6 From Case to Virtual Case: A Journey in Experiential Learning

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Experiential Learning: Bridging Management and Business Communication

Experiential learning in management education has had a long and productive history beginning with Harvard Business School's attempts in 1909 to bring realistic business situations into the classroom with the case method. Later, cases were supplemented with computer simulations and games (Chiesl 1990). Games and simulations, like cases, have been used in business education to provide learners with a broader picture of business forces, and to teach them how to maintain congruence between environmental constraints and organizational needs (Elgood 1984, 9). In 1993 it was estimated that 95 percent of business schools used business games in policy and marketing courses (Wolfe and Chanin 1993, 38).

As an instructor of business communication at a university teaching business graduates and undergraduates, I was determined to bridge the gap between management and communications pedagogies. A literature search uncovered a substantial body of literature in my discipline documenting the pedagogical value of using cases and simulations to teach business communication (Couture and Goldstein 1985; DiGaetani 1989; Gale 1993; Hartman 1992; Hugenberg 1992; Jameson 1993; Orth and Brown 1984; Rozumalski and Graves 1995). However, while a number of Harvard cases under the heading "management communication" were available, none dealt directly with the nature of language and social construction as processes of communication. Cases included in business communication textbooks were generally short (no more than a couple of paragraphs) and failed to provide enough context to capture the complexity of the problem-solving environment, and only a few required learners to work with primary materials.

I was also aware of recent movements in professional writing, organizational and compositional studies toward experiential learning, but could discern a fundamental philosophical difference between the emphasis given by man-

agement and by these latter disciplines to the role of language and interpretation in determining meaning. The "writing to learn" movement, for instance, with its emphasis on knowing as the activity and process of the mind making meaning from experience (Britton 1983; Emig 1981; Zinsser 1988), and shifts in composition theory (process theory, the social context of writing) placed greater emphasis on social context and individual cognitive processes shaped by and shaping cultural contexts (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Catron 1984; Fisher 1971; Knoblauch 1989; Rozumalski and Graves 1995; Scharton 1989; Tedlock 1981). This interpretative perspective sees all communication and all organizations as transactions, and it sees organizations and communication as symbolically constructed and changed entities.

In contrast, the functionalist's perspective, implicit in most business cases, games, and simulations, views communication as an interaction between managers, organizations, and an environment. Such a perspective supports the systems approach which positions organizations as external, concrete entities in need of integration and control. Managers are, therefore, trained to be decision-makers, analyzers, and controllers of contingencies, and organizations are affected by their decisions, policies, procedures, structures, and processes. While social constructionists do not deny the physical nature of business organizations, they emphasize the fact that organizational structure is not a static thing but an ongoing process which continues to take new shape as individuals making up the organization transact meaning through communicative events (Pepper 1995, 11). Comparing the functionalist to the interpretative paradigm, Linda Smircich notes that in the latter, a manager is "a framer of contexts, a maker and shaper of interpretive schemes . . ." (1983, 227) and organized actions occur "through the achievement of shared meanings" (226). It seemed logical that this split would make an interesting subject for a business communication case.

Developing a Communication Case to Bridge the Gap

Because of the paucity of available communication cases addressing the interpretative/functional perspectives, I developed a communication case entitled "The Case of the Unhappy Client." The challenge, as I saw it, was to embrace experiential learning by using the case method and at the same time demonstrate the interpretative/functional perspectives at work in a real-world situation. Using the telecommunication industry for this case, learners were asked to trace a series of misunderstandings which developed between a general manager, a technical services coordinator, his assistant, and a client. To create the "feel" of the actual communication process, I provided all correspondence between the principal people involved as well as background information on the telecommunication industry. Whereas most paper cases are tied to a narrative structure, "The Case of the Unhappy Client" uses the "in basket" technique,

thus permitting learners to experience the flow of communication across distinct discourse communities. The intent was not only to have learners read about miscommunication, but also to expose them to the same linguistic and cognitive processes which contributed to the breakdown in communication, processes such as inferencing, attribution, and coordinated management of meaning. While carrying out a "functionalist task" of problem solving, it was hoped that learners would discover the impact the interpretative powers play. The case required that students discover the causes for these miscommunications and, using writing strategies taught in the course, create effective bad news and persuasive documents.

