

A Longitudinal Development Report on a Business Communication Course in Australia

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Abstract

Business Communication has been taught to students studying an undergraduate degree in computing at Charles Sturt University, Australia since the degree was introduced over 15 years ago. The importance of developing soft skills in a technical degree has been maintained and strengthened with several strategic changes in curricula and teaching-learning methods. The subject is taught to both domestic and international student audiences. This paper outlines the changes in how Business Communication has been taught utilising several strategies, adjustments made through the years with feedback from employers and faculty. It also outlines the evolving classroom activity - from a basic lecture-tutorial model to one that incorporates authentic learning experiences and strategic support for those whose first language is not English. The longitudinal view of the subject will assist many others developing a similar subject to understand the complexities of community demand, employer requests and meeting the needs of academia.

Introduction

Charles Sturt University is a regional multi-campus university located in six cities in New South Wales, Australia. The university runs its courses in both on campus and distance education modes. Of the 44,000 students, about 42% of its student population study online (Bedwell, 2018). Business Communication in the undergraduate Information Technology and Computing course was first offered in 2002 following a course review. This initial offering of the subject in 2004 was the recognition of information as a critical resource in a technological age and the need for information to be collected and effectively disseminated. The subject's (may be called unit in other universities) purpose was to demonstrate techniques to gather information and to teach the variety of approaches to present information on the Internet. The impetus to supply communication skills to business and information technology students came from multiple commentators as a preparation for the upcoming activities from electronic commerce (Abell & Lim, 1996; Lymer, Johnson, & Baldwin-Morgan, 1997; Poon & Swatman, 1997). The approaches included different writing styles as well as an online presentation mode. Hypertext Marked-up Language (HTML) was selected as the authoring language to present information on the World Wide Web. Strategies included exposing students to various asynchronous and synchronous communication methods as proposed by Mabrito (2006). Various hypermedia tools as well as the study of intellectual property and information security formed the subject. The subject is compulsory study for the award of an undergraduate Information Technology degree. It consisted of 14 teaching weeks in the dual semester system and moved to the trimester which has 12 teaching weeks from 2010.

The First Online Learning Environment

The university delivered to distance education students using a paper-based Subject Outline, Subject Guide, and a book of Readings in a study pack as outlined by Garrison (1993). Some subjects may have included a CD-ROM. This pre-packaged self-instructional material became the primary method of distance education in the 1990s. In 2008, Charles Sturt University introduced CSU Interact, a

learning management system (LMS) based on the open source Sakai framework, a worldwide collection of higher education institutions using the community source model of software development. The change and innovation strategies used by the university is based on the work of Kotter & Cohen cited in Uys (2010). The university recorded 61.5% of students enrolled via online mode (Krivokapic-Skoko & Sappey, 2012). The university's leadership commenced an aggressive transition into the paperless environment over the next two years. The subject had to prioritise what analogue-based technology it would retain. They were mainly readings that had to be scanned into the Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) and the need for a host location to make them accessible. There was also the issue of copyright control and permissions obtained to changeover to a new mode of distribution. As this subject used a textbook, publishers were contacted for an online edition. These were the early days of online academic material. The impact of *Kirtsaeng v. John Wiley* in 2016 ("*Kirtsaeng v. John Wiley & Sons*," 2019) saw the move to global pricing for textbooks by Australian book distributors. This rapid rise in pricing of textbooks impacted the cost of studies (Cook, 2016; Lines, 2017). The pace to move to electronic resources seemed the way forward. Multiple standards were emerging at that time and this subject had an early trial of a commercial publisher product called MindTap in 2013. This was reported in an early study (Chan & Prasad, 2014). National Internet filtering/censorship became an issue in some countries where distance education students studied online (Faris & Villeneuve, 2008). Publishers also had their own territory of sale restrictions. The good relationship between the subject convenor and publisher solved many of these early issues utilising resources that were classified as Open Educational Resources (McGreal, 2012).

