With the revised competencies in place, we then repeated the process of rubric assessment with a sample of student work from other departments in the business school (strategically including assignments previously graded by the respective course instructor as excellent, good, fair, and poor). This analysis revealed that some of the competencies were too narrowly defined and needed to be expanded to include a range of different business writing tasks. For example, a CIS (computer information systems) course required heavy use of evidence in writing assignments, but the data being used were not secondary research articles (which is common in many business communication assignments). Instead, these writing tasks focused on student-generated analytic data. Therefore, the "evidence driven" competency rubric was modified to encompass evidence use for secondary research and primary analytic interpretations.

This iterative, multiperspectival process resulted in a competency framework with two guiding principles and five core competencies that apply across business communication tasks—written and oral. The principles provide the theoretical guidance for good communication: goals oriented and receiver centric. The competencies describe the expression of the principles in practical application: professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive (see Table 1). Because the competencies are intrinsically quality referenced (i.e., a student can demonstrate excellent, good, adequate, or deficient mastery of a particular competency), they reflect broader expectations of

Table 1. Summary of Core Competencies.

Competency	Definition	Primary Components
Professional	Exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner	Care Courtesy Conventionality
Clear	Making messages easy to follow, understand, and act on	Central purpose Organizational pattern Clear language Visual design
Concise	Delivering comprehensive messages in the most efficient way possible	Information selection (inclusion and exclusion) Fine-scale editing
Evidence driven	Selecting, interpreting, and presenting credible and relevant data	Using better evidence Using evidence better Citing sources
Persuasive	Inducing beliefs or actions to advance instrumental goals	Making points Connecting evidence Being ethical

what constitutes good business communication across contexts instead of arbitrary or narrowly defined standards for particular assignments (e.g., word counts, margin size, number of sources). The competencies themselves are necessarily broad, both to keep the number of competencies manageable for students and faculty and to reflect the often vague language of business professionals. Each of the competencies is operationalized with subpoints that capture the practical application of the competencies in business communication. The competencies' integration with each other and their links to the guiding principles allow for a scaffolded approach in the classroom, where each competency builds on the previous one to construct a unified, holistic approach to business communication.

The Curricular Overview

In this section, we provide an overview of the competency-based curriculum we implemented. We begin by identifying the guiding theoretical principles of the curriculum. Then we explain each of the five core competencies.

Guiding Theoretical Principles

Nearly all business communication texts and teachers share a common starting ground of purpose, situation, and audience. Students are taught to identify the purpose of writing (e.g., to inform or persuade), to understand the situation that requires communication (e.g., a human resources decision, corporate board meeting), and to adapt their messages to the specific audience (e.g., by considering demographics and psychographics). But in business communities, the terms *purpose, situation*, and *audience* are not commonly used, nor do the terms necessarily carry the same meanings as they do in academic communities. Therefore, we pivoted these basic communication principles into two principles, goals-oriented and receiver-centric, using a more business-focused vernacular to emphasize the action-oriented nature of business communication. This change is more than just a play on words. It acknowledges subtle, yet fundamental, differences between business communication and communication for other purposes. Below, we describe the principles of goals oriented and receiver centric and how we use them as a foundation for the competencies of business communication.

Goals Oriented. The goals-oriented principle is based on an understanding that communication is a multilayered, meaning-making process shared by two or more parties. Importantly, every message carries three interconnected layers of meaning: instrumental, relational, and identity (Adler et al., 2013). The *instrumental* layer of meaning conveys the important facts of the message that are linked to attempts to cause something to happen or to be accomplished. Instrumental meanings include, but are not limited to, attempts to inform (e.g., "Utility costs have increased 38% in the past year"), to coordinate (e.g., "The meeting will be at 10 a.m. in Room 2127"), or to persuade (e.g., "We must fire the office bully before she causes more employee turnover"). The *relational* layer of meaning conveys a message about the relationship between the sender and receiver. This includes information about power dynamics between sender and receiver, the interpersonal quality of the relationship (e.g., respectful, contentious), and intentions for the future (e.g., is this a relationship that the communicators wish to strengthen, maintain, or sever?). The relational layer of meaning is important because it can significantly alter how an instrumental message is received. For example, there is a striking difference between a request from a peer that comes with a respectful "please" and a "thank you" and one that is presented as a top-down command. Finally, there is an *identity* layer of meaning. This layer contains a message—even if an unintentional one—about the image or identity of the sender. Is that person professional, calm, smart, reasonable, hard to deal with, to be feared, willing to compromise? While some identities always seem to be desirable (e.g., being viewed as responsible or capable), others are contingent on the situation.

Our first key principle, then, is that good business communicators recognize that these three layers of meanings exist, set a strategic goal for each layer of meaning, and adapt their messages accordingly to meet those goals—realizing that sometimes these meanings intersect in complicated and/or contradictory ways. For instance, assume that a first-time project manager has a goal of updating a boss on the status of a project (for a good case to assign, see Flanagin, 2004). The employee's instrumental goal will be to inform the boss whether the project is on time, on budget, and so on. The relational goal will be to acknowledge the dynamics of a new superior-subordinate relationship that is based on budding, but not fully cemented, trust. The identity goal will be to present himself or herself as competent, trustworthy, and hardworking. If the status of the project is satisfactory, the message is simple and straightforward. All the employee would need to do is to write a coherent and polite message that says the project is on time and on budget. The message will further advance the trust in the relationship and build the employee's positive identity. But if the project is behind, the task becomes much more complicated. The same coherent and polite message that notifies the boss that the project is behind now increases the vulnerability of the employee and raises concerns about his or her competence. So the employee must do additional work within the message to convey that he or she is indeed competent, trustworthy, and hardworking.