"The Case of the Unhappy Client" was used in hard copy format in an introductory business communication course open to sophomores and juniors from all disciplines. Because the case required knowledge of rhetorical strategies for handling negative news and persuasion, the case was introduced to students, who worked in teams, immediately after these subjects were discussed. Student response to the case exercise was positive, as indicated by the following comments:

- I liked the fact that it provided a realistic context in which to apply the tools acquired in this course. I also enjoyed the process of searching through past documents to solve a set of questions.
- Being a detective was the best part of the unhappy client.
- It reflects a real situation; communication obstacles and misinterpretations happen all the time; it was interesting to experience/observe/read about the events and functions that structure a company; the company itself was sophisticated and produced a life-like example. "No Mickey Mouse Stuff!"
- It felt as if it was real life. That part was a bit interesting.
- I found it very challenging and enjoyed being assigned to such a task. It made me feel a part of the whole situation, as if it were real.

At the heart of all experiential learning theory lies the fundamental idea that active involvement with concrete experience produces learning. Student references to "real life" when commenting on their experiences working with "The Case of the Unhappy Client" were gratifying and motivated me to seek ways to make this case even more concrete, more experiential. While the paper case and in-basket methodology seemed somewhat effective, these formats, nevertheless, presented certain limitations. The paper case removed learners from *experiencing* the socially constructed, contextual aspects of business, aspects which figure largely in the interpretative/functional perspectives and the problem-solving process. The split created by printed texts seemed to rob learners of any sense of immediacy which electronic texts could create. Hard copy also did not

provide learners an opportunity to use information technology as a tool. Most employees today would have to rely on information technology to search and retrieve information regarding clients, sales data, product descriptions, etc. More important, printed texts gave them little sense of the role information technology played in creating and sustaining the sense of community within a firm or industry.

There were other drawbacks to the use of the hard copy case format. Arts-and-science students unfamiliar with business concepts and processes and the case method felt they were at a greater disadvantage than business students. Furthermore, most students, regardless of their majors, were unfamiliar with the telecommunication industry and commented that more introductory material on this industry should have been provided. (Logistically, it was simply not feasible to offer such information in the lecture schedule.) Finally, students for whom English was their second language also found the language difficult and performed poorly on the written assignments. The case method clearly was a step in the right direction, but it appeared that a more experiential method might overcome these limitations. Since the movement in business and communication education was toward greater reality and experiential learning, it seemed logical that I might be able to combine both the case method and the use of a computer simulation to achieve these goals. One other development influenced my decision to move beyond the use of the traditional case format to a computer simulation.

WAC, Business Communication, and the Development of a Learning Platform

Besides teaching a business communication course, I also served as the director of a professional writing center. Part of my responsibilities included supporting the university's writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) effort. Although the university had an active writing clinic, an elective business communication course, and a funded professional writing center, our efforts to integrate writing into the business curriculum met with little success. In the spring of 1986 the College's faculty voted to introduce a writing requirement into its curriculum. There was evidence that business and industry were finding graduate competencies wanting in writing and communication (Addams 1981; Halpern 1981; Stine and Skarzenski 1979; Swindle 1982) and that faculty in a number of business subject areas were getting good results with the introduction of writing as a tool for learning (Crowe and Youga 1986; DeLespinasse 1985; Dickerson 1978; Drenk 1982; Field et al. 1985). While Lehigh faculty agreed that composition courses taken in the first year were important, there was a general feeling that writing skills were being allowed to erode. Faculty agreed that writing was a vehicle for both communication and learning. The economics department in particular was

influenced by Zinsser's *Writing to Learn*. In essence the College of Business and Economics accepted and agreed to try to implement the idea of "writing across the curriculum."

