DO THEY THINK THEY CAN COMMUNICATE? GRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

Research studies, journal articles, and job postings have emphasized communication competency for many years. Prospective employers as well as communication and business professors have emphasized the importance of these competencies, also. Many studies concentrate on what prospective employers are looking for in business college graduates, how to present these skills to business students to emphasize their importance in the workplace, and how students perceive the relevance of these communication skills.

Our study, however, compared how business graduate students rated their own level of competency at the onset of a required managerial communication course with their self-ratings at the conclusion of the course. These students, from two public universities, were asked to rate themselves on 35 communication skills that are addressed in the course. The skills included interpersonal relations, listening, speaking, asking and answering questions, team communication, interviewing, meeting management, and writing routine documents, reports, and proposals. The assessment instrument consisted of 5-point Likert-type scales.

Pre-post comparisons were made for each of the 35 skills in an attempt to determine the extent to which self-perceptions changed as a result of taking the course. Findings indicate that students felt their level of competency had changed positively for all the skills.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment of learning has received much attention in recent years. Parents, students, and policy makers are interested in determining the extent to which colleges and universities are meeting expectations. However, measuring what students have learned is a complex, controversial task. Several kinds of national assessments of learning are currently in use, including standardized tests (Perez-Pena, 2012). In addition, while such assessment tools may have value in that they indicate what students know upon graduating, they do not tell how much they have improved along the way. Indirect metrics, such as the number of hours students spend studying and how much they interact with professors, may be more difficult to determine than

scores on a standardized test, but they may also be important indicators of achievement in such competencies as critical thinking and problem solving.

In addition to standardized tests, student GPA is often considered an easily computed, valid indicator of student learning. For example, potential employers often use GPA as a screen when deciding whether to interview a student applicant. They also tend to believe that a student who successfully completes a course has mastered the course topics. They see a student's final grade in the course as a valid descriptor of the student's learning (Hynes & Sigmar, 2009). However, a final grade does not indicate whether the student perceives the relevance or importance of the course material. Nor does a final grade indicate the extent to which students agree with the instructor's assessment of the student's achievement.

If standardized test scores, course grades, and GPA are insufficient assessments of learning, one might ask, what else should be measured? The concept that learning "must be measured by institutions on a 'value added' basis that takes into account students' academic baseline" gained prominence in 2006, when a commission of the U.S. Department of Education issued its report on higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). This concept provides the theoretical framework for the current study, in that it attempts to assess student learning by considering the distance from the baseline to the finish line. Sanchez and Hynes (2001) found in their online communication skill study that students' perceptions of their entering and exiting skills levels provided much more detail on the nature of the learning that actually took place. This theoretical framework also assumes that students are the best determinants of what and how much they learned.

As can be seen in Table 1, various methods have been used to evaluate student achievement.

Table 1

Methods for Assessing Learning Objectives

Learning Objective	Method
Knowledge	Standardized tests
Attitudes	Retention rates
Competencies	Pre-post measures

In our College of Business Administration, students are asked to complete a course evaluation form at the end of every course. The Individual Development and Education Assessment (IDEA) form was developed at Kansas State University and has been used in our College since 2005.The form includes a section where students are asked to rate their progress on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies (www.idea.ksu.edu). One item asks the extent to which students perceive progress on "developing specific skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course" (IDEA

item #24). This item stimulated our thinking about students' ability to critically evaluate their own competencies. We hypothesized that, when presented with a list of skills addressed in a managerial communication course, they could more accurately analyze their level of competency after completing the course than at its onset. That is, after taking the course, they had a better understanding of what they knew and what they did not know, what they could do well, and what they could not do well.

This study attempts to capture students' self-assessments of their learning in a graduate managerial communication course. We as managerial communication professors wanted to know how the students perceived their communication skills before being introduced to these skills in a semester course and after they finished the course. We wanted to know how business graduate students would rate their own level of competency at the onset of a required managerial communication course and at the conclusion of the course. These students, from two public universities, were asked to rate themselves on 35 communication skills that are addressed in the course. The skills included interpersonal relations, listening, speaking, asking and answering questions, team communication, interviewing, meeting management, writing routine documents, reports, and proposals. The assessment instrument consisted of 5-point Likert-type scales.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English, Manton, and Walker (2007) surveyed 200 of the largest firms in Dallas and found that the most highly rated traits these managers looked for in business college graduates were "integrity and recognition of appropriate confidentiality in communication" (p. 414). The next highest-rated trait they wanted the business college graduate to possess was "the ability to produce neat and well organized documents that use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling" (p. 414); plus, "the ability to proofread documents and understand the principle of effective communication" (p. 414). In light of the recent corporate scandals, it is understandable that the human resource managers would rate "integrity and recognition of confidentiality in communication" very high. In fact, the second highest traits they are looking for in business graduates align with what we, as business communication professors, have been emphasizing for years.

