

## **Creating Significant Learning Experiences in the Business Communication Classroom**

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“Last fall, when I signed up for Business Communication, I thought I would get nothing out of the class. I falsely believed that because I was a second-semester senior with a job, I could not possibly learn anything more about communication.”

“This class is somehow similar to marketing in my mind. . . . Before the class began, I thought that marketing was only common sense. We didn’t really need to take a class to learn that.”

These are several quotations from students in my business communication course, and from speaking with colleagues over the years, I believe this is a common belief of many of our students and a challenge that many instructors must overcome to be successful in the business communication classroom. The purpose of this paper is thus threefold: to explain how to use active learning techniques to first persuade students that they do have more to learn about communication by observing people (and themselves) in action, to engage students in the learning process more fully so that they might learn more in the class, and to provide them practice in effective communication skills that they will hopefully take with them into their careers. A final goal of the course discussed in this paper was to show students how the concepts and skills that we were learning in the class were relevant to their career success.

The student quotations indicate that students often believe that they have excellent communication skills and thus are not in need of working on their improvement. However, as many of us understand, learning to communicate effectively is a lifelong process. One of the primary challenges of teaching it seemed to me was to increase students’ self-awareness of the quality of their communication skills. My suspicions about students’ lack of accurate perceptions of their communication abilities was supported by the initial results of a research program that I undertook with a colleague to study intercultural group communication. Our first step was to gather student attitudes about their teamwork skills using a survey instrument. The results of that survey indicated that students consistently believed themselves to be high contributors to group discussions and as consistently acting as leaders in groups (Walker & Aritz, 2006). However, as a second part of that study, we also videotaped the team discussions for which we gathered the survey data and transcribed them, and our analysis found that their actual contributions to the discussion did not mirror the survey results (Walker & Aritz, 2006). These studies and the contradiction they revealed cemented for me the problem with student accuracy regarding their perceptions of their communication skills.

It is difficult to explain why this discrepancy between self-perception and actual skills exist, and that is not the purpose of this paper. Instead, it is to suggest ways to help students develop more accurate perceptions of their communication skills so that they might have the opportunity to improve those skills. More precisely, the purpose of this paper is to discuss my approach to helping students develop what Gudykunst (2005) calls “mindfulness”. But before that could happen, certain contextual problems of the classroom environment had to be dealt with, using some of the principles of his anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication. The paper will then discuss how active learning principles and methods can be used in the classroom to help students learn “mindful” communication practices and will provide student reactions to their experience to help show their progress toward this goal.

## **Mindfulness**

According to Gudykunst (2005), much of the time when we communicate we are not highly aware of our behavior. Langer (1989) also made a similar observation that we communicate mindlessly or automatically. We do, however, pay sufficient attention to recall key words in the conversations that we have (Kitayama & Burstein, 1989). Thus, we can improve our conscious awareness of our communication to become more mindful. Langer (1989) argues that mindfulness involves “1) creation of new categories, 2) openness to new information, and 3) awareness of more than one perspective” (p. 62). Consequently, becoming more mindful not only enables us to become more aware of the quality of our own communication and thus more able to improve it, but it also enables us to become more aware of the potentially differing perspectives of others and thus to be better able to understand them and to communicate in meaningful ways with them.

Langer (1989) elaborates on these aspects of mindfulness. First, he contends that the ability to create new categories works against our natural tendency to categorize or to “eliminate the perception of differences” (p. 154). Being mindful involves making more distinctions and thus enables us to create new categories that are more specific to individuals and individual encounters. In other words, the more categories we use, the more personalized the information we use to make predictions about the behaviors of others (Gudykunst, 2005).

Mindfulness also involves being open to new information, which enables us to focus on the process that is occurring rather than just the outcomes of our interactions (Langer, 1989). According to Gudykunst (2005), when we focus on the outcomes of communication, we are more like to miss subtle cues that may lead to misunderstanding.

Finally, mindfulness involves the ability to understand the perspectives of others (Langer, 1989). When we are “mindless,” we tend to assume that others interpret our messages the way that we intend. When we are mindful, however, we are able to recognize that others may interpret our messages differently than we do. Being mindful thus enables us to better see the choices we have when communicating with others (Langer, 1989, 1997).

The goal of the course design presented here is to move students’ from a position of often being “mindless” about their communication to a place where they have the opportunity to become more “mindful.”