Understanding that there are always three layers of meaning provides a valuable heuristic for students. "What is your instrumental goal? What is your relational goal? What is your identity goal?" This way, students can spot where they need to adjust their message to meet their goals. It also gives them a systematic way to think through complicated messages. This is what we mean by being goals oriented. Business communicators understand that there are three layers of meaning, set specific goals for each layer, and carefully craft their message to meet those goals.

Receiver Centric. Our second key principle is that communication is receiver centric. At the outset, we note that being receiver centric should not be interpreted as dismissing the needs of the sender. Rather, receiver centric is a principle that operates in tandem with goals oriented to highlight the relational and reciprocal nature of business communication—one in which the needs of both the senders and the receivers are addressed. What we mean by business communication being receiver centric, then, is that the receiver of the message is the ultimate arbiter of meaning. We emphasize that it is how the receiver interprets the message—not how the sender intended the message—that matters most. For instance, a sender may think a quick, curt reply is simply efficient, with no further meaning attached. The receiver, on the other hand, may perceive a quick, curt reply as rude or dismissive—and that is ultimately the meaning conveyed. Granted, receivers have a responsibility to work at interpreting messages and should give senders the benefit of the doubt (or at least to follow up to clarify and/or correct assumption). But senders—particularly those operating in the business world—have a greater responsibility to ensure that their messages convey the intended meanings to the receiver.

It also is important to note that we speak of *receivers* and not *audiences*. While the two terms are often used interchangeably in academic contexts (though some disciplines prefer one over the other), there are important differences, especially when discussing the terms with students and professionals. For instance, an audience typically is a general group that is described in broad terms and with aggregated demographic data—like the dimly lit anonymous faces in a crowded room. In sending messages to an audience—whether for a public speech or for a social media posting—communicators are participating in a one-to-many communication with little expectation, if any, of interaction with audience members. Because an audience can be large, anonymous, and varied, communicating with an audience also may encourage a "you can't please everyone" attitude. A receiver, on the other hand, is a targeted individual or group of individuals with whom there is some sort of expectation of action based on the message. Well-crafted messages are specifically targeted at the receiver and take into consideration the unique needs of that receiver so that the receiver can take action on the message. Therefore, knowing the receiver as an individual (or a targeted group of individuals), business communicators do their best to adapt their messages to the needs and preferences of the receiver: What information does the receiver need to process and act on the instrumental message? What kind of relational dynamics exist with the receiver and how should those dynamics be acknowledged to ensure the desired relational message is received? What kinds of expectations, biases, and sensitivities does the receiver have that could influence how the sender's identity is judged?

Being receiver centric requires business communicators to expand their role from writer to writer-reader-reviser (or from speaker to speaker-listener-reviser). Jameson (2009) described one of the executive coaching techniques she uses to teach people how to be more receiver centric. She explains that executives often have difficulty understanding the defensiveness that they may be provoking with their style of writing. So she has them shift the focus from "writing to reading." Jameson said, "When they discuss pieces of writing from the perspective of *recipients*, they are much more open to the idea that creating an appropriate tone is a major challenge for writers" (p. 334). By being receiver centric, communicators are better able to create messages that will be received in positive ways: "Writers need insight into readers' psyches, sensitivity to the nuances of language, and imagination enough to anticipate how readers will emotionally respond to the words chosen" (Jameson, 2009, p. 334). Thus, being receiver centric involves anticipating the receiver's needs, interpretations, and reactions and balancing those with the sender's goals for communicating.

Core Competencies

While the competencies are based in theory, they are framed in business vernacular so that they reflect the kind of language students likely will hear when they enter the workplace—thereby connecting the core competencies to the "real world." The competencies also are designed to be intrinsically quality referenced, to help students understand the effect each competency can have on their overall communication ability and efforts. When taken together, the competencies act as an evaluation of communication quality, with five separate but connected ratings from excellent to deficient. While there is no one right way to perform each competency, the goal of the business communication course is to teach students different ways to achieve each of these competencies at high quality levels, thereby creating overall high-quality communication appropriate for different situations. The five core competencies are professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive.

Professional. The first competency for business communicators is being professional, which means exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner. Professionalism is particularly important because it serves a gatekeeping function for the overall message. Receivers judge messages (and by extension, the senders of those messages) on their professionalism. When messages are deemed unprofessional there can be significant consequences—from messages not being taken seriously to the working relationship between the sender and receiver being damaged. When a message is unprofessional, instrumental goals may be impeded if the receiver discounts the overall trustworthiness and quality of an unprofessional message ("I can't work with this company if this is the quality of work its people submit!"); relational goals may be impeded if the receiver is insulted by an unprofessional message ("The sender must not respect me"); and identity goals may be impeded if the receiver views the sender unfavorably (as being personally unprofessional, incompetent, lazy). Therefore, being professional is the most important competency for business communicators.

Although being professional encompasses numerous qualities and behaviors, there are three primary components that consistently apply to business communication. The first component is *care*. Care involves attending to details and presenting oneself without mistakes, sloppiness, or other detractors. In written communication, care is demonstrated by proofreading messages carefully to eliminate typos and grammatical errors. As Lentz (2013) pointed out, use of standard grammar is seen as a "mark of professionalism" (p. 475), and in a *Harvard Business Review* blog, Wiens (2012) argued that people who cannot demonstrate care through attention to grammar should not be hired. Care also can include things like having a neat overall appearance in terms of attention to detail (consistent font faces, colors, and sizes). In oral communication, care can refer to a neat personal presentation, such as being appropriately dressed or having an electronic presentation that is free from errors and demonstrates high attention to detail.