Kirmer and Sellers (2009) analyzed survey responses from 94 campus recruiters in an attempt to clarify which communication skills recruiters valued most highly. They found that oral communications skills—formal speaking, teamwork, interpersonal communication, and listening—rated highest. Hynes and Sigmar (2009) surveyed approximately 100 campus recruiters representing 45 businesses and government agencies to find the importance of various communication skills. The recruiters ranked courses in "daily workplace relationships" and team communication as more important for success than business writing, presentations, office technology, and intercultural business communication. Koc (2011) found that the "ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside of the organization" was ranked higher

than the ability to write reports by recruiters in a survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers. Hynes' (2012) research agrees with the studies above. She found that "interpersonal communication appeared to be just as important, if not more so, than business writing or making professional presentations" (p. 7).

Hartman and McCambridge (2011) bring some insights into how to present key communication skills to the Millennials. Millennials are individuals born between 1980 and 2000. They are described as "technologically sophisticated multitaskers, capable of significant contributions to tomorrow's organizations, yet deficient in communication skills" (p. 22). According to Hartman and McCambridge (2011), the Millennials are the largest majority of college students in the United States, and, apparently, we need to find new ways to emphasize the importance of communication skills in the workforce.

Ameen, Bruns, and Jackson (2010) surveyed 576 students in a principles of accounting course in 1998 and 322 in 2006 from four universities. Their results indicate, "students continue to regard the accounting profession as one that requires few oral communication skills even though the profession and academia have demonstrated the importance of these skills" (p. 65).

Many business leaders complain that recent college graduates lack the fundamental communication skills, especially writing, necessary to gain success in the business world. The leaders place this problem on the universities' professors and administrators. However, the problem goes beyond the professors and administrators (Hines & Basso, 2008).

Business communication professors, as well as other writing professors, have to review basic writing rules briefly and move on to other topics such as presentations, research, writing emails, letters, reports, etc. that have to be covered in the course. The limited classroom instruction time mixed with the need to introduce students to a variety of written communication in different media leave little time to actually "teach" a business student how to write effectively and efficiently in a semester. If students do not have the use of basic grammar, then they are not going to have fundamental communication skills (Hines & Basso, 2008). Most students "perceive" themselves as good "communicators". Once they are introduced again to the rules of core writing skills such as proper sentence structure, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, etc., they often realize that they may not be as competent as they thought (Hines & Basso, 2008).

Hines and Basso (2008) also found that a significant number of communication professionals report relatively low scores when rating the writing proficiency of entry-level employees. Their data seems to suggest that communication professionals think higher education does an inadequate job of preparing these workers for writing-intensive careers. The study does support the idea that higher-ranked communication practitioners reported lower perceptions of good writing skills among entry-level communication workers than lesser-ranked practitioners.

Students need to be able to apply the skills and competencies they are learning in the college classroom to the "actual workplace". It seems the college professors and business employers should work together to prepare the students for the actual workplace. Not only does that mean that college professors should teach the skills and competencies that they and the

employers think are necessary, but also incorporate practical application of these skills and competencies so students can perceive their competency in these skills and global competencies (Weisblat & Bresciani, 2012).

Maes, Weldy, and Icenogle (1997) report the results of two studies done in 1995 that identify the competencies, characteristics, and skills that managers consider when selecting graduates for entry-level positions. The first study clearly identified oral communication as the most important competency for entry-level positions. It was even more important than written communication. In the second study, managers rated the importance of 13 oral communication skills. The top four oral communication skills were: (1) following instructions, (2) listening, (3) conversing, and (4) giving feedback. These oral communication skills were consistently rated as most important, regardless of industry or size of organization (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997).

"In the dynamic and evolving world of project management, communication remains constant as a desirable and critical competency for managing projects" (Henderson, 2008). Henderson (2004 & 2008) found that managers' decoding competency positively influences their teams' satisfaction and productivity. Also, their encoding competency positively influences their teams' productivity and, unexpectedly, their team's satisfaction. For geographically dispersed teams, managers' competency in decoding and encoding positively influences their teams, also (Henderson, 2008).

This is just a sampling of the studies that are published on business communication competencies. They mainly concentrate on what prospective employers are looking for in business college graduates, how to present these skills to business students to emphasize their importance in the workforce, and how students perceive the relevance of these communication skills.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to measure student growth and learning in a managerial communication course from the students' perspective, not from the instructors' grades.