## Active Learning and the Importance of Reflection

Traditionally, “the majority of college teachers do not seem to have learning goals that go much beyond an understand-and-remember type of learning...In-depth, sustained discussions where students respond to other students as well as to the teacher are extremely rare” (Fink, 2003, p. xi). As many of us who teach communication know, research shows that lecturing has limited effectiveness in helping students retain information after a course is over, develop an ability to transfer knowledge to new situations, develop skills in thinking or problem solving, and achieve effective outcomes, such as motivation for additional learning or a change in attitude (Fink, 2003, p. 3). Courts and McInerney (1993) studied student attitudes about instruction and found that students were not self-directed learners, sensed they were not learning as much as they should, believe instructors do not care about them or about promoting their learning and interacting with them, and consequently, they do not engage energetically in their learning.

To solve these problems, according to Spence (2001), the role of the professor must change from being simply a teacher to that of becoming designers of learning experiences. Barr and Tagg (1995) echo this call, claiming that there needs to be a shift in the role of the teacher from being primarily lecturers to “faculty being primarily designers of learning methods and environments” (p. 18). Campbell and Smith (1997) also present a new paradigm for student learning in which knowledge is jointly constructed by students and faculty; the student is an active constructor, discoverer and transformer of knowledge; the faculty’s purpose moves from a classifier and sorter of students to that of developing student competencies and talents; and the context of learning moves from a competitive, individualistic one to cooperative learning in the classroom and the empowerment of students.

Fink (2003) proposes an integrated approach to learning, which means that having students engage in an experiential exercise becomes more potent when it is linked with reflective dialogue. Authentic assessment becomes even more meaningful when it is linked to opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment (Fink, 2003, p. xiii). According to Fink (2003), significant learning experiences have both a process and outcome dimension (p. 6). The process is characterized by engaged students with a high energy level, while the outcome is characterized by significant and lasting change and value in life (Fink, 2003, p. 7). Smith (1998) echoes this sentiment, arguing that we “only learn from activities that are interesting and comprehensible to us; in other words, activities that are satisfying. If this is not the case, only inefficient rote learning, or memorization, is available to us and forgetting is inevitable (87).

In constructing this “integrated approach to learning,” Fink (2003) builds upon Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning to create a new one. The first item in that taxonomy (as it is in Bloom’s) is foundational knowledge, which involves understanding and remembering information and ideas. The second is application, which involves the development of skills, thinking, and managing projects. The third is integration, which involves making connections between ideas, people, and different realms of life (school and work). The fourth is the human dimension, which involves learning about one’s self and others; the fifth is caring, which involves developing new feelings, interests, and values; and the sixth is learning how to learn, which involves becoming a better student, learning how to inquire and construct knowledge and becoming a self-directed

learner. (Fink, 2003, pp. 30-32). A self-directed learner needs to consider multiple and alternative ways of understanding the meaning of each experience and the key to this is critical reflection (Fink, 2003, p. 53). Without linking the process of learning through reflection, the activity does not lead to an enhanced capability to autodidaxy for the purpose of enhancing personal autonomy. (Autodidaxy means knowing how to learn what one needs to learn in life) (Fink, 2003, p. 54)

Through the use of this taxonomy, Fink (2003) believes that students will learn more and retain it if they learn how to apply the content, can see how it connects with other knowledge, understand the human implications of what they have learned, come to care about the subject, and about learning how to keep on learning (p. 57).

An important part of Fink's integrated course design is feedback. Fink says feedback should be frequent, immediate, discriminating (based on criteria), and delivered lovingly (2003, p. 83). Frequent feedback should occur in every class if possible or at least once a week. Immediate feedback should occur during the same class. This process also helps students to learn how to monitor their own progress. Good teachers also try to find ways to incorporate feedback from other students and experts, if possible, according to Fink. Feedback should involve a back-and-forth dialogue.

As for assessment, Fink claims it should be forward-looking, which means it should take into account how students will put their skills and knowledge into practice in the real world. Wiggins (1998, p. 22-24) suggests ways to create forward-looking assessment: 1) activities should be realistic 2) should require judgment and innovation 3) ask the student to do the subject 4) replicate or simulate the contexts in which they will use the subject 5) assess the student's ability to use a repertoire of knowledge and skills 6) allow opportunities for students to rehearse and get feedback.

Active learning is more effective and involves students doing things and thinking about the things they are doing (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p.2). These are experiences (which include doing and observing others) and reflection (reflection can be done in groups, too) and they should occur after students receive information. Reflection involves in-class discussions and writing papers. Another form would be asking students to reflect on the learning process itself. Instructors can, for example, have students write about critical incidents in class and their reactions to those incidents. To get students to read, they must know they will be held accountable. Ways to do that are to give in-class quizzes or to have an activity that draws on the information.