In 2008 the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd made a National Apology to the Stolen Generations. This event of national significance was reported by Cuthbert & Quartly (2013). Wright (2018) recalled the moment that "the Prime Minister reached across to the Leader of the Opposition and shook his hand. Every member of the House of Representatives present rose and supported the motion. Parliament had apologised and tears flowed. This awareness of Indigenous Australian created the need for all Australians to understand them better in communication and in culture." Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt (2012) documented the raising questions about pedagogical approach and challenges the primary educational goal. Modules of study in Indigenous communication were discussed for this subject, drawn up with Indigenous academic staff participation, and approved by the University's Indigenous Board of Studies. One of the most important lessons learnt was about the aboriginal lack of eye contact when spoken to. This was a custom and gesture of respect. In western society, averting gaze can be viewed as being dishonest, rude, or showing lack of interest Queensland (2013). Trial modules in Indigenous Communication were written and taught in 2009. It was fully integrated in the subject in 2011. This was a time to work with permissions and use of copyright of aboriginal images and material in an electronic format. Ongoing consultations and requests filled the "to-do" sheet. In the second year of running this topic, faculty management had decided to create a new subject dealing with this topic and the material was transferred over to the new subject. This move was in line with "the growing frustration with the difficulty of questioning traditional/cultural/community forms and sources of Indigenous authority pivots around the Indigenous political and scholarly allegiance to conceptualisations of Indigenous worldview as a counter-narrative to the Western (Nakata et al., 2012). One of the most rewarding ways of moving forward towards understanding, acceptance and inclusion of actual teaching material was to spend time with the Indigenous Elders listening to them. At times, these lasted hours – every one of them well spent.

Business and Technical Communication Ethics

The establishment of the online environment progressed in the economy and software tools became more powerful in crafting and designing web pages. A subsequent course review in 2009 introduced changes that focused on students acquiring the skills of delivering good quality messages. Fundamental concepts of the communication process as well as improving general writing skills so that students would be able to write online memos, letters and produce technical reports. Interpersonal skills and intrapersonal bases of effective written communication such as audience awareness, sender credibility, self-concept, empathy, and assertiveness were introduced. The proliferation of web sites and information dissemination meant that the general public were inundated with information. The term “information explosion” reflected the rapid amount of published data and the effects of this abundance became overwhelming (Kadiri & Adetora, 2012). The review panel introduced studies in ethical business communication in the review of 2011, and strategies in presenting information communication technology for effective communication become centre stage. Samples included crafting messages for websites and online captioning. At this review, the web programming (HTML) component of this subject was moved to another subject.

Commercial Teaching Partners

Australian universities expanded into the private sector with the appointment of commercial education providers. The change in Australian government policies between 2007-2009 also broadened access to publicly-funded subsidised student loans, which has resulted in the emergence of small and large private higher education providers and consortiums offering language, vocational and higher education courses (Bennett, Nair, & Shah, 2012). As the university did not have campuses in the cities, a commercial partner which ran undergraduate and postgraduate courses for international students in the metropolitan Australian cities was appointed (Andrews, 2014). The challenge of dealing with an international cohort and a domestic cohort has been highlighted by many commentators. Studies conducted by the Grattan Institute reflect a difference in passing rates (Norton, 2019). The first item that haunted subject developers was the literacy level of the new audience group: mainly non-English speakers. This was emphasised by many commentators such as (Coley, 1999; Sawir, 2005). International students being admitted into the course may not have the level expected of them, and this was highlighted by Worthington, O'Neill, & Selvaratnam (2019). The change in teaching style from a constructivist combined with real world problem-solving teaching style had to change to a situational methodology. Assignments had to be changed to an instructional scaffolding style as proposed by Grady (2006). Supplementing this method, we invited speakers to join in the teaching of the class providing variety and different insights. Stephanie Kelly of North Carolina A&T State University taught the class remotely and presented views on intercultural communication. Mary Ellen Guffey, a Business Communication textbook author presented views on gender neutrality and how it affects both written and spoken formats in 2014. These were very well received by Australian students, but international students could not relate to these concepts as they were just looking towards their local lecturer on campus. To encourage English as a Second/Foreign Language students, a combined class via video conferencing was organised in 2016 with the class of Associate Professor Bistra Vassileva in the University of Economics in Varna, Bulgaria. Students from both sides had English as their second or third language. Such a session was awkward for both sides and the participants were shy and fearful of making mistakes. Adjustment factors proposed by Andrade (2016) would be best put in place ahead of such sessions. These factors describe the “fit between students and the academic environment” as mentioned by Ramsay,

Barker, & Jones (1999). Learning processes such as the way in which individuals acquire knowledge and skills, which is hampered by emotions, moods, and feelings (Boekaerts, 1993). However, these time-consuming processes would not have allowed satisfactory progress to meet the learning objectives of the subject in a 12-teaching semester. In 2018, Dana Loewy, another author and specialist was invited for a question-and-answer session with the students. Questions were collected from students and forwarded ahead to the speaker. A mixed cohort of first language speakers and international students also complicated the experience. Moreover, students in regional and rural locations presented questions that were of little or no interest to international students and vice-versa. International students were more focussed on assessment, in particular the exam (Wong, 2004).