Subjects

The subjects in this study were graduate business students enrolled in a required managerial communication course in two public universities. One hundred and forty-three (143) student subjects were used in this study. As you can see from Table 2 below, the largest percentage of students were Professional MBA students (45.7%) or MBA students (28.2%). About half of the students were part-time students (42.7%) and half were full-time students (57.3%). A majority of the students was employed full-time (72%). Only 8.1% were employed part-time, and 19.9% were not employed. The students' undergraduate majors were Business

Administration (24.1%), Liberal Arts (10.7%), Computer Science (4.5%), Science/Engineering (37.5%), Education (1.8%), and other (21.4%).

Table 2

Student Demographics

Graduate Program	
MBA	28.2%
MS in MIS	12.7%
M. Acct.	13.4%
Professional MBA	45.7%
Part-time or Full-time student	
Part-time Students	42.7%
Full-time Students	57.3%
Employed	
No	19.9%
Yes, Part-time	8.1%
Yes, Full-Time	72.0%
Undergraduate Major	
Business Administration	24.1%
Liberal Arts	10.7%
Computer Science	4.5%
Science/Engineering	37.5%
Education	1.8%
Other	21.4%

The students were all enrolled in a course that was equivalent in terms of course content, assignments, and textbook. The same instructor taught the courses at both universities.

Procedures

The students were asked to rate themselves on 35 communication skills that are addressed in the course. The skills included interpersonal relations, listening, speaking, asking and answering questions, team communication, interviewing, meeting management, writing routine documents, reports, and proposals. The assessment instrument consisted of 5-point Likert-type scales. The instruments were administered twice to the students – once at the onset of the course, and again at the conclusion of the course, but before final grades were calculated.

Pre-post comparisons were made for self-rated scores on each of the 35 skills in an attempt to determine the extent to which self-perceptions changed as a result of taking the course. Paired t-tests were computed to determine the differences between the mean pre- and post-course scores for each skill.

The research questions were:

1.   How did the students perceive their communication competencies at the onset of a graduate MC course?
2.   How did the students' perceived competency levels change at the conclusion of the course?
3.   Which competencies changed the most?
4.   Which competencies changed the least?

RESULTS

Tables 3-10 below show the pre-course and post-course means for each of the 35 communication skills addressed in the course. The skills are divided into eight categories, six oral communication competencies, and two written communication competencies: interpersonal communication, listening, speaking, asking questions, team communication, interviews and meetings skills, writing routine documents, and writing reports and proposals.

Table 3

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Interpersonal Communication Skills

Interpersonal Relations Skills	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I convey warmth and empathy when communicating at work.	3.75	3.91	-2.26	.026
I remain open-minded in relationships.	3.80	4.03	-3.64	.000
I resist judging or comparing people.	3.26	3.69	-6.17	.000
I foster liking and trust among my coworkers.	4.03	4.15	-2.09	.039

Table 4

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Listening Skills

Listening	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I am motivated to listen to others.	3.83	4.08	-3.76	.000
I listen empathically.	3.63	3.95	-4.51	.000
I am alert to verbal and nonverbal cues.	3.61	3.98	-4.03	.000
I use feedback techniques such as paraphrasing.	3.34	3.74	-4.36	.000

Table 5

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Speaking Skills

Speaking	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I state my point simply and succinctly.	3.59	3.97	-5.28	.000
I support my opinion with facts, reasons, or examples.	3.59	3.89	-3.57	.000
I avoid technical terms (jargon) when talking with lay people.	3.37	3.80	-5.16	.000
I give clear, logically organized instructions.	3.24	4.05	-9.22	.000
I know how to begin and conclude a business presentation.	3.34	3.90	-6.80	.000

Table 6

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Questioning Skills

Asking Questions	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I ask various types of questions for different purposes.	3.51	3.85	-4.61	.000
I recognize hostility and resistance in question form.	3.70	3.99	-4.15	.000
I check my understanding of a question before replying.	3.47	3.79	-4.27	.000

Table 7

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Team Skills

Team Communication	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I interact cooperatively with teammates to achieve our goal.	4.07	4.31	-4.28	.000
I can diagnose the problem when my team isn't working well.	3.55	3.85	-4.24	.000
I understand the fundamentals of group dynamics.	3.69	4.08	-6.02	.000
I can motivate and lead a team to achieve high performance.	3.58	3.90	-4.42	.000

Table 8

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Interviewing and Meeting Skills

