Field Project for Business Communications: Warm Welcome to the Real World!
Teaching Notes and Project Outline

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Abstract

The necessity for the business classroom teacher to effect, simulate, and ensconce the students into a real business environment prompted the creation of this field project used in a business communications class. The project is also applicable to other business disciplines. The paper sets up the rationale for the project, provides teaching notes, and a detailed outline of the field project. The learning outcomes meet multiple course objectives for research, writing, verbal, and non-verbal business communication skills. Built into the project are professional experiences in networking and the development of interpersonal skills. A grading rubric is included that may be used to demonstrate outcomes for the Accrediting Association of Collegiate Schools of Business and measurement of learning outcome for the assurance of learning goal.

Introduction

The latest wave of inventions for pedagogical advancement in the teaching of undergraduate business courses is the experiential connection for students to the outside business world. This mirrors graduate business schools, which often require experience infield before admission to their program. Many undergraduate programs are also eschewing the heavy upfront emphasis on theory and putting students early on into practical application scenarios. While theory must not be abandoned altogether, the trend is obvious. The objective is to place the students not in simulations of the real world, but into an actual real world work environment. The focus is to help students learn concepts in context and teach the written, verbal, and non-verbal business communication skills needed to execute those concepts. Colleges of Business are teaming up with for- profit and not- for- profit businesses and putting students on job sites from day one. Professors are doing everything with students from building golf courses to managing million dollar portfolios.

The prevailing attitude is that introducing visceral experiences initially makes the teaching of theory more meaningful and possibly more palatable. It may be a concept that helps eliminate the sophomoric question or unspoken attitude about how all this relates to my life. This proposed new classroom environment calls for a different way of seeing traditional assignments. Just as the *Writing Across the Curriculum Movement* of the late 80's is now an entrenched concept on most college campuses, I suspect that *Working Across the Curriculum* may be the next trend to emerge. Furthermore, because of the media attention focused on figures like David Miller, who is on the move for higher educations reform, I believe it will not take as long to be realized as the writing movement.

This paper details a transition field project that provides the student hands-on practice with skills that students need to perform business communication functions successfully. The project accomplishes more than one course objective and provides the exercises for the development of multiple skills in research, writing, interpersonal, and networking experience. The exposure to the business environment serves to provide the students a close view of life in their chosen career field.

This outline also includes rubrics for teaching and grading that may meet the Accreditation Association for Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) outcome measures. The project concludes with the presentation of a formal long report in *American Psychological Association* (APA) format. It challenges students to venture into the real world; and it forces them to make some commitment to a career choice. They are forced to think and act professionally and to be pro-active in finding and linking to a practicing professional in the employment field of their choice. Part of the focus is to assist students to begin the process of business networking while they are still assigned to the classroom.

The project can be a final exam, introduced mid-way through a 15-week semester to allow students time to make an appointment with a suitable subject. The project can also be broken down into components and parts assigned throughout the semester. It is possible to form teams in the class and use the professional interview as discussion material for a team project. Teams could, for example, discuss their interviews, and provide feedback to the instructor by submitting team minutes of the session.

I constantly talk to my Business Communications classes about professional attitudes and the necessity of professional standards in all business communications. One student last semester, having all he could stand of being so challenged about professionalism for a career, declared that he just wanted a "job" after all, maybe as a sheriff's deputy, so he could ride around in a car and help people. I smiled to myself and told him that he could interview a sheriff's deputy and complete the project, since it was too late to drop the course. He lined-up a connection and spent two weeks riding in a squad car. You can guess the results. He came back after the experience declaring how much writing was a part of the officer's job responsibility, how demanding the standards were for accuracy, and how many time he heard the word professional conduct. This student's epiphany produced awareness to the relevance of what was happening in the class discussions. Wow, what a difference the real world can make in attitude.

 The surveys taken from the students, following this project experience, paint a clear picture. First, students initially see it as "hard" and there is trepidation and mild resentment because they are challenged to go outside their comfort zone. They need to be encouraged and directed. I am careful not to provide the specific leads, but I provide specific ideas for developing the leads. There is much opportunity to talk one-on-one about career choice. Students, who use this project at its highest and best level, are offered internships by the companies they interview, some have found full-time employment as a result of the project connections, some have completely change their

career track and majors as a result of the experience. A larger number have refined and narrowed down their career choice as they discover more about the industry and the profession.

The following guide provides the instructional methods for the Field Project and functions as a handout for students.

Professional Portfolio Presentation

Interview a practicing professional, not a relative, or a person on campus. Ideally, this individual would hold a career position you intend to pursue. Select an individual who— occasionally or as a routine part of their duties— formally writes for a specific audience for a variety of specific purposes. When you make the appointment, ask for five samples of writing, which he/she considers representative samples of the work required in their position.

1. Set up a mutually agreeable time to interview the person. Be clear about your expectation and be specific about what you require.

2. Before you go to the appointment, **research the industry** and include in your completed report the following information:

- Web site reviews of other similar corporations within the industry: image, design, information, focus, themes, etc.
- Financial Data on relation of the industry to the National Economy
- Structure/Relationship of the Industry in terms of Globalization
- Industry information in terms of sector of the economy
- Legal and Ethical Issues in the Industry
- Data on technology and the industry
- Industry history on diversity challenges
- Typical (or atypical) pattern of management, i.e. bureaucratic or team environment

In the formal report, this research information is documented according to APA guidelines.