An extended form of reflective writing is the learning portfolio. These usually include a narrative that describes and explains the learning experience and an appendix with materials that illustrate and support the comments in the narrative. Fink also proposes the use of a process portfolio. In these students are asked to reflect and write about three considerations: 1) The content of the learning: What did you learn about the subject (about the content of the learning experience? 2) The context of the learning: How does your learning fit into the larger context of your life (work, social, etc.)? 3) The learning process: What have you learned about how you learn or how you could learn more effectively?

## **The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory**

Two challenges that I faced when instituting the active learning model described above were the problems of competitiveness and performance anxiety. The competitiveness problem was probably due to at least two factors: the individualistic nature of U.S. culture and a business school policy that required that the grade average for all courses be no higher than a “B”. Students also generally experienced some degree of performance anxiety about participating in activities that required them to perform and to potentially make mistakes in front of their peers. (This performance anxiety may have been enhanced by the first factor, competitiveness.) To decrease the competitiveness issue, none of the exercises or activities in the course were graded, although, students did receive points for participating in the activities. To deal with the anxiety issue, I used Gudykunst’s anxiety and uncertainty management (AUM) model of effective communication.

In this model, Gudykunst refers to the processes underlying our communication with people we do not know; he calls this process “communicating with strangers”. Interacting with strangers is characterized by anxiety and uncertainty, which can inhibit communication if they are not kept between minimum and maximum thresholds. Gudykunst’s theory has been modified over the years and includes a number of axioms aimed at predicting communication behavior, axioms which only hold true if anxiety and uncertainty are kept between those thresholds.

When designing my course, I relied upon several axioms from AUM. Axiom 13 proposes that “an increase in our tolerance for ambiguity will produce a decrease in our anxiety” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 298). To improve students’ tolerance of ambiguity, some exercises involved situations where students did not have clear directions on what the “correct answer” was. This put them in a position of trying to discover the answer for themselves, a situation that involves ambiguity and one which they will experience many times in the workplace.

Another principle used to help them to overcome their anxiety was Axiom 23: “An increase in the cooperative structure of the tasks on which we work with others will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 301). To institute this principle, I reminded students at the beginning of each exercise that the activity was intended to help them as a class to improve their communication knowledge and skills and over time, they became more confident as they learned that others in the course would not be unduly critical of their efforts. Many of the activities also involved small group work and cooperative - rather than competitive - tasks.

Finally, I relied upon Axiom 24., which states that “an increase in the normative and institutional support for communicating with others will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our confidence in predicting their behavior” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 301). Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) posits that the more verbal communication in which we engage with others, the less uncertainty we have about their behavior. In addition, URT also suggests that the greater the intimacy of our communication with others (e.g., nonsuperficial contact), the less uncertainty we have about them. Consequently, the regular and numerous in-class activities helped the students to become more comfortable performing in front

of each other as well as helped them to develop relationships with their classmates. A final consequence was that the students found the class to be engaging and even fun as one student said in his final learning portfolio, “Among all the classes I have taken [at] USC, I feel that BUAD 302 (this class) is one of the most quintessential, enriching and fun classes, which has created a deep impact on my future.”

Reducing anxiety and uncertainty leads to the development of the ability to practice mindfulness, according to Gudykunst (2005). “It follows that the more contact we have with others and the greater the quality of that contact, the more information we are able to collect about them and their groups and the less uncertainty we will experience” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 302). The use of reflection activities and principles from AUM was intended then to help to also develop mindfulness in the students.

### **Course Design**

In his final learning portfolio, one student summarized the basic structure of the class very clearly:

“The course was structured around Bloom’s Learning Theory, which divides thinking into six hierarchical categories: Knowledge, conceptual, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. For every topic that was covered throughout the semester, this theory was used in order for us (the students) to fully comprehend [it]. The process was composed of initially doing the reading assigned for a particular topic before class. . . . A quiz would take place. Following the quiz, we would have a discussion. . . [to gain] a deeper and better understanding of what was supposed to be taken from the reading. As we moved along, we usually formed small groups in an attempt to apply the subject matter. Each group would have its turn at applying the material, which served [sic] to be beneficial due to the fact that we would learn most from each other’s mistakes. After we all had a chance, the professor would guide us into the higher orders of thinking.”

The higher-order thinking that this student is referring to is perhaps more accurately described as reflection about what course participants had practiced and observed during the exercise. What is impressive to me about this description, though, is the preciseness of the student’s understanding of the structure of the class and the rationale for its design and how that design was applied. It thus serves as demonstration of how effective the process was in teaching students how to learn, one of the goals of the active learning model discussed here.