The second component is *courtesy*. Courtesy is marked by adhering to standards of etiquette, behaving civilly, and demonstrating tact and emotional control (Fritz, 2013). It is also inherently linked to tone (see Jameson, 2009). This component is consistent with calls for respect and courtesy as essential communication skills for business graduates (Gray, 2010; Robles, 2012). At a basic level, it involves language choices such as using "please" and "thank you" but can include tactics like using proper forms of address, refraining from swearing or outbursts, following the proper chain of command, and so forth.

The third component is linked to following *conventions* of professional communication. Conventionality refers to conforming to professional expectations in terms of format, style, and so on. This means that business letters are formatted properly, PowerPoint presentations follow standard ideas about design and progression, and interpersonal interactions conform to prevailing customs. Conventionality allows the sender to focus the receiver's attention on the message by applying the accepted norms of business communication. Breaking conventions can distract from and even distort the central message. One example that gained widespread media attention was when Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert responded to LeBron James's departure from the team with an angry email. The buzz was not about his tone but that he used the Comic Sans typeface to write the message (Sutter, 2010). Because Gilbert did not follow the conventions of business writing fonts, he appeared unprofessional and his message was overshadowed. Breaking conventions is not always detrimental, however. We recognize that business communicators do not have to follow strict cookie-cutter approaches to communication. Communicators can break conventions if they do so with high-quality creativity (e.g., using video resumes or innovative websites instead of paper resumes). But short of high quality, breaking conventions runs the risk of being viewed as sloppy or careless.

Clear. The second core competency for business communication is being clear, which refers to making messages easy to follow, understand, and act on. Garner (2012) positioned being "relentlessly clear" as a mandate for business writing, saying, "anything that requires undue effort from [your readers] won't be read with full attention—and is bound to be misunderstood" (p. 44). Likewise, Duarte (2012) repeatedly returned to being clear as a priority for developing persuasive presentations—from clearly stating the central point of view to using clear, jargon-free language. It is important in business to create clear messages for several reasons: they are easier to understand, easier to remember, more efficient, and potentially more persuasive. When a receiver has to read a message several times in order to understand the meaning, it wastes valuable time and money. Or if a receiver reads a message and interprets an ambiguous piece of information incorrectly, costly mistakes could be made. In fact, Lentz (2013) calculated the cost of unclear email messages to be upward of more than a million dollars annually for large corporations (see also Project Management Institute, 2013).

There are several elements of being clear. The first element is that there must be a *central purpose*. This means that all elements of the message support a single, main idea. The key here is that all parts of the message should logically relate to the central purpose. In longer or more formal messages, the central purpose may be signaled with a thesis statement and supporting subpoints. In shorter messages (e.g., an email message arranging a meeting), the purpose may be communicated with a simple, clear subject line and with the details in the body of the message clearly expressing what actions need to be taken. Whether in long or short messages, the central purpose should connect directly with the instrumental goal of the message—it is the sender's articulation of that goal for the receiver.

The second element is that there is a clear and logical *organizational pattern*. This element involves organizing ideas, information, and data in a way that can be easily understood by the receiver. In fact, Minto (2009) claimed that "controlling the sequence in which you present your ideas is the single most important act necessary to clear writing" (p. 9). To begin, business messages should lead with the central purpose. Whether it is called "top-down," "results oriented," or "bottom-line focused," placing the most important idea first helps the receiver process, evaluate, and remember the message (Dannels, 2002; Minto, 2009). Then, supporting ideas and information must be logically grouped and ordered. For instance, instead of having 10 separate pieces of information to support an argument, an organized message might group those pieces of information as three main points—thereby creating a clearer message. The ideal organizational pattern for a message will depend on the goals of the message and the receiver's needs for information.

The third element of being clear is using clear language. Considering how easy it is to have some confusion in messages over *who* (e.g., Is that meeting required for supervisors or for everyone on the staff?), *when* (e.g., Is that Friday as in tomorrow? Or as in the following Friday?), and *where* (e.g., Which conference room are we meeting in?), it is easy to see that explanations of *why* and *how* are even more complicated. By composing messages with clear language, communicators can save their receivers time and frustration. Writing with clear language involves removing ambiguity, limiting jargon, providing optimal levels of detail, and writing or speaking plainly. Clear language enables communicators to improve the efficiency of their messages and increase the likelihood of their messages being acted on as intended.

The fourth element of being clear is clear *visual design* of information. By using elements like headers, charts and images, bulleted or numbered lists, white space, and text formatting, the sender can help the receiver see what information is important, identify steps or instructions, and scan the message for key details. Visual design also can help the receiver find information within a message at a later date. In other words, formatting can be used to highlight the overall structure of the message, making the central purpose much easier to spot within a larger message (Minto, 2009).

Concise. The third competency for business communicators is being concise (Garner, 2012; Jones, 2011; Morrone, 2013). While "clear and concise" is a common phrase that links these two competencies together, being concise is distinctly different from being clear. Concise means delivering comprehensive messages in the most efficient way possible. Sometimes conciseness is referred to as being brief or economical in style. In business, time is of the essence. As mentioned above, the average worker spends the equivalent of 111 days responding to email. Wading through unnecessarily long messages exacerbates the time demands already placed on organizational members. That is why managers often want their employees to "cut to the chase" or "get to the point." They don't have time to spare. Therefore, senders must be sensitive to the time demands placed on their receiver.