As Fulwiler and Young (1990) have noted, while some WAC programs have made real changes in undergraduate and graduate education, others have floundered even with sufficient funding. At my institution, although faculty wanted to support the WAC cause, most felt that their course content would be compromised if their course concentrated on writing. Most faculty were willing to have someone from the writing clinic deliver a fifteen- to twenty-minute "lecture" on how to improve one's writing. Scheduling such visits proved difficult. Reflecting their functionalist perspective, faculty looked upon communication issues as "training" and writing and speaking as tools. Many faculty felt that a quick review of the rules of punctuation would be sufficient. Language and its ability to construct and deconstruct the reality of business was not a familiar concept, nor one easily accepted. Although our Center offered these "motivational" lectures each semester, because they lacked any instructional component, student writing performance remained unchanged.

My immediate concern was to find some way of integrating writing and communication issues into our business courses and somehow avoid many of the obstacles which WAC administrators have been encountering ever since WAC began in the mid-1970s. A few points were clear: first, trying to win faculty approval would take too long; second, because integration was not possible in many courses, our successes would be partial at best; third, students and some faculty would continue to view communication issues and skills as irrelevant as long as the curriculum continued to exclude, demote, and, therefore, divorce communication from the study of organizations and management theory.

Ironically, because of rigid disciplinary barriers, I soon became convinced that I was looking in the wrong direction for a solution. Like so many WAC directors, I was attempting to initiate change within the forty- or fifty-minute class period; but what if the changes we wanted could take place outside the class in the computer lab in a simulated environment? My study of communication, organization, and composition theory had convinced me that communication instruction and its key issues stood a better chance of succeeding if communication could be experienced by learners as fundamental to all social interaction within a real or simulated business context outside the classroom. Could a solution to the problem of integrating business communication and writing across the curriculum lie in the direction of experiential learning?

From Case to Learning Platform

In 1993 I began developing a simulation of the electronic network of the telecommunication firm I had used in my paper case. My goal was to create a

traditional simulation which would model some system or process, such as the grapevine or rich communication, allowing learners to explore key variables and how they interact and affect performance (Teach 1990, 94). Writing help would be integrated into the simulation so students could access this information as the need arose. Learners would role-play company employees and would be given data and information about internal and external communication constraints, critical decisions which must be made, and tasks to be completed. As in most simulations, mine would require that multiple decisions be made along the way as learners work within the framework of the system under investigation. Learners would play not against other players, but rather against the system. And because language and interpretation would be crucial to the case, I preferred to have all learner correspondence sent via e-mail to my office. Once received, I would then send back a response or a series of responses. By this method I was able to monitor the progress learners were making.

Figure 6.1 ("The Office") illustrates the opening screen to the simulation, which represents the learner's office where all work is carried out. The options menu located at the top of the screen provided access to e-mail, training, company databases (including customer, personnel, supplier files, product information, and financial data), summaries of meetings, and selected utilities such as the address and appointment files. Students who selected the "training" option could access a file entitled "Instructor's Comments" which offered some sug-

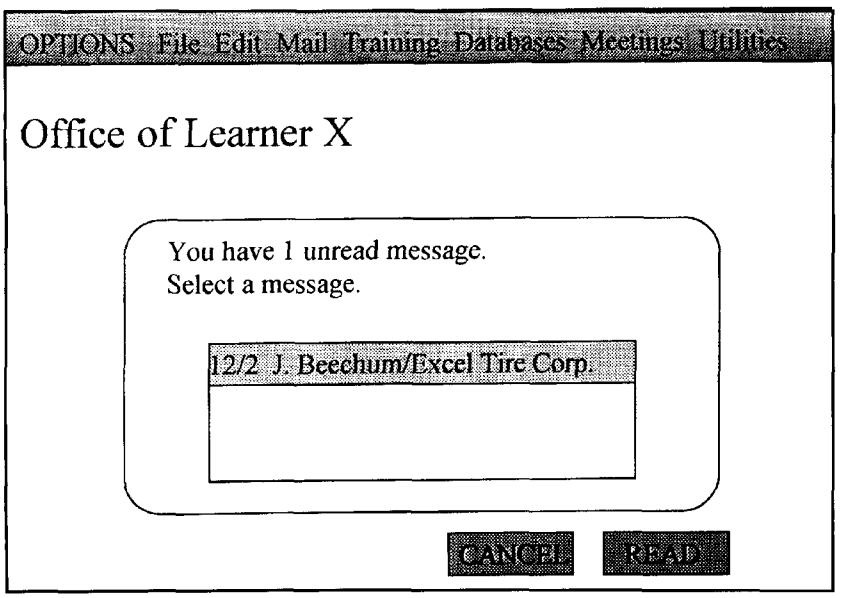

Figure 6.1. "The Office."