Students were asked to keep a journal of their observations and experiences during the exercises. This journal was to be used to help them construct their final learning portfolio, but I also hoped that it—along with the exercises—would help to increase student “mindfulness” of effective communication principles, techniques, and behavior through reflection.

The course covered many of the typical topics addressed in business communication courses: employment messages, oral presentations, group and interpersonal communication, strategic

communication practices, and some topics from organizational communication. There was little focus on writing, since this skill is covered in a separate course, but this learning goal could easily be incorporated into the active learning model described here.

A large part of the actual course was devoted to students working alone but primarily in groups completing exercises and activities that were designed to help them practice particular communication skills and to observe their own and others' skills in these areas. These activities were of multiple types proposed by Fink (2003) to encourage active learning among students: role plays, simulations, case studies and small group learning. One resource that made this goal easier to achieve was the experiential learning laboratory that we have at the Marshall School of Business. The lab allows students to practice various communication skills, be videotaped, and to review those activities for the purposes of learning what they did well and how they might improve. However, this lab is available to instructors on a limited basis, so the majority of the exercises took place in a traditional classroom setting.

Students were involved in exercises every course period. No lecturing occurred on a daily basis, other than explanations of the quiz topics and answers. However, at the end of each unit, I did hold a review session in which I explained the topics that had been covered, their relationship to one another, and their potential application in the business world. The review sessions were intended to attempt to ensure student understanding and to help students integrate the information.

A unique aspect of the course was the so-called "no-grading" policy regarding the exercises. As explained earlier, this was implemented to reduce the focus on competition and to create a more cooperative learning atmosphere in the course by reducing performance anxiety. Students did receive grades on the quizzes over the assigned readings, participation in the exercises, and for the final paper, the learning portfolio. The learning portfolio was a reflection exercise intended to increase students' retention of information, deepen their learning of the materials, and to encourage mindfulness in the area of communication. In the learning portfolio, students were asked to address three issues broadly: 1) The content of their learning: What did they learn about this subject? 2) The context of their learning: How did their learning fit into the larger context of their lives, particularly their future professional life? 3) The learning process: What did they learn about how they learned or how could they learn more effectively? These three topics were taken from Fink's suggestions for a process portfolio.

### **Results—Student Feedback**

Students' final learning portfolios contained no negative comments about the active learning model used in the course. This result could be due to the fact that students were asked to focus on what they learned. But other evaluations indicated that the course design was successful. At the mid-way point of the course, I asked our director of learning at the business school to conduct an oral evaluation of the course and her feedback included the comment that "it was the best evaluation of a course that I have ever received." In addition, the final student ratings for the class instruction raised more than half a point over previous courses taught using a more traditional model that involved lectures, graded assignments throughout the course and exams.

One of the most helpful aspects of the course was the use of the experiential learning laboratory, particularly the use of the videotaping facilities for it enabled students to observe their communication behaviors and to identify areas that could be improved. It also helped to accomplish one of the primary tasks that I set about achieving in the design of the course: providing opportunities for students to gain a more accurate assessment of their communication skills. This opportunity was recognized by students in a number of their learning portfolios. One student said about one of the exercises designed to allow them to observe their oral presentation skills:

“I had the chance to see how others saw me. Although, I had [delivered oral presentations] in the past, I never had the chance to observe myself. I was oblivious to the unnatural body movements and the awkward pauses that I saw on the screen and I began to reflect on some other weaknesses that I may be unaware of.”

Another student said about one of the exercises designed to help them identify effective group communication skills:

“I specifically remember my group experience because it was one of the most supportive group climates that I have ever been a part of, and as a result, was one of the most enjoyable and productive. Interestingly, though, I feel like I gained the most valuable knowledge about the various aspects of group work from viewing the brief clip of my group, rather than actually participating in the exercise. Viewing the clip from a third-person perspective provided me the opportunity to really see the specific qualities of my fellow group members that contributed to a developed that supportive climate. More specifically, I was able to see the various group member roles that were mentioned in the textbook in my peers and recognized how those roles helped to foster such a positive, supportive group climate.”

