Using Writing in the Business Department to Pursue Excellence

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Communication skills are crucial to organizational effectiveness at a time when business is adopting a quality-based philosophy and pursuing excellence in meeting the needs of their customers. Organizations utilizing the principles of quality are striving to empower their employees to make decisions to deal with problems that will lead to improvements in product quality and customer service. Successful organizations embrace the ideas of using as much statistical data as possible to make informed decisions. Much work is team-based and self-managed.

Many of the writing assignments across the business curriculum focus on problem solving and empowering students to make informed decisions. Students gain experience and skill in identifying and analyzing work-related problems and using both oral and written communication to present their solutions. They learn to conduct primary and secondary research and to perform data analysis using statistical tools. Some assignments are team-based and require self-management (with the instructor as the facilitator).

The menu of writing contained in the business program is extensive and varied including report writing, case studies, newsletters, press releases, research papers, team projects, business

plans, journals, essays, literature reviews, free writes, peer evaluations, training plans, and labor contracts. The remainder of this paper will provide samples of some of the assignments used in the Business Department to teach writing and will also demonstrate how writing contributes to the learning of business concepts and work place requirements.

Quality Team Project in Organizational Behavior

One of my favorite and most innovative research and writing assignments is the quality team project used in my Organizational Behavior course. Through this project students learn about team building and continuous process improvement tools and apply their research and writing skills to real-life problem solving. Students work in teams of five to study a system or process at Plymouth State College for the purpose of improving it. The LEARN process (Baugher, Stamford University, 1992) has been adopted as the model for this project. Students follow the steps below:

1. **L** ocate a problem. Students brainstorm for potential problems—systems or processes that could be improved on the PSC campus. Some of the past studies have focused on the following aspects of the campus: snow removal, registration, advising, shuttle service, security, cafeteria meal plans, bathroom maintenance, and instructional methods.

2. **E** stablish a team. Teams are randomly assigned and members assume various team roles including a team leader and recorder. (The team roles may be rotated among members). They select meeting times and locations (out of class) and keep a progress chart of their activities and summary of their meetings including a record of the responsibilities of each team member.

An important initial step in the forming of these teams is an icebreaker activity conducted early in the semester known as the

"Hotel Building" exercise. Each team of students is given an envelope containing the following materials: deck of 3x5 cards, ruler, scissors, stapler, tape, and marker. They are given 30 minutes to construct a hotel using these materials. Their team performance is judged on the strength and aesthetics of their hotel. The test of strength is measured two ways: first, a book is dropped from 3 feet onto each hotel. Those still standing in good condition are given the second test, a member of the class usually someone tall and of a sturdy build is nominated to stand on each hotel—some of the hotels are strong enough to withstand this test and others quickly crumble. This is a FUN activity and also an effective way to break the ice and observe group dynamics.

3. A ssess the current process. The instructor is the team facilitator and responsible for helping the teams to learn the methods of continuous process improvement. Primary research **is** conducted to assess the current process using a variety of research techniques including a survey.

4. R esearch the causes. Students use tools such as fishbone diagrams (also **known as** cause-and-effect diagrams) and pareto charts to analyze the causes and chart the results of their investigation.

5. **N** ominate a solution. Based on data gathered through research, each team makes recommendations for improving the current process.

These steps provide the framework for the final quality team report. The problem is defined, the results of the investigation are reported, and recommendations for improvement are presented for consideration by campus decision makers. These teams have been successful both in terms of their investigations and also with regard to team performance. Many teams have become highly cohesive and seriously committed to their work—two teams

recently were successful in getting their recommendations implemented on campus.

Communication Audit in the Graduate Seminar in Organizational Communication

At the graduate level, business students are taught advanced writing in the Seminar in Organizational Communication course. Students are introduced to proposals, business plans, and report writing. The most comprehensive, challenging, and labor-intensive writing assignment experienced by students is the communication audit report. The communication audit is a business research technique used by managers and consultants to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of an organization's communication systems and activities. It focuses on assessing the quality, quantity, and timeliness of information, measuring the communication climate, and identifying networks of communication. The audit process involves gathering data using questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups, network analysis, critical incidents, and content analysis. This data gathering phase is followed by analysis and evaluation that lead to the preparation of a communication audit. Essentially the student is becoming a consultant to an organization. As a result of the audit, it is likely that the student will discover hidden communication problems, which if corrected can lead to improved morale, reduced costs, higher productivity, better use of technology, and changes in organizational culture.