gestions about how the problems presented in the case might be approached. Students were also encouraged to look at the Quicktime video "lecture" on how to handle bad news. By selecting the "file" option, learners could access a word processor, create a response and "mail" it to their fictional manager. When students first log on, they discover that a message from their boss, R. Medley, is waiting for them. By having each student's name appear on the screen, I tried to strengthen the illusion that each learner was intimately tied to the context of the events which were to occur on the screen. The first action learners take is opening and reading this document.

Essentially, this document informs learners that their boss, R. Medley, faces a complaint from an irate client, Janet Beechum. The message provides a few sketchy details and then asks that the learner search through the correspondence and e-mail folders and decide "what went wrong." Learners are then to e-mail a summary of their findings to Medley and to draft a letter for Medley's signature setting the client straight and retaining her goodwill. These documents were sent directly to the instructor via the college's e-mail system.

In a usability test, four students were asked to "work the case"; their reactions were essentially the same as those students who had worked with the paper case, which was encouraging. In transferring hard-copy documents to the electronic medium, I was able to achieve a greater sense of realism by having students complete all their work on the computer and by creating the illusion that their manager had actually given them a problem to solve and was counting on their problem-solving skills. One student commented, "It is realistic; it possesses a challenge of not only having to write but to investigate and to come up with a solution (enjoyable). Role playing—responsibility to resolve the situation. Interesting once the problem surfaces. Definitely more good points than bad." On the negative side, testers continued to complain about their unfamiliarity with the telecommunication industry, the lack of language support for second language learners, and their uncertainty about how the case method worked and what was expected of them.

There were other problems not mentioned by these students that needed correcting. Unlike in other business games and simulations such as *The Executive Game*—which require learners to make decisions regarding price, investment, production volume, and research and development which are then acted on by a mathematical model—in this simulation I wanted to explore socially constructed processes and the realities they create— beliefs, values, genres, and communication practices—variables normally excluded from business simulations. Unfortunately, I could see that my computerized version of the "Case of the Unhappy Client" failed to capture these added dimensions. Because my simulation was to be an organizational/social-process simulation, a closed simulation focusing primarily on data management of economic or financial variables over a period of time, while valid from a functionalist's point of view, imposed too many

restrictions on the processes I wanted students to explore. As Linda Putnam (1983) points out, "functionalists assume a unitary view of organizations; that is, organizations are treated as cooperative systems in pursuit of common interests and goals" (36); whereas "interpretivists are more likely . . . to adopt a pluralistic perspective by treating the organization as an array of factionalized groups with diverse purposes and goals" (37). With these points in mind, work began on a learning platform which would permit students to work on their case problem and support their learning needs at the same time.

Figure 6.2 ("The Map") reproduces the "learning platform" screen which appears after students first log on to the system. Moving across the screen from top left to right, I added a computer icon linking learners to their offices where individual cases were worked on. To add greater realism and to help students get the feel of what a telecommunication firm is all about, I provided more context on my simulated telecommunication company which I called the Corporation of the Future (CoF). Using multimedia and information technology to mirror the world my students would work in, I added information which conveyed the multiple dimensions of community (social, linguistic, political) by