These comments also are evidence of the importance of reflection to effective learning. As these comments indicate, the focus on reflecting about what was learned in each exercise appeared to increase students’ mindfulness during communication situations. The usefulness of reflection as an important part of the learning process is illustrated in many of the student examples used in this paper. It is clearly addressed in the following statement from a student’s learning portfolio regarding a mock interview exercise:

“I was asked to answer various questions starting from “tell me about yourself.” The [start] was OK because we prepared for this question in [a] focus statement activity. . . . But when unexpected questions were asked, I had awkward moments of silence not knowing what to say. As I got more nervous, I kept saying [the] same thing over and over and felt that I had failed this activity. But I realized after the mock interview exercise that I did not fail this activity; rather, I aced it because I learned [a] very important lesson. . . . If it was a real interview and I made so many mistakes like I did in this activity, I would have never gotten the job. But through this, I could learn what my weaknesses are and [that] I need to be

preparing more thoroughly for upcoming nervous events, interviews for my full-time position.”

Some students even discussed the value of the learning portfolio as a tool for reflection:

“As I look back on the class, I do not know exactly when I started to realize that this class could offer me a lot, but as I began to plan the [learning portfolio], I figured out exactly how much I did take away from this. I really believe if all the classes had a project similar to this, I would remember a lot more from them, because I would say I have forgotten more from my classes than I have remembered.”

As to the value of the active learning model, a number of students commented on this approach. One student said:

“The hands-on and active learning approach that took place in my business communication classroom/Experiential Learning Center (ELC) room gave me a better understanding of, not only the skills I already possessed, but also an idea of what I would need to continue to work on to better prepare myself for my career and overall goals in the future.”

The importance of exercises and activities that focused on real-life situations was mentioned by another student:

“This past semester, I took several courses that have provided me with a variety of useful tools and essential skills that can prove to be beneficial as I make my way into the professional world. Although I was exposed to a significant amount of information, most of these courses lacked a sense of realistic situations in which the concepts taught would be applicable, essentially, simply learning the material but not placing it into context and truly understanding [sic]. However, the business communication course that I took allowed me to become very familiar with the content and apply the concepts into real-world scenarios.”

Some students also commented on how the “no-grade” policy for the exercises and activities also contributed to creating an environment for learning. One student even commented on how it helped him to recognize that he was responsible for his learning:

“The no-grade policy instituted in this class gave me a new perspective on my learning process. If I am “in it” just for my benefit, removing the need to say “just what the professor wants to hear”, changes the dynamic. It allows me to be interested in even boring material if I feel it is more for my benefit than a grade. After graduation, I will capitalize on this and make it my lifelong perception of continued learning.”

Other students commented on the focus on “learning how to learn” with the idea that this will be helpful to them, not only in their careers, but also as they make vocational changes throughout their lives.

“This course not only improved my previous skills . . . , it also gave me insight into the way that I actually learn. The fact that my learning will not stop after I complete my time at university was a notion that I had not readily considered until it was pointed out by Professor Walker. This compelled me to discover how exactly I best learned, because I realized how important it will be for me to be able to learn constantly and effectively, especially after I graduate and begin my career.”

But perhaps some of the most gratifying comments from students were in regard to their newfound valuing of communication skill:

“Perhaps more important than the actual internal content of the class—the sections contained in the textbook and reinforced in the lectures and ELC activities—is the reality that studying communication as an academic discipline really drove home to me how crucial communication is to business success. . . . Specifically, I had my ‘Eureka’ moment when it dawned upon me how much *more* important communications skills are than the so-called ‘hard skills’ that are traditionally studied in much more extensively in academic environs. . . . What our teachers I think have by and large overlooked, however, is the incredible significance of ‘soft skills’—communication being a major part of them—in determining professional success.”

Not only were the learning portfolios useful for students in helping them to reflect upon the learning experience, but it also served as a useful means of feedback for me in terms of what students found valuable in the course. This information will help me to make adjustments to improve the course design in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Based upon the feedback that I received from students, there are some changes I will make in the course. Rather than suggesting that students keep a journal about their experiences and observations in the course on which they might draw to write their final learning portfolios, I will provide a more structured approach to the learning portfolio. In other words, I will ask them to write their reflections about their learning in each of the topic areas that are covered in the course and for several of the most important exercises. I will then add another opportunity for reflection by asking them to review their writing over the course of the semester and prepare a final integrative summary of their learning. These changes will provide a more systematic approach to the reflection aspect of the course as well as institute an added layer of reflection with the hope of increasing the depth of student understanding and their “mindfulness” in the area of communication.

I will also continue to use the student feedback that I received throughout the course, including that given in the learning portfolios, to continue to create and improve the exercises and activities used in the course to create the active learning environment.

Finally, I will drop the periodic review of course materials that I had included in the first version of the course, because student feedback indicated that these reviews were not necessary. Apparently, students were taking away more from the initial activities and discussions that I suspected, making the reviews redundant.

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Biography

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