3. **Research information about the company/corporation**, before you go to the interview, and include in your report the following information from your research and the interview:

Profile the Corporation:

- Statement (formal or informal) of corporation's philosophy <u>or</u> mission statement
- Discuss Chain-of-Command within the corporation; include a diagram, if available.
- Discuss how communication flows within the corporation, may add chart
- Physical Plant – size – location(s) include any interesting facts
- Number of Employees – Levels of employees
- Total Operating Budget (or some financial figure which is a matter of record)
- Other – Information of Interest

This information is documented, where appropriate, according to APA guidelines; note the APA pattern for documenting personal communication.

Profile the Interviewee:

- Give Title and Formal job description / indicate the interviewee on the chain of command
- List and Evaluate the duties (areas of responsibility) of the interviewee
- Assess Business Etiquette and Personal Appearance:

  1. Dress
  2. Body Language – Non-verbal Messages
  3. Signs of Confidence/Nervousness/Notes
  4. Symbols of Power, Success, Competition
  5. Office configuration and where you sit in relationship to Interviewee

4. Discover the Facts:

- Ask for current copy of their résumé, if available, or ask for a short run-down of their job history.
- Note how much writing is a part of their job function.
- Learn what preparation they had for writing: high school, college, workshops, and/or training.
- Find out what they believe is the best preparation for writing in the business world and their profession.
- Request the individual to share what is most challenging about the kind of writing they do, and what is rewarding.

- Explain methods they use to "think outside the box." Ask to what extent they can rely on forms for their communication.
- Ask for and use, as part of the summary for this project, any special message the interviewee has for writing in the business world.
- List Professional Associations to which they belong and all the professional publications they read for business. Ask how much of their time is spent in reading for their work and how much time the professional activities require.

5. Questions to Use for Discussion

- How did you locate your current position? (Network, etc.)
- How did you prepare for your job interview?
- Is your undergraduate degree related to your current position?
- What skills do you have that help you the most?
- What skills do you not have that would help you in your career?
- How often are you evaluated in your position and how are you evaluated?
- How much crisis management is involved in your work/writing?

6. Use the following guidelines in the interview

- Be prompt to arrive and prompt to exit
- Shake hands and wait to be asked to take a chair
- Restate your purpose, briefly.
- Be Organized.
- Use a notebook, which looks professional, with all the questions written out – leave room to make notes or record responses.
- Begin by establishing a rapport with the interviewee:

  Specifically – set the context for the interview: "I am here to discover/learn some personal strategies you use in writing and information about your career."

- Do not disagree or hold forth your own opinions.
- Let the expert do the talking.
- Be prepared – know the person, know something about the person, i.e.: background, length of the time with corporation, personal likes or dislikes. Research or look for clues in office.
- Respect the interviewee's time limit. Stop within the time frame you set-up when you made the appointment.
- Check your understanding of what the interviewee is saying by occasionally paraphrasing the point the speaker is making.

7. Critique each writing sample.   Use terminology from the text and from class discussion:

- Identify the form of the Communication (sales letter, inquiry letter, etc.)
- Note the subject of correspondence
- Summarize the content briefly
- State the Occasion/Audience/Setting
- Give the Purpose: To Evoke, Persuade, Inform, etc. and give examples of that specific language
- Describe the Method of introduction/Inductive, Deductive and why
- Identify what specific language is used to set tone
- Analyze the Conclusion: Logical or Psychological
- Evaluate the Organization – use specifics from text material to explain
- Determine the level of Language Usage/denote specific words
- Note the specifics of Style (courtesy and tact, the "you" attitude)
- Read for Grammar and Mechanically errors
- Discuss Format: use of bullets, white space, paragraphing (Note letterhead or other such features of format)
- Write an Overall Impression: Effectiveness
- Explain what is done well and what and how the communications could improve

8. Include your evaluation of the following: (do not write in first person)

- Career opportunity/Network opportunities
- Required education and experience
- Role of communication
- Reaction to the interview

9. Make a professional presentation.

Present the material in a professional manner, and organize all the material in a formal long report for business. All parts typed on good bond and presented in a plain manila folder. All parts of the report must follow the *American Psychological Association Style Manual* guidelines for the long report. A letter of transmittal should accompany this long report. Address the letter to the person directly responsible for assigning the project. The report should have a table of contents, and the pattern for organization is title page, letter of transmittal, contents page, executive summary, body of report with internal citations and the reference list.

Make generous use of headings throughout the report. The body of the report is the research on the industry, the corporation, the information you gather from the interviewee, the collection of the five samples of writing, and the critiques you write. In the critiques, you must include the business terminology that you have learned in the class, see the textbook for a refresher. The sample writings are in a special section, if you do not scan the documents into the report, you may number by hand and make the match to the table of contents. The critique of the business communication sample should follow directly the sample of business communication. Remember all writing and speaking has a beginning, middle, and an end. You may not just begin and you may not just stop!

The thank-you letter and addressed envelope must be approved before mailing. You are responsible for mailing. A copy of the approved thank-you letter should be included in the report as a last item.

This information is a guide for you and the assembling of the report information requires thinking about how to present and how to write a formal long report to your advantage.

<p align="center">Plan ahead and enjoy this project!</p>

Appendix: Evaluation Sheet

Field Project for Business Communications   460 points

5%	Selection of Career Area	20 points	_____

- Follow Directions
- Advance Research

10%	Elements of the Long Report	40 points	_____

- Letter of Transmittal
- Thank-you letter
- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion

10%	Research and Organization of Material	40 points	_____

- Internal Citations
- Reference List
- Headings
- Title Page
- Contents Page

15%	Level of Professional Presentation	60 points	_____

- Management of Material
- Use of Research Material

10%	Format	40 points	_____

- APA Format
- Good Bond Paper/Manila Folder

20%	Grammar/Mechanics/Style	80 points	_____
40%	Critique of Writing Sample	160 points	_____
5%	Evaluation of Project	20 points	_____