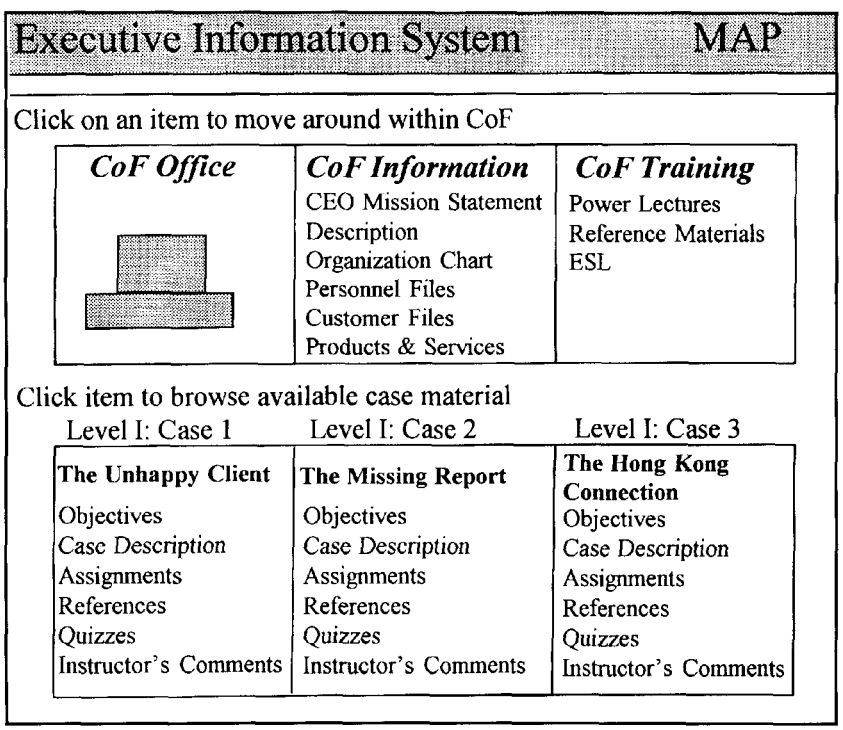

Figure 6.2. "The Map."

adding the following items under the heading "CoF Information": a company mission statement narrated by the CEO of the firm and delivered via Quicktime movie, a description of what a telecommunication firm does, an organization chart, financial statements, more explicit details about each employee including photographs, and a short Powerpoint presentation on the products and services offered by the firm. Such additions meant that I could retain the possibility of using CoF as a tactical-decision simulation, but I could now provide learners with enough information to give them the feel of what a telecommunication firm is all about and a look at the people who work there.

Because I wanted to integrate writing and communication instruction into the fabric of the platform and to support ESL learners, I expanded the concept of training to include lectures on how to handle bad news and on how to work with cases, and shorter lectures on inferencing, the interpretative perspective, and information technology as communication content and process. Reference materials and an ESL help button were added. For selected documents, the ESL help button would appear at the top of the screen. When students clicked on this button, difficult idioms, verb forms, and jargon would be highlighted. When students clicked on a highlighted expression or word, a box would appear offering information on the meaning of the item.

The bottom half of the screen provided case-specific information such as course objectives, case description, details on assignments due, references, quizzes, and instructor's comments on how students might approach the case.

Like many of today's corporations, CoF required extensive use of information technology to collect, process, transmit, and disseminate information. And while most students, influenced by the functionalist perspective, would see the technology as transparent and look to the "information," the "Case of the Unhappy Client" required that they learn about the interpretative perspective and how the very technologies they were using, like the cognitive processes they were using, were keys to solving the case problem. As Christina Haas (1996) has noted, "a technology is not an object, but rather a vital system that is bound to the world of time and space; that is, a technology is always inextricably tied both to a particular moment in human history and to the practical action of the human life world in which it is embedded" (xii). I hoped that the problem embedded in the "virtual case" would raise questions about when information technology should be used to solve communication problems and when face-to-face communication should be used.

Student Performance and Perception: Paper versus Virtual Case

Students' grades were not significantly different in classes that used the virtual simulation versus the ones using paper; indeed, both classes' grades declined

when students were faced with "negative news" assignments. Perhaps students had difficulty with the case study per se for a couple of reasons. First, they simply did not have the opportunity to practice the rhetorical skills or develop the knowledge of human psychology required by this type of case study. Performance with paper and virtual cases may decline if learners have not first mastered the specific strategies required by case problems.