Mobile Learning

The introduction of MP3 players and the introduction of the Apple iPod in 2001 presented an opportunity that academics were dreaming of: the ability to *push* information to students during their down time such as waiting for the bus or train, travelling passively in public transport or parents waiting for their children in their cars at school dismissal time. These few minutes of *stolen* time could be used for learning. Three to five minute podcasts were produced to alleviate student anxiety in various topics as they prepared to attend university classes (Chan & Lee, 2005). The content of Business Communication was suited for such audio only podcasts as they travelled to and from the university or their places of work (Chan, Lee, & McLoughlin, 2006). Student-generated podcasts for dissemination (Lee, McLoughlin, & Chan, 2008) and advanced peer learning where students were free to share their thoughts about various learning problems and issues anonymously were produced (Lee et al., 2008). Macdonald, Chiu, & Chiu (2011) supported mobile learning content increased convenience and flexibility. In 2017, mobile learning in the subject moved from MP3 to MP4 as video was found to be the more effective means of presenting content related to business communication. Similar success was replicated and reported by many others (Moura & Carvalho, 2008; Taylor, 2010) and contributed to the efficacy of the flipped classroom (Vaughan, 2014). Certain topics such as non-verbal communication and ethics in business communication are appropriate to be taught in the flipped classroom model. The course included students presenting their work in MP4 video format beginning in 2019. This led to unexpected learning advantages which are described later in this paper.

Changing Online Learning Management System

The change in Learning Management System from Sakai-based Open Source Learning Management System (LMS) to the commercial Blackboard system in 2015 presented a number of problems for the subject. Embedded HTML resources had to be manually changed over: these included subject study notes, web links and even embedded YouTube videos. Rather than transitioning into the new LMS directly, the materials were temporarily hosted in Google Docs format. The definite move to cloud storage (McDonald, 2010; O'Mara, Meredig, & Michel, 2016) presented several advantages: the material could be accessed in a very short time frame by students rather than waiting for technical assistants to re-code material into the new LMS Content template. This also reduced as system tweaking was underway and updates were being implemented. These documents in the Google Drive platform could also be easily shared with casual lecturers and tutors who have not been issued a university login and industry experts who could not log into an LMS yet. All authorised users can view, evaluate, and advise on readings and case materials. The last example is a good reason why materials should have been hosted in the cloud without access interruption (Masud & Huang, 2012),

while the new system was being setup and the LMS was being studied and updated by the subject convenor. Teaching staff would also be able to experiment and learn the strengths and weaknesses of the new system which allowed educational material presentation in a manner that was not available on the earlier Sakai platform. This engagement was most important for the subject as for the first time, as industry professionals were invited to send in comments. This led to a number of changes in the subject: one of which was to have a floating topic system so that new issues in communications could be inserted into the subject as quickly as possible. Modules would also be stackable so that one could be taken out and taught as an independent professional development module. Good examples of these include ethics in communication, intercultural communication and research-to-write. This was also a need within the system being an online education provider with a private commercial teaching partner, educational teaching materials are required to be finalised three to four months before the actual teaching session starts.

Oral Presentation Skills Via MP4

The ability to present verbally in the Information Communication Industry has always been important in the engagement with employers and stakeholders. Campbell, Mothersbaugh, Brammer, & Taylor (2001) states that the mastery of oral presentation skills is important in professional life. Boud & Falchikov (2006) supports this by stating that oral presentation is the key competency skill for life-long learning in general and higher education. Graduate surveys with employers responded that while our Information Technology graduates were technically competent at their tasks, they did not acquire the skill of effective oral presentation in front of their peers or customers. As the larger number of our students are online students, these 'soft skills' were highlighted as important as technical skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Kenkel, 2011). In 2018, a trial began with a component of an assignment that required students to produce a MP4 file. A case study usually involved management requesting the participant to produce a short voice-over-PowerPoint presentation introducing or explaining a certain product or procedure to a target audience. Based on the steps presented by De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen (2009), this authentic learning activity presented an opportunity in learning that most students regarded as very useful. Students in this subject found out that they have to think and plan ahead, a skill that they picked up in this subject. Other important skills picked up in the process included not reading every word on each slide, to the provision and appropriate use of graphics and charts to convey visual meaning. This activity is reinforced in the following subject of managing customer support. International students learnt that auto-translation using Google Translate was not the best tool to prepare a slide as many words would be translated "out of context." As the lecturer was the same for both subjects, the presentation skill in almost all students improved tremendously in a space of four months, between the first and the second subject. The same result of "presentation effectiveness" as observed by Alshare & Hindi (2002) was replicated in this subject's task. The development of this skill should be encouraged and supported when millennial students are more dependent on written social media for communication among their peers (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014; Manago & Vaughn, 2015).