However, perhaps counterintuitively, the shortest messages are not necessarily the best or most efficient messages. That is, the message needs to be long enough to accomplish all the goals of the communication. For instance, if a short message leaves out important details that are necessary for making a decision or taking action, it could cause a back-and-forth exchange of emails or voice mails until the missing information is found. By writing a longer initial message with all the necessary information, the total time spent communicating is much shorter and, therefore, is more efficient. Likewise, there may be instances when a concise message will convey all the necessary information to meet an instrumental goal. However, by being too concise, there may be relational and identity damage. For instance, in the case of not hiring someone, a generic "We are writing to inform you that you were not selected for the position" letter may suffice from an instrumental angle. But if the sender has additional goals to sustain a positive, professional relationship with the rejected candidate or to preserve the identity of the employer as professional and benevolent (instead of rude and uncaring), a longer message might be necessary (see Walden's B-R-I-D-G-E letter activity in Whalen, 2013). So while this competency is framed as "concise," what is meant is concise yet comprehensive. That is, a message must not only convey all of the essential information but also present it in the most concise way possible.

Being concise involves two key processes. The first involves information selection. This means including all the information that the receiver needs to know and excluding all the extraneous information that the receiver does not need. This can be a very difficult step because senders tend to communicate from an ego position. For instance, an employee might write to his or her supervisor, "I'm having a problem with my customer again." But his supervisor may not know which customer is being referenced, or what previous problems the employee had with that customer. Alternatively, another employee might want to vent and will include far too much detail, giving a play-by-play of what happened instead of focusing on the problem. In each of these scenarios, the employee focused on what he or she wanted to say instead of on what the supervisor needed to know. The first process for being concise, then, involves returning the focus to the receiver to ask what he or she needs to know, and selecting information based on those needs rather than on the needs of the sender.

The second process required for being concise involves fine-scale editing. After the information is selected and presented at the proper level of detail, the sender must deliver that information as concisely as possible. This means cutting down the words in a written message or reducing the length of an oral presentation. It can include tactics like reducing wordiness through eliminating redundant pairs, removing passive voice, and shortening sentences. The two processes of being concise involve striking a balance between details and brevity—comprehensiveness and conciseness—with a focus on communicating efficiently with the receiver.

Evidence Driven. The fourth competency of business communication is being evidence driven, which means selecting, interpreting, and presenting credible and relevant data. This competency is similar to the engineering competency of "numerically rich" (Dannels, 2002) but also addresses nonnumerical evidence that must be attended to by business people (e.g., qualitative comments from customer feedback and exit interviews; stories of business successes and failures; testimonials from experts; integration of management research). This competency is also tightly paired with the next competency, persuasive, which addresses using evidence to influence others' actions as well as influencing others in those messages that are focused on relationships or opinions rather than data. Evidence driven is important as a competency because sound business decisions rely on solid evidence. Conversely, given the large amounts of evidence in business operations (sales projections, big data, online customer comments), it is necessary that business communicators are able to work with those data to make sense of them and present them clearly. Additionally, business communicators who are competent at using evidence will be seen as more credible than those who are not.

Being evidence driven includes the ability to identify relevant evidence and to present it effectively and efficiently. We divide this competency into two main parts and a minor part. The first main part of being competent at using evidence is the ability to select high-quality evidence, or what we call "using better evidence." Business communicators must know how to work with a range of evidence—from statistics, to financial data, to testimonials, to examples, to large quantities of qualitative data, and more. This competency entails, first and foremost, selecting current and credible sources or, in the case of original analysis, it means selecting the most relevant data points. In particular, sources and/or data should be chosen in light of what the receiver will find most influential. So this could be highly credible and well-recognized experts in the field or well-regarded sources, such as trade publications, national news sources, government resources, or academic sources. Being evidence driven might also include finding primary data or compiling new statistics from multiple sources. The key here is that business communicators must make important distinctions between adequate evidence and good evidence. The more credible the sources and/or data, ultimately, the better the final result will be.

The second main part of being evidence driven is what we call "using evidence better." This part of the competency has direct bearing on how the evidence is interpreted and presented or what Duarte (2012) described as "clarifying the data." Ideally, the evidence should be presented in clearly organized and compelling ways. When it comes to writing, this involves making decisions about whether to present something in text, table, or graphic form. It involves organizing the evidence into main points (particularly with primary data). It involves finding ways to use sources in the most compelling manner—such as how to use quotations from experts. De Rycker (2001) offered a highly useful assignment on analyzing data as a starting point for learning strategies of how to present evidence. Using evidence better integrates the credibility of the sources with the message, thereby improving the trustworthiness of the message and its sender.

The final minor part in being evidence driven is citing sources. This part of business writing goes beyond the academic purposes of avoiding plagiarism. While it is important that students do not plagiarize (see Dyrud, 2011), what we stress in terms of business communication competency is that citing sources adds to the sender's credibility. A proposal that says, "We expect that X will happen" is far less compelling than a report that says, "According to the City Economic Development report released last week, we expect that X will happen." Therefore, citing sources is done, in part, to assist in the achievement of instrumental goals (e.g., to persuade someone that a proposal is better than its competitors) and identity goals (e.g., presenting oneself an intelligent and trustworthy sender). By citing sources correctly, using better evidence, and using evidence better, communicators are able to construct stronger and more compelling messages. Additionally, being evidence driven improves the likelihood of communicators achieving their instrumental, relational, and identity goals.

