

The Status of the Business Communication Course

Travis L. Russ

Fordham University

The goal of this study was to analyze the current status of the introductory business communication course at colleges and universities across the U.S. Data from a national sample of 505 instructors revealed a number of pedagogical and programmatic insights about: (1) major course sponsors; (2) academic levels at which the course is taught; (3) ideal and actual class sizes; (4) use of distance learning; (5) topic coverage; and (6) learning assessments. Trends identified in this study are compared with those from previous audits. Future research ideas and implications for business communication education are also discussed.

Keywords: business communication, audit, instruction, course content, administration

Introduction

As early as 1964, a litany of extant literature has demonstrated a need to teach undergraduate students how to communicate effectively in the workplace (e.g., G. W. Bowman, 1964; Edge & Greenwood, 1974; Hildebrandt, Bond, Miller, & Swinyard, 1982; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Rader & Wunsch, 1980; Reinsch & Shelby, 1997; Ulinski & O'Callaghan, 2002; Waner, 1995). Perhaps in response to such reports, a rising number of U.S. colleges and universities have offered the introductory business communication course as a way to teach undergraduates the communication competencies deemed necessary for their professional success. Driving this shift is a consensus that students' business acumen is concomitantly linked to their communication abilities. As Plutsky (1996) observed, "[Since] employers view effective communication skills as a key to success in business ... business school faculty have come to realize that they must equip students with the communication skills employers demand if their programs are to succeed" (p. 69). Today, the introductory course has become a staple in many undergraduates' experiences, gaining greater credibility in higher education communities. For as Du-Babock (2006) conceded, "Business communication has established itself as an important subject area and has become an integral component of business school curricula" (p. 254).

Clearly, the introductory business communication course serves an important function in undergraduate education. For this reason, a number of studies, published over the course of more than thirty years, have surveyed instructors to answer recurring pedagogical and programmatic questions about the introductory course, such as the way it is taught and administered to undergraduate students (David, 1982; Glassman & Farley, 1979; Nelson, Luse, & DuFrene, 1992; Nixon & West, 1993; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995; Persing, Drew, Bachman, Eaton, & Galbraith, 1976; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). Capturing the evolution of the introductory course over the years, such studies have served as reliable barometers. Further,

these routine check-ups have yielded valuable information for both internal and external stakeholders, allowing them to evaluate the status of the introductory course, track pedagogical and administrative trends, benchmark best practices, and identify pedagogical opportunities for improving student learning. In light of these myriad benefits, similar audits should be completed on a periodic and timely basis.

As the most recent audit soliciting information from instructors about the introductory course was published almost a decade ago, a more recent self-examination is warranted. Therefore, this study sought to address that need by systematically collecting current pedagogical and programmatic information about the introductory business communication course at colleges and universities throughout the United States. Specifically, this study sought to collect macro-level data about: (1) the major departmental sponsors of the introductory course; (2) the academic levels at which the introductory course is taught; (3) the average size of the introductory course and whether it is smaller or larger than instructors desire; (4) schools' use of distance learning to deliver the introductory course; (5) the range and depth of topics covered in the introductory course; and (6) the types of assignments instructors use to assess student learning.

This audit begins by explaining the method used to collect field data about the status of the introductory course. Next, results for each of examined areas are reported. Finally, the pedagogical and programmatic implications of each of the findings are discussed and, when possible, compared with results from past audits.

Method

Participants

A list of potential respondents was created by researching contact information for instructors teaching the business communication course at U.S. colleges and universities as well as members of the Association for Business Communication. A total of 1,967 individuals were emailed an invitation to participate in this study. Additionally, invitations to participate in this study were posted on the listservs of the Association for Business Communication as well as the National Communication Association. Further, a snowball recruitment technique was used by asking respondents to contact their fellow business communication instructors and encourage them to participate. A total of 545 business communication instructors submitted usable surveys; forty were omitted as these respondents taught at schools outside the U.S., yielding a final total of 505 surveys. The approximate response rate equaled 27.71%; however, this number is likely higher as not all email recipients were eligible to participate in the study since some were not instructors of the business communication course.

Of the research population, 468 (92.7%) reported teaching the undergraduate business communication course within the past two years. Respondents taught at 321 schools in 44 of the United States. Of the participants, 82.2% ($n = 416$) reported teaching at institutions granting bachelor or higher degrees while 17.6% ($n = 89$) of respondents taught at schools granting associate degrees.