Interviews and Meetings	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I participate in job selection interviews satisfactorily (either as an interviewer or applicant).	3.52	3.97	-6.35	.000
I participate in performance appraisal interviews satisfactorily (either as a supervisor or subordinate).	3.47	3.89	-5.91	.000
I know how to begin and conclude an interview.	3.30	4.15	-9.52	.000
I make valuable contributions to business meetings.	3.50	4.08	-8.08	.000
I am competent in leading meetings.	3.31	3.95	-7.92	.000

Table 9

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Writing Routine Business Documents

Writing Routine Business Documents	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I compose letters and memos in standard business format.	3.41	4.08	-7.98	.000
I compose documents that are well organized.	3.68	4.13	-5.40	.000
I plan documents by considering my purpose and audience.	3.82	4.19	-4.68	.000
I revise documents for conciseness, clarity, courtesy, and completeness.	3.86	4.20	-4.94	.000
I proofread documents for surface errors (spelling, mechanics).	3.96	4.24	-4.06	.000

Table 10

Pre-Post Mean Scores for Writing Reports and Proposals

Reports and Proposals	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	T-Values	P-Values
I know how to compose all the parts of a standard business report and proposal.	2.89	3.83	-10.5	.000
I can write an Executive Summary.	2.77	3.76	-9.93	.000
I organize formal reports logically.	3.24	3.97	-8.33	.000
I write persuasive proposals that achieve their goal.	3.08	3.81	-8.29	.000

Results in Tables 3-10 above indicate the answer to RQ1*, How did the students perceive their communication competencies at the onset of a graduate MC course?* The students rated themselves highest at the onset of the course in teamwork skills (Pre-test Mean = 4.07) and interpersonal skills (Pre-test Mean = 4.03). Their lowest self-ratings were for ability to write an Executive Summary (Pre-test Mean = 2.77) and ability to compose a standard business report (Pre-test Mean = 2.89). It is interesting to note that, as they entered the course, the students believed their greatest communication skills to be in oral communication and their weakest to be written communication.

Results in Tables 3-10 above indicate the answer to RQ2, *How did the students' perceived competency levels change at the conclusion of the course?* All t-values showed significant change in a positive direction (p<.05). That is, the students believed that they improved significantly in all 35 skills during the course. In addition, all but two skills showed improvement over the course at the p<.001 level. The smallest improvement was for interpersonal communication skills: fostering liking and trust (T-value =2.09) and conveying warmth and empathy at work (T-value = 2.26).

Results in Tables 3-10 show the answer to RQ3, *Which competencies changed the most during the course?* The greatest improvements were for report writing (T-value = 10.53) and executive summary writing (T-value = 9.93). Regarding improvements in oral communication skills, the students felt they had improved the most in interviewing (T-value = 9.52) and giving instructions (T-value = 9.22). The answer to RQ4, *Which competencies changed the least?* is found in Tables 3-10. The least improvement had to do with students' ability to foster liking and trust (T-value = 2.09) and convey warmth and empathy when communicating (T-value = 2.26). It is understandable that these competencies were the least affected by a skill-based course, since they may be tied to personality traits or are environmentally determined.

In summary, interpersonal skills were rated the highest at the onset of the course and showed the least amount of change during the course. Report writing skills were rated the lowest at the onset of the course and showed the greatest amount of change during the course.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study compared how business graduate students self-rated their level of communication competency at the beginning and again at the end of a required managerial communication course. Pre-post comparisons were made for each of 35 communication skills to determine which perceptions changed after taking the course. Findings indicate that students felt their level of competency had changed positively for all the skills addressed in the course. The competencies that were the most improved were writing skills, particularly report writing skills.

One of the implications of these results may be that student self-perceptions about competency levels should be included in learning assessment programs. The statistically significant differences in pre-and post-course ratings are evidence that the students believed that they had improved on all the communication skills studied. Whether these student perceptions actually correspond with their final grades is a matter for future research.

A third implication may be that administering a skills test at the beginning of a communication course is a useful strategy in that a pre-test will identify the students' perceptions of where their weaknesses are and motivate them during the course to work on those specific skills. Then a post-course test will help students determine whether they feel that they improved in those specific areas. Similarly, examining such metrics can help instructors decide what topics need emphasizing or de-emphasizing, according to the students' perspective.

A fourth implication of our results is that we as instructors may need to change our style of teaching and/or course content to better suit the expectations of the students and their future employers. Since our study indicates that students have clear preferences and perceptions about what they need to study, curriculum development efforts should consider them when making decisions regarding topics and the amount of emphasis each topic receives.

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