Persuasive. The final competency is persuasive. Being persuasive refers to influencing beliefs or actions to advance instrumental goals. Persuasion can be as simple as "We are the right firm for this job," but in many cases it is much more complex and difficult. So much of business communication revolves around being persuasive: From persuading a prospective employer to hire you, to persuading a client that your idea is the best one being pitched, to persuading your organization to pursue a new product line, to persuading your boss to fire the office bully, to simply persuading peers to do the right thing, communicators regularly engage in persuasive appeals.

What is unique about the persuasive competency is that it relies on the other four competencies to be accomplished. A message has to be professional, clear, concise, and evidence driven in order to be persuasive. In essence, persuasion is the culmination of the other competencies. As communicators improve in each of the individual competencies, they enhance their ability to be persuasive. That is, they are better able to get other people to accept their position and to act on their messages.

While persuasion builds on the foundation of the other competencies, it also is more than simply a rehashing of the first four competencies. A message that is professional, clear, concise, and evidence driven may not necessarily be persuasive. Therefore, for this competency we specifically look for three additional demonstrated abilities: making points, connecting evidence, and being ethical. The first ability is to make points instead of discussing topics. Making a point requires the business communicator to take a position on a topic. Consider the difference between "The next feature of our product is the pricing" and "Our pricing on this product is competitive." By converting topics to points, business communicators increase the power of their words and direct their receivers toward specific actions.

The second ability is connecting evidence to the persuasive points or the overarching conclusion. Connecting evidence to points is strongly tied to the competency of evidence driven, but it takes evidence one step further. In this component of the persuasive competency, students move from effective presentation of data to *inform* a receiver to presenting the data to *persuade* a receiver. For instance, whereas evidence might be used to matter-of-factly describe an employee's performance (e.g., "Below is a summary of your sales figures for the past four quarters"), when the goal is persuasion, those same facts need to be logically linked to a larger persuasive point (e.g., "Your sales performance has been falling steadily, and therefore . . .") Moreover, each of the evidence-supported points should link logically to the overarching purpose or instrumental goal of the message.

The third ability deals with ethical persuasion. As explained by Adler et al. (2013), ethical persuasion requires that the receiver is free to be (or not be) persuaded by the appeal and that the receiver is able to make that decision based on complete and accurate information. If these two conditions are not met, then ethical persuasion has not occurred. In the case of the former, the receiver has been coerced; in the latter, he or she has been deceived and/or manipulated. Therefore, in business communication, being persuasive requires that the communicator does not use undue force—explicit or implied—to compel a receiver to make a particular decision. Additionally, all persuasive arguments must contain complete and accurate information that is presented honestly to the receiver. While ethical principles are inherently different from skills-based competencies, we can teach specific strategies for presenting complete information.

Summary

The two guiding principles and five core competencies are designed to help students become better communicators by developing practical skills tailored to workplace expectations of quality communication and by giving them a framework to think through their messages. Through setting goals to address multiple layers of meaning, focusing on the receivers of the messages, and learning to apply the five core competencies, students become better prepared for a workplace focused on effective communication.

Implementation

We have implemented the curriculum with great initial success. Below, we describe (a) the ways in which we have initiated the curriculum within the introductory business communication course, (b) how we have expanded the implementation across the broader business school curriculum, and (c) the ways that this curriculum benefits students. Finally, we conclude with (d) alternative ways the competency-based approach may be adopted at institutions with different needs and constraints.

Classroom Implementation

We have initiated our competency-based business communication curriculum by using it as the foundation of the introductory business communication course, which is required of all students in the College of Business and is targeted at second-year students who have completed university general education requirements in English composition and public speaking. In a standard 15-week semester, we introduce students during the first week to the superordinate principles of goals oriented and receiver centric, which we present as the baseline for successful business communication. Then we sequentially teach each of the five core competencies. For each competency, we begin by providing a rationale for why the competency is important. Then, we provide instruction on the core elements and guide students through in-class activities to develop and apply different techniques for achieving the competency. At the end of the unit, students are graded on a major assignment that assesses their ability to meet the competency. Because competencies apply to all business communication, it allows for much flexibility in terms of specific assignments. See Table 2 for suggestions.

The key to the instruction is threefold. First, we use a scaffolded approach, which means that each competency builds on the previous one. As the semester progresses, students accumulate competencies for which they have specific skills and on which their assignments are evaluated. For the first competency class unit, students are taught strategies for being professional and are graded only on their ability to be professional; for the next competency class unit, they are taught strategies for being clear and are graded on their ability to be clear *and* professional (the previous competency), and so forth. This teaching structure requires that assignments are designed as carefully as possible to match the competencies being covered, and that instructors evaluate students only on competencies that have been covered to date. In particular, the latter requires some restraint on the part of the instructor not to overwhelm students by commenting on everything that could be improved. For instance, in our own classes, we have graded assignments on "professional" and "clear" that are far too wordy. In these cases, we might comment, "Next week, we'll be covering some strategies for making

Table 2. Sample Assignments for Teaching Each Competency.

