

Developing Communication Competence through Technology and Tradition

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Abstract

Communication skills are recognised by academics, employers, professional groups and graduates as key ingredients of successful professional practice. The theory of active learning also promotes communication skills as key ingredients of active, meaningful, self-responsible, lifelong learning.

A blending of tradition and technology is essential to effective academic programs of study in communication. Communication technology involves the learner in self-directed, interactive, dynamic learning experiences. Traditional methods provide important role models of scholarship and enquiry, and offer experiences in working and communicating in a team and communicating orally with diverse audiences.

These issues will be discussed from the experiences of the author in the delivery of a core communication curriculum at the University of Southern Queensland.

Introduction

Communication is a key ingredient of daily human endeavour. It is the core from which the individual embarks daily on a series of interactions. These interactions collectively determine the ongoing success of the individual. Whether the interactions be formal or informal, structured or unstructured, the communication competence of the individual is crucial to ongoing success in the particular environment. And yet, of all the skills required by individuals, particularly those moving into the employment sector, communication remains the skill which is least developed. Consistent feedback from industry suggests that there is a significant gap between the skills possessed by new graduates and the skills required of new graduates.

Communication is central to effective teaching and learning in an academic setting. Both instructors and students need to demonstrate competency in communication in order to create and share meaning. The theory of active learning highlights the importance of equipping students with the communication skills necessary to meaningful learning.

Advances in university education offer opportunities to provide specific educational experiences which involve students in active learning, and ultimately improve the communication skills of individuals. The demands placed on graduates requires that a range of methods, approaches and strategies be employed in the development of a diversity of skills. Through a blending of tradition and technology, students can develop their potential in becoming competent communicators.

Communication and the Concept of Competence

Communication is an active, complex, dynamic, transactive process where individuals negotiate to achieve a common understanding. Communication is quite distinct from delivering messages, giving instructions, or leading a learning experience. All of these embrace what is essentially a one-way flow of information, which is under the control of the 'sender'. In contrast, communication involves both parties simultaneously in the mutual creation of meaning.

Achieving competence in communication requires much more than application of learned skills. Competent communicators are those who apply an appropriate skill with an understanding of why and how this skill is the most appropriate within the particular context. Much education has been directed at improving the skills of individuals, however much less has been directed at developing a deep understanding of the elements which underlie and influence the process as a whole.

The Importance of Communication Competency in Education

To portray the learning experience from a communication perspective is to frame education as the mutual creation of meaning. As Shea (1987) states, 'to have knowledge is to make it, to construct it, not to record, absorb or memorize it.' (Shea 1987, p.36) Central to this mutual construction of meaning are the communication skills of both instructor and learner.

The theory of active learning asserts that, in order to foster greater levels of learning, university educators must move away from instructional methods which embrace a linear, one-way flow of information. Rarely are lectures, for example, a two-way flow, of negotiation, of sharing meaning between parties who endeavour to develop an understanding of each other. More frequently, lectures are a mechanism used to deliver a predetermined curriculum to an undefined and largely passive audience. 'How each student reacts, understands, interprets, and perceives the information cannot be acknowledged.' (Gleason 1986, p.22)

Active learning fosters the transformation of students from receptacles of facts, attitudes, ideas, and opinions, to active participators in the exchange and negotiation of meaning. Thus, students no longer passively receive information which is already 'intellectually digested', but actively join with instructors in the creation, manipulation and communication of knowledge. (Parrot 1987). Indeed, active learning embraces the transactional view of communication, for it places less emphasis on transmitting information and more on developing students skills (Bonwell & Eison 1991) in order to negotiate to a common understanding.

Denicolo, Entwistle and Hounsell (1992, p.3) consider that there are four 'distinctive features' of active learning:

1. a search for meaning and understanding
2. greater student responsibility for learning;
3. a concern with skills as well as knowledge; and
4. an approach to the curriculum which looks beyond graduation to wider career and social settings.