Due to the hands-on, field-based nature of the communication audit, students must be able to apply and evaluate communication theories, concepts, and practices and at the same time demonstrate their ability to communicate their expertise to decision-makers within the organization studied through oral and written communications. It's a project that could easily overwhelm even graduate students without proper guidance. The success of this assignment depends on a thorough understanding of the audit process facilitated by the instructor and supported by the host organization. Likewise, the opportunity to review "model" communica-

tion audit reports is helpful to students in planning, organizing, and writing the content of the report.

Below are the steps that I teach students to complete the communication audit:

1. Locate the target of your study and obtain permission to conduct the audit. This requires a written statement of the audit outlining the overall purpose, services to be performed, types of methodology, and possible uses of the audit results.

2. Select the methods of research. Students are encouraged to select their methods to match the needs of the organization, as well as their own time, skills, and available resources.

3. Schedule the audit. Prepare a calendar of activities allowing time for the return of questionnaires and scheduling of interviews, as well as processing of data and preparation of the report.

4. Get started. Inform all members of the organization of the audit and its procedures. This is communicated by the student, but also by a letter of support from management.

5. Select participants and construct a survey. (A specific discussion of methodology is beyond the scope of this article.)

6. Analyze the data and evaluate the results. Once the data are collected, they must be analyzed and conclusions reached. Recommendations are based on strengths and weaknesses discovered in relation to the organization. Audit results are usually reported orally and in writing to top management and then in a condensed form to all members of an organization (both favorable and unfavorable findings). Results must be empirically based and reported clearly and objectively and centered around the needs of the organization.

Some of the most common areas of focus for past c o m u n i-cation studies have included organizational philosophy, mission, and goals; employee participation and decision making; communication climate; interpersonal relations; communication channels and media, and interdepartmental communication.

Many students tell me that this is the most challenging and intensive course work that they have ever completed but also the most rewarding and meaningful—it can even result in follow-up work as a paid communication consultant.

Newsletter Assignment in Principles of Marketing

In teaching Principles of Marketing, Professor Tom Fitzpatrick was searching for a writing assignment that would involve original research and the development of skills that would follow students into their careers. He created a newsletter assignment that met these criteria requiring students to write a newsletter for a company that they worked for or an industry that interested them.

One of the concerns that such an assignment presents is whether it stretches students' abilities and thereby provides a learning experience or whether it proves overwhelming to them. Professor Fitzpatrick has given the newsletter assignment to classes of first year and sophomore students at PSC and to adult learners at the College for Lifelong Learning. To his delight, the students have produced newsletters that are equal to professional newsletters in terms of content, style, and graphic design. This assignment integrates course content, computer application skills, current events, and writing/editing skills into a final product that the student could proudly show a prospective employer.

At the beginning of the semester, the students are asked to form work teams of no fewer than three and no more than four students. They are required to pick a company or an industry around which to build their newsletter. Frequently, one student may be working for an organization that would like to have a newsletter created, and the team agrees to work on this project. Each team member is responsible for one page of the four-page

newsletter, and their work must be reviewed/edited by the other team members.

In summing up, an assignment that presented some concerns about the degree of difficulty, proved a challenging and confidence-building experience for Principles of Marketing students. Additionally, it was not unusual for the newsletter to actually go to print and fulfill its role communicating the organizational message to consumers, employees, or membership.

Video Presentation and Report Writing in Business, Ethics, and Society

The Business, Ethics, and Society course uses real-life issues to teach ethical principles and concepts of social responsibility. The most effective teaching technique that I have found to do this is to videotape television programs such as *Dateline, 60 Minutes,* and *Nightline* that report on ethical or unethical corporations and their acts of social responsibility or irresponsibility.