Second, it was also clear from the post-questionnaire comments that a number of students still found the technical concepts (telecommunication) and language associated with satellite transmission intimidating despite a glossary of terms available to them. In most cases in the real world, of course, employees have months and sometimes years to learn the discourse of their place of employment or industry. Students also require immersion in the linguistic landscapes of the workplace reflected in the cases they are to work on *before* they attempt to work these cases. Indeed, instructors may have to make linguistic tradeoffs when creating paper and virtual cases.

Students were also asked to indicate their preferences for the following teaching methods: the case method, reading a textbook, attending a lecture, other methods. Students consistently chose attending a lecture over the case method, but when asked specifically about "The Case of the Unhappy Client," separate from the case method as a general method of learning, a significant number of students from both groups indicated they preferred the paper and virtual case over other methods! More of them rated this specific case as interesting and challenging and said they would like assignments like it. The experiential nature of the case method appears to have universal appeal, even to first-time case and computer users. Indeed, the computer and the use of information technology offer case writers an opportunity to increase this realism, as the following student comments indicate:

- I liked the "detective work" that was involved. I found it very realistic having to dig for the information. (Use of the computer made this necessary. All the information was there but we had to navigate through the system to get at it.) The case itself reflected the political nature of organizational problems and had many people and departments involved.
- I liked it because I found it relevant to life. In university courses it is rare (at least in my program) to encounter practical learning tools. I was very impressed overall with the assignment and I found it very interesting. A novice at the computer, I found the operation nonetheless straight forward. I would definitely encourage this format for future classes.
- What I like most about the case of the "Unhappy Client" is the challenge to understand, read, and respond using two different approaches, i.e. E-Mail/Bad News Document. To find the problem was very challenging.

Student Use of the Learning Platform

Because the focus of this study was to compare student performance and perception of the traditional case versus a multimedia version, no formal data was collected regarding the use of the learning platform's various file options. However, informal observations of students at their computers produced a number of interesting points. Although students were each assigned to individual computers, most students preferred to work in teams of two or three, with one student manipulating the computer while the others dialogued on both the nature of the problem and possible solutions. At times, groups would decide to divide their search tasks, work on their own, and then return to report their findings. Collaborative learning was definitely the method of choice when students worked on the learning platform. Approximately two thirds of the students using computers referred to the Quicktime video "lecture" on how to handle bad news. Providing mini-lectures via Quicktime movies or Powerpoint presentations to be accessed during the problem-solving process appears to be an efficient way of serving the needs of learners. While many students explored the "CoF Information" files, many did not. Providing richer contextual information does not ensure that students will feel the need to access this information. Unless instructed to do so, many students ignore such information which would help them understand the problem at hand. Further study is needed to determine if students receive higher grades on their assignments when they explore the files which provide background material on the telecommunications industry.

Students found little difficulty accessing financial and written data and moved easily from the "office" to the college's word processor. It would be interesting to provide additional access to the Web and to redesign the case so that learners integrate Internet search techniques as part of their problem-solving activities.

When the ESL help function was added, it was thought that students would use this function as most computer users use the help functions found in most software programs, such as the "Balloon Help" option of Microsoft's Word. Typically, users select the help function to find a quick answer to a specific problem or function. Our ESL learners did not use the ESL help function in this way; to our surprise, ESL students used the help function as a language tutorial! Groups of two or three learners would go through each underlined expression and discuss its meaning and use before attempting the case problem. One student from Hong Kong told me that he was as interested in how the English language is used to conduct business as he was in solving the case. For multimedia case developers, language support and language issues are central to ESL learners and provide a gateway to our own linguistic landscapes. In "The Case of the Unhappy Client" ESL students wanted to know how language wraps itself around business and used the help function to achieve this end.