The communication skills specified include problem-solving, initiative and efficiency (including self-responsibility and self-confidence), interaction (working cooperatively in a team, and organising/leading a team), and communication (in written, oral and electronic form).

Communication skills, then, are key ingredients of meaningful, self-responsible, lifelong learning. Through active learning, these skills are 'purposefully nurtured

rather than learned incidentally, and students are given opportunities to practise and review them. (Denicolo, Entwistle & Hounsell 1992, p.4) Thus, 'as active participants in the quest for knowledge, students learn to develop their own resources for learning and become prepared to meet the intellectual challenges that lie ahead.' (Petonito 1991, p.501)

The Importance of Graduate Skills in Organisations

There is wide acceptance within organisations that good interpersonal and communication skills are inherently linked to successful practice. (Hissong 1993) Young graduates find that interpersonal skills are critical to success on the job, particularly in an environment of computer networking coupled with participative management approaches. (Bednar & Olney 1987) These skills are also key factors in successful bids for promotion - indeed, those with well developed communication skills 'have a greater chance of staying in the ranks of the upwardly mobile'. (Reynolds 1992, p.131) Evidence also suggests there is a strong relationship between communication, organisational commitment and job satisfaction. (Ticehurst & Ross-Smith 1992) Proficiency in communication is also important to overcoming barriers in the workplace. (Baskerville and Tucker 1991).

A Communication Skills Deficit?

Much has been written about the perceived lack of communication skills in the academic student community. Investigations by bodies such as the National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1992) and the Business-Higher Education Round Table (*Courier Mail* 26 Sept. 1993) reveal that university graduates require much better skills in communication in order to succeed in the employment sector. With a wider focus, consistent findings of global research are that 'communication skills are the least developed of any major category of skills' (LaBar 1994)

Clearly, then, there is a need to develop communication skills. The fundamental issue which academics face is which skills are to be developed. (Smith, Wolstencroft & Southern 1989) The National Board of Employment, Education and Training (1992, p.16) suggest that interpersonal skills, presentation skills and oral communication skills are the most important. The literature which comments on skills requirements from an industry perspective is relatively consistent with the NBEET findings. Hissong (1993) places importance on interpersonal skills, and Stevens and Stevens (1994) on written communication. Bednar and Olney (1987), Hauge (1992) and Wallace (1994) support these findings, but extend them to include oral communication and problem solving. Kane (1993) build on the skill requirements with the addition of team skills, and Braham (1992) further includes leadership and communicating through electronic mediums. LaBar (1994) places particular emphasis on development of communication and management skills. While there may be some variance in the specific skills requirements, the common theme is that there are generic communication skills - such as those identified - required of new graduates across professional and disciplinary contexts.

While there is consensus that graduates are competent in technical knowledge, there is agreement that individuals will require additional training in human relations skills. (*Personnel Journal*, 1994, p.17) Howell & Shaughnessy (1993) assert that 'people skills' are equally, if not more important than technical skills. Kane's (1993) study of MBA graduates reveals that interpersonal skills are considered primary to job effectiveness, followed by technical skills.

Developing Competency through Technology and Tradition - the University of Southern Queensland Experience

As part of the undergraduate degree structure, the University of Southern Queensland has incorporated a core curriculum. The curriculum, which contains three components - communication skills, computing and information technology skills, and Australia in its region - is provided to both internal and external students.

The unit 'Communication and Scholarship' fulfils the communication skills component of the core curriculum. This unit aims to develop in students a knowledge of the process of communication together with a range of transferable communication skills. In other words, the unit aims to develop competent communicators. This takes place in a unit with a particularly large enrolment - currently some 2,500 students yearly - with a cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural student community, comprised of both genders across varying age groups.