Competency	Sample Assignment	Additional Resources
Professional	Business correspondence: Students write two letters—one letter congratulating their team for a success and the other letter to discipline a team member for performance concerns.	Problem-based writing scenarios for business correspondence (Smart, Hicks, & Melton, 2013) Audience and tone (Rice-Bailey in Whalen, 2014)
Clear	Product information sheet: Students create a one-page handout that highlights the features of a product.	Tax case memo to file (Vik in Whalen, 2013) Documenting sexual harassment (Campbell in Whalen, 2014)
Concise	Elevator pitch: Students develop and deliver a 90-second pitch about themselves that could be delivered in a networking situation.	Executive summaries and abstracts (Cox, Bobrowski, & Maher, 2003) PechaKucha presentations (Lucas & Rawlins, 2015)
Evidence driven	Customer complaint report: Students research customer complaints for a real company. They prepare a comprehensive report that summarizes the problems.	Analysis and interpretation of business charts (De Rycker, 2001) Infographics (Toth, 2013)
Persuasive	Shark tank pitch: Students prepare a persuasive presentation and accompanying written materials to convince an investor to back their product or company.	Ethical quandary memo (Morrell in Whalen, 2013) The Power of One presentation (Zizik in Whalen, 2014)

your writing more concise!" But we do not grade students down because they lack conciseness. In other words, we do not expect students to demonstrate a competency that they have not yet been taught. This scaffolded approach to assignment design, grading, and feedback allows us to help students develop each individual competency to the best of their ability, as they work toward integrating all five by the end of the semester.

Second, the focus of the instruction is on building students' ability to meet the competencies, not on their ability to create particular kinds of messages (e.g., presentations, letters, email messages, reports). This teaches students that these competencies apply to all messages, and that they are not learning assignment-specific tactics. For instance, we do not require "bad news letters" as part of the curriculum. Of course, we still may assign a bad news letter; however, the focus of the assignment will be to apply a range of competencies (depending on how far along we are in the semester) and to reinforce the overall principles of goals oriented and receiver centric. Furthermore, we provide a mix of messages when teaching each competency (e.g., email, letters, reports, speeches) so students can see that the competency applies to and can be adapted for all different kinds of messages and all different kinds of channels. As an additional benefit, focusing on competencies extends the principles from the assignment to communication tasks beyond the classroom. That is, students are not learning how to do a particular assignment, which may or may not be applicable beyond the class, but instead are learning a particular skill that can be applied equally to an assignment now and to writing tasks in their future careers.

Third, our assessment of student assignments directly maps onto course content. What we teach in class matches what students see on their graded assignment feedback. For instance, in a more traditional course, instructors might include a learning unit on report writing. The in-class lessons would be about reports (why reports are used, what they should look like, how to conduct and cite relevant research) and then students would write a report that would be graded on their quality of writing (organization, mechanics, grammar, research quality). For many students, there appears to be a disconnect between instruction and grading. Although all of the factors by which they are graded (organization, mechanics, grammar, etc.) are important, they do not directly map onto the lessons regarding cover pages, tables of contents, research, and more, which were covered in class. In our competency-based curriculum, when we teach about being concise (selecting optimal content, reducing wordiness, formatting for speed of receiver processing), we grade students on their ability to be concise and present our feedback in terms of being concise. We have found students appreciate this approach because they see a clear connection between in-class instruction and how their performance is graded. This approach also gives them clear directions for improvement and future competency development.

For purposes of grading, we have created a detailed rubric that captures excellent, good, adequate, and deficient levels of achievement for each competency. Each competency is composed of several subitems, as described above. For instance, the professional rubric contains three individual subitems—care, courtesy, and conventionality. These expanded rubrics enable us to provide greater detail on specific aspects of meeting each competency. All student assignments are graded with the appropriate rubrics (e.g., the third major assignment would be graded with professional, clear, and concise rubrics). The two overarching principles (goals oriented and receiver centric) are not included as separate competencies because they are implicitly and explicitly embedded into the quality standards for each competency.

In addition to the overall curriculum implementation, we made a significant shift in how we present assignments to students. We noticed that across the curriculum (and in a variety of other business courses) students frequently are assigned tasks that include specifics on length and style. However, assigning a five- to seven-page report has the unintended consequence of prioritizing the length of the final product over the larger communicative goals of the assignment. Therefore, we have dropped all page limits—and even recommendations of page length—on written assignments. Instead, we give students a set of goals to achieve (or sometimes set an instrumental goal and prompt them to set relational and identity goals on their own) and let them determine how long the message needs to be. When students inevitably ask, “How many pages does this need to be?" We answer with "We don't know. How long will it take you to tell the receiver what he or she needs to know?" We realized that by previously assigning page constraints, students had developed deeply rooted harmful habits of making their writing wordier so that they could meet the constraints of the assignment. They were adding nonessential clauses, replacing short words with long ones, and tacking on paragraphs to the ends of papers just to reach a stated page length.

Curricular Implementation

In addition to the design of the introductory course, we have taken several steps to expand the curriculum across the business school. One of the major steps is the development of a variety of upper-level business communication modules. Once the modules are completely phased in, students will be required to complete two modules to fulfill their business communication requirement for graduation. The half-semester modules are designed to reinforce the core competencies by applying them in specific situations (Communicating with Customers), by positioning them within a discipline (Communicating Financial Information), or applying them to a particular mode of communication (Advanced Business Speaking). In each of the modules, students will be expected to demonstrate and further refine their ability to be professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive. Therefore, in the advanced modules, instructors will evaluate all assignments with all five competencies.

As a second step, we have facilitated the adoption of these core competencies in the evaluation of business writing and speaking across the curriculum. While we cannot compel other faculty to adopt our system, we do know that communication-based assignments are an integral part of the college-wide curriculum. A benchmarking survey of all course syllabi from the previous academic year indicated that across the 338 classes offered in the college, there were 500+ communication-based assignments, which accounted for an average of 14% of students' total course grade. Therefore, we have developed a condensed five-item grading rubric that captures the main elements of the core competencies (see Table 3). There is an item each for professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive. The tool has been made available in a hard-copy format for faculty who grade papers by hand and in an electronic version compatible with our online course management system for faculty who grade assignments online. Notably, faculty feedback on the rubric has been very positive. Rather than seeing it as an extra burden, faculty are viewing it as a tool that makes grading easier and that also gives them more confidence in what they should be looking for in grading communication assignments. It has been adopted by at least one major course in each of the management, marketing, economics, CIS, and accounting departments. Additionally, it has been adopted by some faculty teaching in the MBA program.