A majority of respondents ($n = 389$, 77%) reported full-time instructor status. Respondents averaged 11.70 years ($SD = 11.40$) of full-time teaching experience (range: 0-46 years), 4.58 years ($SD = 5.28$) of part-time teaching experience (range: 0-32 years), and 10.40 years ($SD = 9.99$) of industry experience (range: 0-45 years). Master's degrees were held by 47.5% ($n = 240$) of respondents, followed by 45.5% ($n = 230$) with doctoral degrees, 4.4% ($n = 22$) with undergraduate degrees, and 1.4% ($n = 7$) with juris doctorate degrees; 1.2% of respondents ($n = 6$) did not indicate their highest degrees.

Instrument

Participants were asked to complete an online survey containing 53 closed-ended items. This survey was constructed to capture information on: (1) demographics about the respondents and their institutions; (2) course administration (course sponsors, academic levels of students, class sizes, and delivery modes); (3) course content; and (4) learning assessments.

The content of the research instrument was based on data collected in previous audits of the business communication course. The final survey's face validity was confirmed by a sample of business communication instructors currently teaching in the field. Based on feedback from these instructors, additional items were added to the survey to capture current data on contemporary issues affecting the business communication course including technology, diversity, class size, and learning assessments.

All participants were given the option to complete an online or pen-and-paper version of this instrument. All participants volunteered to complete the online version.

Results

Results are reported in three categories: course administration, course content, and learning assessments.

Course Administration

To investigate how the introductory business communication course is administered at different schools, the following areas of data were collected: major sponsors of the course, academic levels at which the course is taught, instructors' ideal versus actual class sizes, and modes used to deliver the introductory course.

Course Sponsors. As revealed by respondents, the business department is the dominant sponsor of the business communication course. As displayed by Table 1, the business department sponsors the introductory course in twice as many cases ($n = 301$, 59.6%) as any other department, including the communication department ($n = 143$, 28.3%), English department ($n = 53$, 10.5%), and education department ($n = 8$, 1.6%).

Table 1
Course Sponsors

Departments	<i>n</i>	%
Business departments	301	59.6
Communication departments	143	28.3
English departments	53	10.5
Education departments	8	1.6

Academic Levels. Table 2 reports the academic levels at which the business communication course is taught. According to respondents, almost half of students who complete the introductory course are juniors ($n = 234$, 46.3%), followed at some distance by sophomores ($n = 165$, 32.7%). The smallest number of students who complete the introductory course are first-year students ($n = 70$, 13.9%) and seniors ($n = 36$, 7.1%). These findings suggest that most institutions gear the business communication course toward students in the midst of their college careers, versus those in entering or exiting stages.

Table 2
Students' Academic Levels

Academic Levels	<i>n</i>	%
Juniors	234	46.3
Sophomores	165	32.7
First-years	70	13.9
Seniors	36	7.1

Class Sizes. Instructors were asked to report their ideal class sizes as well as the average number actually enrolled in one section of their business communication courses. As revealed by Table 3, results suggest that instructors have larger class sizes than they desire. For instance, 70% ($n = 346$) of instructors desire enrollments of less than 20 students per section; yet, only 25% ($n = 126$) actually have such class sizes. As reported by 57.7% ($n = 290$) of instructors, the typical class size is between 21-30 students. This disparity is further evident given instructors reported an average class size of 26.36 ($SD = 10.79$) while they desired an average class size of 19.70 ($SD = 5.77$). In a related vein, instructors do not prefer to teach the business communication course as a large lecture class. While 17.3% ($n = 87$) actually teach the introductory course with an enrollment of more than 31 students (150 was the largest class size), only 2.4% ($n = 12$) actually prefer doing so. Similarly, no participating instructor desires a class size of more than 51 students.

Table 3
Instructors' Ideal versus Actual Class Sizes

	Ideal Class Sizes (<i>n</i> = 494)		Actual Class Sizes (<i>n</i> = 503)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Number of students:</i>				
20 or less	346	70	126	25
21-30	136	27.5	290	57.7
31-50	12	2.4	78	15.5
51 or more	0	0	9	1.8

Delivery Modes. As revealed by Table 4, a small percentage of instructors (*n* = 15, 3%) report delivering the introductory course entirely online while a majority of instructors (*n* = 371, 73.5%) report delivering the course in the traditional classroom format. Almost a quarter of instructors (*n* = 119, 23.6%) report using a hybrid delivery mode, administering some content online and the other via classroom.