Using the Platform to Integrate Lehigh's MBA Curriculum and Communication

In a recent article published in *Change*, the American Association for Higher Education's magazine, Elaine Hairston describes a structural "metamorphosis" which significant numbers of American businesses have undergone during the 1980s and early '90s as they struggled to remain competitive. Driven by global competition, rising costs, lower market share and profits margins, rapid obsolescence of product lines, and the impact of information technology, companies and whole industries have restructured and consolidated their operations, placing increasing pressures on their employees to meet higher performance goals within shorter time periods. The end result for many companies, Hairston points out, is similar to what has happened to B. F. Goodrich: "the company's whole mode of operating today is more intense, rapid and more productive, and its technological and other systems are better" (1996, 35). What also changed was the type of manager needed to succeed in this fast-paced world where agility and adaptability are revered. The old model of manager, as someone skilled at directing operations within a centralized, hierarchical organization with layers and layers of bureaucracy, was quickly becoming irrelevant. For graduate institutions and programs training future managers, there was a clear and urgent message from American business: today's managers require a restructuring of old competencies, plus new knowledge and new skills.

Part of this new knowledge includes a thorough grasp of an industry's structure and the impact economic and competitive forces exert on that industry's competitive advantage. Managers must also understand the role information technology is playing in the new electronic networked environment where change can be both friend and foe (Applegate, McFarlan, and McKenney 1996). Some MBAs will no doubt work in traditional, highly structured, hierarchical companies which are being forced to change, but more will find themselves in newer corporate structures which are integrated, extended, open, and networked, where activities are focused around multidisciplinary teams capable of crossing departmental boundaries, reaching into every part of their enterprise from suppliers to clients (Tapscott and Caston 1993, 33). Corporations and organizations extend far beyond the traditional boundaries of stone and mortar, extending even beyond the traditional organizational chart. Today we have virtual corporations and organizations which consist of a temporary network of independent companies—suppliers, customers, even erstwhile rivals—linked by information technology to share skills and costs, and to provide access to one another's markets. What is curious about these developments is that while Porter (1980), Tapscott, Caston, and others stress the need for greater skill integration, mastery of information technology, and better ways of achieving what Fuld (1995)

calls "competitor intelligence," little mention is made by these authors of the significant role language and interpretation play in these activities. Indeed, communication issues are largely ignored.

As part of Lehigh University's response to the growing number of MBA programs competing for a finite number of students, the changing needs of today's agile companies, and the globalization of American business, its College of Business and Economics (CBE) set about restructuring its MBA and professional education programs and turned to its Center for Business Communication and the learning platform as a possible vehicle for integrating the MBA curriculum and for developing new agile managers. At this writing, the learning platform is being modified to reflect the operations of a major American microelectronics firm whose corporate structure is integrated, extended, open, and networked, and whose activities are focused around multidisciplinary teams who are required to cross departmental boundaries. Working closely with this firm, business faculty representing different functional areas will develop cases to be used in their courses, and faculty from business communication will attempt to integrate writing and communication into each case. The "office" will include links to financial databases and the Internet. Video lectures will also be integrated into the platform, and communication, writing, and ESL support will be added under "Training." A grant from AT&T's Foundation is helping to make this a reality. A major challenge for business education has been demonstrating how the various competencies taught relate to each other and to the workplace. By having students work cases in different courses which refer to a single company, and by integrating communication and writing training into the fabric of the learning platform, it is hoped that the relatedness of what we teach will become apparent and the MBAs we graduate will have a greater sense of how to apply what they learn and how to meet the communication challenges that they will face.

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Resources

Communication Education newsgroup: Bit.Listserv.Commed

Communication discussion groups:

XCULT-L: for discussing intercultural communication
Contact address: Oliver@dhvx20.csudh.edu (Oliver Seely)
E-mail address: listserv@psuvm.psu.edu (Bitnet: LISTSERV@PSUVM)

XCULT-X: for interdisciplinary discussion of communication philosophy, theory, and practice via computer-mediated communication
E-mail address: listserv@umrvmb.umr.edu (Bitnet: LISTSERV@UMRVMB)

Communication research and theory:

CRTNET: A magazine about communication research and theory.
Contact address: t3b@psuvm.bitnet (Bitnet: T3B@PSUVM)
E-mail address: listserv@psuvm.psu.edu (Bitnet: LISTSERV@PSUVM)

Discussion group for instructors of business communications: BIZCOM@EBBS.ENGL