The third step in implementation has been connecting the core competencies to assessment. There is a clear and strong link between a competency-based approach and assessment. From an effectiveness and efficiency standpoint, we are able to produce information-rich assessment reports with much ease. Rather than using grades on assignments as a proxy for student learning (which is fast but obscures much of the

Table 3. Core Competencies Grading Rubric (Condensed).

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Deficient
Professional	Message is very professional. It demonstrates courtesy (tactful, follows standards of business etiquette), care (error-free, careful attention to detail), and conventionality (fully meets professional standards for message type or demonstrates high-quality creativity).	Message is mostly professional but may have minor issues with courtesy (using too casual of a tone), care (having a few errors or some inattention to detail), or conventionality (not fully meeting professional standards for message type).	Message is somewhat professional. It may have minor issues with courtesy (using too casual of a tone) and more significant issues with care (having several errors or marked inattention to detail) and conventionality (not conforming to professional standards for message type).	Message is unprofessional. It has significant issues with courtesy (tone is offensive, violates standards of business etiquette), care (sloppy, careless, filled with errors that detract from credibility), and/or conventionality (not conforming to professional or "homework" standards for message type).
Clear	Message is very clear. The central idea is clearly presented (thesis statement, subject line, etc.). Message is organized in top-down manner (i.e., leads with main idea). Supporting points and information are organized clearly and ordered logically. Ideas are expressed in a way that is easy for the receiver to follow. Formatting is expertly used to present the main points with maximum clarity.	Message is mostly clear. The central idea is explicitly stated, but it may be saved until the end. Supporting points and information are organized clearly but may not be optimally ordered. Ideas are expressed in a way that is easy for the receiver to follow. Formatting is proficiently used to organize the main points visually.	Message is somewhat clear. The central idea may be missing, implied, or ambiguous, raising some concerns with clarity. Supporting points and information may be present but may not be ordered logically. Formatting is absent or used in a way that does not aid receiver comprehension.	Message is unclear. There is no apparent central idea. Supporting points and information are disorganized. Problems with ambiguous language or awkward wording make the message confusing. Formatting detracts from the receiver's comprehension.
Concise	Message shows careful consideration of receiver's needs for content. Essential information is included; nonessential information is excluded. Message is presented in a concise and efficient way.	Most essential information is included; most nonessential information is excluded. Message may be somewhat wordy or inefficient.	May be missing some key information or may include too much nonessential information. Message is wordy.	Key information is difficult for the receiver to find. Poor balance of essential and nonessential information.

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Excellent	Good	Adequate	Deficient
Evidence driven	Use of evidence is excellent. All claims are clearly supported by high-quality, highly relevant evidence. Evidence is presented skillfully with a mix of text, tables, and graphics. The quality of the evidence is strong (relevant, credible, and current), and is explicitly established through complete source citations, explanation of source quality, description of analysis, etc.	Use of evidence is good. Most claims are supported by relevant evidence. Evidence is presented accurately, even if inefficiently. The quality of the evidence is strong but may leave assessment of quality to the receiver (e.g., citations may omit key details, source quality may not be explained).	Use of evidence is adequate. Some claims are supported by evidence, or the connection between the evidence and the point it is supporting is not immediately clear. Text, tables, and graphics may have minor inaccuracies or issues with clarity. Credibility of evidence is not established. Citations are incomplete or inefficient.	Use of evidence is problematic. Little or no evidence is provided to support claims. Alternatively, evidence is presented deceptively or with significant inaccuracies in text, tables, and graphics. Evidence is selected from irrelevant, out-of-date, or otherwise dubious sources. Citations are missing.
Persuasive	Message is highly persuasive. It communicates an overarching persuasive position, supported by logical subpoints and evidence. The sender is ethical in presentation of argument.	Message is persuasive. It contains an overarching persuasive position. (Sub)points and evidence are relevant, even if not fully articulated. The sender is ethical in presentation of argument.	Message is more informative than persuasive and/or the persuasive position is implied. (Sub)points and evidence are relevant to the topic but place burden on receiver to link evidence to points. Only minor issues are raised regarding ethics.	Message is not persuasive. It is supported by logical fallacies or irrelevant information. Message raises serious ethical concerns.

Note. Full rubrics, electronic rubric files, and additional supporting materials are available at http://bizcomm.louisville.edu.

important detail about student skill) and rather than reevaluating a sample of student work (which reveals important insights but is very labor intensive), we use aggregated data of student performance on each competency as the base of our assessment. These data are effective in that they provide important detail about student skill (e.g., 85% are performing at a good or excellent level of professional, but less than half of students are performing at a good or excellent level of evidence driven) and are efficient because we are able to generate reports of competency scores through our electronic course management site. We can then concentrate our efforts on analysis of the data and strategize how to close the loop on any deficiencies. Also, when other faculty in the college use the same rubric, we can get reports from them to corroborate our assessment of how students are doing.

Student Benefits

As indicated above, there is a strong connection between what is taught in class and how students are evaluated. We have found, at least anecdotally, that students like this approach very much. They have indicated that they like knowing how they are being graded and have expressed strong interest in having writing and speaking assignments in other classes graded by the same rubrics. But another benefit that this overall curricular approach has is that it breaks down "good communication" into a set of more manageable competencies. While it is good for instruction and evaluation, it is particularly good for students' writing self-efficacy and their own personal and professional development (see Mascle, 2013). Instead of students thinking of themselves in black-and-white terms of being a "good communicator" or "bad communicator" (or "good at writing" or "bad at writing"), they now have a more nuanced approach to understand their strengths and weaknesses.