The communication skills addressed in the unit include developing and adapting written, oral and nonverbal communication appropriate to particular audiences, critical thinking, listening, reading, notetaking, the identification and minimisation of barriers to communication, group participation and communication, as well as skills in planning and research. Indeed, this range of communication skills reflects the emphases of the literature previously cited. Further, as a recent University review of the core curriculum reveals, there is consensus across the University that these communication skills are central to academic and professional practice.

The philosophy that underpins the teaching of Communication and Scholarship is that communication (and therefore teaching and learning) is a transactional process. The educational experiences created for students are as diverse as the students themselves. This is crucial to facilitating active learning, and develops the range of skills individuals required in order to succeed and advance personally and professionally.

Instructors draw on the strengths of well established methods, with a blend of newer approaches. The lecture, for example, ranges from the traditional approach to the mini lecture. The traditional lecture provides students with an important role-model of a formal, complete, multidimensional oral presentation where material is tailored for a specific audience and arguments are substantiated by considerable evidence. This traditional approach is then also used as a framework by which students evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of one-way communication. The mini lecture approach encourages greater levels of active learning by complementing multidimensional lecture material with participatory discussion, activity, written exercises, brainstorming, and summary. The format is varied so that students gain experiences working as an individual or in pairs and teams. At other times, the lecture format includes instructor modelling of specific communication skills interspersed by individual assessment and discussion in pairs/small groups. Some lectures are solely structured around student-generated questions and discussion.

Small group learning offers experiences in working and communicating in a team. This takes place in a rich environment where students learn from each other and become competent in communicating with diverse audiences. Within these settings, a range of instructional strategies are used - from teacher modelling to peer instruction and evaluation. Particular emphasis is placed on developing student communication skills through consistent application. Sessions are designed to foster student responsibility for learning, and to encourage student involvement in, contributions to, and direction of, the learning experience.

Multimedia materials are essential to the unit, for they engender energy and participation, and demonstrate relevance of the unit. An introductory video was produced to demonstrate the importance of study in communication and focus on common student needs across disciplinary boundaries. Current and past students, academics, and representatives from across industry groups were all involved in planning and production. Evaluations of the video indicate that the students particularly valued the frank discussion provided by industry professionals.

Communication technology is used to involve distance learners in the unit. Telephone tutorials and e-mail discussion groups foster greater student responsibility for interaction and participation in the learning process. Internal (and visiting external) students have access to interactive, self-paced computing programs to develop research skills, particularly in the use of CD-ROM technology.

Our goal is to ensure that teaching/learning moves beyond action to transaction. This requires a shift from activity as a means of involvement to a focus on understanding and interacting with the people. Indeed, 'The foundation of effective communications is a *community* of people who hold certain understandings in common.' (Johnson 1994, p.666) We believe that, 'Effective communication skills training begins when people are encouraged and given the opportunity to relate to one another in meaningful ways'. (Elmes and Costello 1992, p.427)

We consider that technology but facilitates this process - it cannot totally achieve it. To communicate - to learn - is to construct and share meaning with another person, to move in directions which are not constrained by predetermined frameworks or systems. As Mona Sarkis states: 'It should be quite clear that no meaningful communication - in the sense of a true exchange of ideas, thoughts, opinions, or discussion (where one interlocutor might suddenly lead the conversation into an unexpected direction due to his partner's response) - can never emerge from a programmed technology. What we get instead is a simple alternation, based on the rules set by the programmer.' (Sarkis 1993)

Conclusion

In order to effectively improve communication competency, specific educational experiences must be designed to involve students in active learning and application of transferable communication skills. To successfully achieve this requires a multifaceted approach to teaching and learning, framed from a communication perspective. While technology plays an important part in this process, it is but a part of the ultimate blend required in the development of individual competency.

The core communication unit at the University of Southern Queensland is an example of a program specifically designed to enhance communication competency through active learning. The unit successfully employs a blending of tradition and technology in involving instructors and students alike in the process of negotiation, creation and sharing of meaning.

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