In this course I assign a team project requiring each group of students to videotape such a television program on a current issue related to business, ethics, and society. From that video a 10-to-15-minute segment of the program is presented to the class, and the members of the team lead the class in a discussion of the issue presented in the video. This semester students selected the following issues: retail discrimination, unsanitary hotel conditions, automobile safety, unethical landlords and privacy violations, hospital billing and overcharging, illegal employment practices, gun safety, the pharmaceutical black market, cornea transplants and the rights of the living versus the rights of the deceased.

The second part of this assignment is to write a five-page report analyzing the chosen issue. To expand upon the knowledge gained from the television program, students use primary research such as interviews and conduct secondary research via the internet and library. They are also required to apply specific concepts, principles, and ideas from the textbook and classroom discussions

related to their issue.

Students are provided with the following questions to help them in analyzing and reporting on the issues:

- What is the issue? (Present key facts and take a stand on the issue).
- How active or dormant is the issue?
- Who are the stakeholders affected by the issue?
- What ethical principles and concepts of social responsibility apply to the issue? (Use these constructs to support your position on the issue).
- What options are available to business in managing the issue? Can they be integrative? Proactive? What policies should be implemented or practices modified?
- How should the issue affect the company/industry strategy?
- What influence can/should the business have on the political environment affecting this issue?

Students enjoy this assignment. It actively engages them in the learning process and brings the course to life. Most importantly it keeps them informed about current issues and teaches them ethical decision making. It is also an opportunity to develop and refine their presentational skills, analytical abilities, and writing skills.

Business Report Writing in Organizational Communication

The most direct way that undergraduate students are taught to write in the Business Department is through the writing (W) course known as Organizational Communication. For many years this course has been one of the most highly regarded courses in the business program. Alumni consistently acknowledge the value of the course and its contributions to their success in the work place.

Among the many skills learned in Organizational Communication is report writing—a major component of the student's work

is dependent upon the successful planning, research, and writing of a formal analytical business report. The skills learned in this assignment are readily transferable to various disciplines and careers. The assignment is interesting and challenging to students as it requires them to research and analyze real-world business problems. Topics are not assigned by the instructor but chosen by the students. Examples of topics include: new product research, management practices, employment policies, employee wellness, employee rights, business laws and regulations.

Planning the Business Report

When I teach this course, students are encouraged to explore current business issues related to quality, work force diversity, globalization, technological change, and ethics. These issues are then developed into problem statements. Each student must then identify the purpose, scope, and methodology for the report to establish the framework for the study. The final planning stages of this assignment involve developing a preliminary outline of content as well as establishing a work plan that identifies task and time requirements. The success of this project depends on students providing regular progress reports and the instructor responding with feedback.

Conducting Primary and Secondary Research

Students are taught that the value of their reports depends on the quality of information that is generated through primary and secondary research. One of the main differences between this assignment and other academic reports is the requirement of primary research. Students must go out into the real world and collect data that will help them to analyze their selected business issues and develop conclusions that support their recommendations. Common methodologies used by students include interviewing experts in the field; visiting organizations to observe their operations; contacting corporations to receive business documents such as sales reports, policy statements, and other correspondence;

and surveying in the field to gather data.

Analyzing Data and Writing the Business Report

Based on the primary and secondary data collected, students analyze their issues, form conclusions, and make recommendations to the targeted audiences. Students have an opportunity to use statistical/computing/graphic skills and practice their problem-solving skills as they work through the analysis of their business issues. The writing of the report emphasizes proper content and formatting, effective language and style, organization and readability as well as visual aids that complement the written text. One of the most important pages in their formal reports is the executive summary. Students are taught that business readers rely on an executive summary to provide an overview of the most important parts of a report and generally these summaries are widely distributed across the organization.

My most successful experiences teaching the course have been when students write their reports and go through the revision process one or two times. This involves extra time for students and instructors alike and necessitates keeping the sizes of classes to manageable numbers.

Concluding Thoughts

The writing in the Business Department promotes active learning through hands-on activities that apply theory to the real world and teach problem solving and decision making. The writing assignments emphasize team-building skills, research methods, critical thinking, and analytical writing. These skills follow students through their college studies and into their careers, contributing to their successes in the business world.