For instance, we have been able to incorporate these competencies into individualized coaching appointments. As students are exposed to the competencies, they can have one-on-one sessions with their professor to talk about what their relative strengths and weaknesses are, as framed by the competencies. So a student may be able to say, "I'm good at professional and clear, but I am really struggling with evidence driven." With this kind of outlook, students no longer have to feel defeated or overwhelmed by the prospect of building communication skills. In fact, it has been our experience that all students can identify relative strengths in their own writing. Likewise, this kind of competency approach may be particularly useful for students who are on the cusp of becoming excellent writers. Perhaps they are strong at most competencies but struggle with just one. By concentrating their professional development efforts on that one competency, they can really move their writing skills forward.

Additionally, by using the competencies to articulate their strengths and weaknesses as communicators, students also are able to approach teamwork and collaborative communication more strategically. When we assign team assignments, students are encouraged to use their strengths to complement and compensate for their teammates' strengths and weaknesses. This way, instead of dividing a project into four equal writing parts that are produced separately, the students work together according to their strengths to create a final product that is more complete, more unified, and ultimately better than they could have produced individually.

Finally, we see a benefit for students being able to speak about writing in a common language that is familiar to a business audience. They are able to articulate their strengths as business communicators. But they also are able to see how these competencies relate to other writing assignments in other courses. For instance, a few of our students excitedly reported that they had to write a memo in their accounting class and they felt confident in their ability to "be professional, be clear, and be concise" (the other two competencies had not yet been covered in class). Another student told us that after a couple of unsuccessful interviews, she decided to apply the core competencies when answering job interview questions. Her next interview was successful and she secured a highly competitive accounting internship. Also, knowing that some faculty in the college use the same rubrics gives our students an added boost of confidence because they know how they will be evaluated.

Alternative Approaches

While we have found measurable success in our College of Business with our scaffolded approach to the introductory business communication course, as well as our additional implementation steps, we realize that faculty at other institutions have different curricular and institutional requirements, face different sets of constraints, and have different pedagogical commitments and preferences. Therefore, we have identified alternative ways the core competencies approach could be integrated in other classrooms. First, instructors could use the condensed rubric as the standard for how assignments are graded. In this approach, instruction and assignments can remain unchanged but students would be graded throughout the semester on their performance on all five core competencies. This approach would have the benefit of giving students multiple opportunities to integrate the competencies and would emphasize the need for all five to be demonstrated to produce truly excellent messages. Ideally, the instructor would introduce the principles of each competency early in the semester and would continue to add breadth and complexity to the competencies as students progress to harder assignments.

Second, the core competencies approach can be taken as a starting point and be modified to meet specific instructor needs. For instance, the rubric can be edited in minor to significant ways. Some instructors may want to tweak the wording of the rubric to meet quality expectations for their students (perhaps making them tougher or easier) or institutional requirements (including five levels of performance instead of four). Other instructors may wish to add or delete competencies. For example, depending on the type of institution and the level of preparation of the average student, it may make sense for an instructor to teach an introductory business communication course with only the professional, clear, and concise competencies and reserve the evidence-driven and persuasive competencies for an advanced course.

Finally, the core competencies approach can be the foundation of a supplemental assessment of students' communication ability. Particularly, as an assessment tool, the rubric would not be part of either curriculum design or student grading. Rather, it would be used to guide end-of-semester assessment of student learning. Even if done only periodically, the core competency rubric could provide an aggregated measure of students' overall communication competence and identify which competencies are students' respective strengths and weaknesses. For even more in-depth assessment, the rubric can be used to measure student progress through evaluating writing samples collected at the beginning and the end of each semester, which could provide important insights into how well a course is developing communication abilities. The overall point of these suggested alternatives is to demonstrate that there are a variety of ways the core competency approach can be integrated into the curriculum.

Conclusion

In this article, we have described our efforts to implement a competency-based approach to the business communication curriculum that connects both learning and grading with the development of practical skills. We described the rationale for our system, including our superordinate principles of being goals oriented and receiver centric and our five core competencies of professional, clear, concise, evidence driven, and persuasive. To develop this approach, we drew heavily on decades of solid pedagogy and curricular advancement in the business communication field. Therefore, this core competency approach should be viewed not as a reinvention of the curriculum but instead as a pivot that positions existing disciplinary knowledge and best practices into a clear, memorable, and professionally oriented framework that helps students build critical communication skills that can be applied strategically across a range of business situations.

Our competency pivot of the business communication curriculum makes important contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Notably, by combining a scholarly teaching approach with a solid grounding in business practice, we have developed a curricular framework and a set of tools that offer practical value for faculty who teach the business communication course and administrators who have the difficult task of assessment. Additionally, this approach opens many avenues for research into competency-based instruction, which is still in a nascent form in business communication. Future research could examine effectiveness of competency-based instruction and assignments, transferability of students' competencies from the classroom to the workplace, and longitudinal studies to determine the relationship between students' communication competence and their long-term career success. Most important, the competency pivot provides immediate practical value for students and, by extension, their employers. By framing the curriculum in the language of business, focusing on the development of core competencies, reinforcing learning across the business school, and building students' sense of mastery as competent business communicators, we anticipate this curriculum will serve students well long after they leave the classroom.

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