Contract Cheating, Use of Data Analytics and Six-Step Guidance

The subject requires students to submit research reports as assignments. In April 2019, the Australian Federal Department of Education drafted legislation that made contract cheating an offence (Panel, 2019). Universities were called to put in measures to ensure that the student assignments submitted were difficult to be contracted out to third parties. The assessable components (Harper et al., 2018; Rogerson, 2017) were taken into consideration and assessments

incorporating elements recommended by Bretag et al. (2018) were put in place over a year. Assignments were scaffolded and linked with some essential elements of work released seven days before due date. This short time frame allowed all students to work on a realistic industry time frame and narrowed the window making outsourcing to contract writers not viable to work on or present themselves with a very expensive option. Student data analytics available on Blackboard LMS were viewed (Figure 1) and analysed for any inconsistencies in student time-use of resources (Reyes, 2015). The use of the Journal tool in Blackboard was appropriate as it also allowed the instructor to provide and encourage step-by-step guidance along the way. The six-steps outlined by Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens (2008) was used effectively to help students in their task. In this way, the journey in the writing of the report was more important than the final presentation of the final product. More marks were awarded for the process rather than the end product. This further reduced the viability of the work being outsourced.

Student Activity by Item in the Course

Item Name And Type	Total Time Spent in Hours	Number of Times Accessed	Initial Access Date/Time
1.Site Access & Introduction Test	0.77	4	7 Mar 2019 3:52 pm
2.Report Preparation Journals	1.84	19	21 Mar 2019 5:25 pm
3.Structured Report Journals	0.65	10	29 Mar 2019 8:43 am
4.Ethical & Non-Verbal Comm Journals	1.65	7	4 May 2019 10:12 am
Assignment 1 due 14 Mar Content Folder	0.02	7	6 Mar 2019 3:35 pm
Assignment 2 due 27 Mar Content Folder	0.41	29	21 Mar 2019 5:25 pm
Assignment 3 due 10 Apr Content Folder	0.50	12	22 Mar 2019 12:23 pm
Assignment 4 due 13 May Content Folder	1.36	12	4 May 2019 10:12 am

Figure 1. A sample of data analytics showing a student accesses in developing an assignment.

Future Work: Plug-and-Play Modules for Different Learning Styles

Popular subjects are taught up to three times a year in the current university trimester system and new assignment materials have to be generated each session. One good example is supporting different learner styles. In 2018, the audience of this subject catered to approximately 45% first language speakers and 55% non-English speaking background (NESB) students. However, their pattern of enrolment varies with more NESB students enrolled in the second and third sessions. Some very interesting information about user attention spans, their interactivity (Figure 2) and capturing of search keywords by viewers were collected in an experiment with Videohop (Australia), a commercial product that auto-subtitles a video-over-PowerPoint presentation, auto-indexes for a search and also generates chapters automatically. This software allows the owner to gather other useful information such as interactivity averages and the number of downloads and views. Initial

reviews showed that the NESB cohort did not view videos longer than 15 minutes. Search keywords were also captured as this highlighted the students' interest in reviewing these sections. There is also a planned future study into how videos could be produced in parts that meet the search criteria of viewers. Hopefully, this will encourage greater and more rewarding student interaction and provide a more appropriate learning experience that caters to individual learning preferences.

Viewer Statistics

Total unique views:	185
Play time average:	11:22 (34.54%)
Play time total:	35:04:32
Interactive time average:	12:18 (37.36%)
Interactive time total:	37:56:01
File downloads (for offline viewing):	9

Figure 2. Useful viewer statistics from Videohop portal.

With Australia's uptake of the National Broadband Network, the company rolling out the nationwide infrastructure reported that 5.2 million homes and business are connected compared to 3.8 million in April 2018. The same report also mentions that 9.2 million homes and businesses are able to connect compared to 6.6 million in April 2018 (NBN, 2019). This indicates that future development of the subject could move toward streaming delivery of selected educational materials for the subject, catering to different groups of learners. The subject has also been collecting statistics on electronic book (eBook) uptake by students of this subject. At the present moment, the fifth year of data collection is in progress. With reading and viewing material data, resources can be better positioned into the development of a multi-faceted approach that engages with the selected experience desired by the learner.

Conclusion

The number of initiatives carried out in the last fifteen years of this subject has brought about a subject that could be adapted very quickly to change with learning management systems. At times, this demand comes through feedback from potential employers and the community. The current subject is also able to address oral presentation deficiencies (especially for online students) and offers a subject with oral presentation capabilities in an authentic learning environment. The use and analysis of data analytics tools have provided a positive pathway into reducing the possibility of the written assignment being outsourced to contract cheating organisations. The subject has been positioned to offer more variety in learning styles when higher broadband services becomes available. The use of the new software tool, Videohop has opened up an avenue to understand

student video viewing patterns and logged search words will be the way forward to provide increased positive learning experiences.

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