Table 4
Course Delivery Modes

Delivery Modes	<i>n</i>	%
Classroom delivery	371	73.5
Hybrid delivery (classroom and online)	119	23.6
Online delivery	15	3

Course Content

Instructors were asked to report the extent to which they cover 38 different topics in their business communication courses. These items were fixed on a five-point Likert scale with the anchors “1 = not covered” and “5 = covered extensively.” Table 5 separates the list of topics into 11 categories and displays instructors’ average ratings for each. This list was generated using information from previous audits, tables of contents from current business communication textbooks, and contemporary scholarship on business communication pedagogy. The list’s face validity was confirmed by a sample of instructors currently teaching the business communication course. The following highlights the top ten topics receiving the most coverage as well as the bottom ten topics receiving the least coverage.

Most Covered Topics. Six of the top ten “most covered topics” instructors report giving the most coverage were classified under two categories: *written communication* (“write good/bad news [positive/negative] messages,” “format business documents correctly,” and “use correct grammar and sentence structure”) and *public speaking* (“deliver individual presentations”, “design and use visual aids,” and “deliver group presentations”). This suggests that these are the two pillars of the business communication course. The remaining four topics within the top ten “most covered” areas fell under three umbrellas: *persuasive and ethical communication* (“analyze principles of persuasive communication” and “discuss ethical issues/behaviors”), *mediated communication* (“use email effectively”), and *employment communication* (“create resumes and cover letters”).

Least Covered Topics. Among the bottom ten “least covered topics” were the seven survey items related to the analysis of communication theories. Exceptions to this trend were in the following categories: *persuasive communication*, *basic communication models*, *written communication*, and *group communication*. While these areas received low ratings from instructors, they were not the lowest. These findings suggest that instructors place a heavier emphasis on the practical application than the theoretical analysis of business communication constructs. The other three topics in the bottom ten “least covered” areas were classified under two categories: *interpersonal communication* (“conduct negotiations”) and *mediated communication* (“use instant/text messaging effectively” and “use video conferencing effectively”). Ober and Wunsch (1995) reported a similar lack of emphasis on teaching students how to negotiate (in that case, the topic was coupled with conflict management).

Table 5
Instructors' Average Ratings of Content Coverage

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Written communication:</i>		
Write good/bad news (positive/negative) messages	3.94*	1.55
Format business documents correctly	3.93*	1.45
Use correct grammar and sentence structure	3.87*	1.42
<i>Public speaking:</i>		
Deliver individual presentations	3.95*	1.50
Design and use visual aids	3.91*	1.40
Deliver group presentations	3.81*	1.48
<i>Persuasive and ethical communication:</i>		
Analyze principles of persuasive communication	3.98*	1.29
Discuss ethical issues/behaviors	3.75*	1.30
<i>Employment communication:</i>		
Create resumes and cover letters	3.75*	1.60
Practice being interviewed for a job	3.06	1.62
Practice interviewing others for a job	2.41	1.53
<i>Mediated communication:</i>		
Use email effectively	3.64*	1.48
Use the internet effectively	3.00	1.51
Use voice mail effectively	2.48	1.43
Use instant/text messaging effectively	2.19**	1.35
Use video conferencing effectively	1.93**	1.23
<i>Interpersonal communication:</i>		
Give and receive feedback	3.56	1.37
Improve listening behaviors	3.35	1.34
Analyze nonverbal communication	3.17	1.35
Resolve interpersonal conflict	2.98	1.35
Conduct negotiations	2.26**	1.32
<i>Group communication:</i>		
Participate in group meetings	3.49	1.47
Lead group meetings	3.25	1.40
Analyze effective/ineffective leadership behaviors	2.71	1.52
<i>Organizational communication:</i>		
Analyze organization's communication practices	3.02	1.46
<i>Intercultural communication:</i>		
Recognize intercultural bias/discrimination	3.40	1.43
Analyze cross-cultural exchanges	3.16	1.46
<i>Business communication models/theories:</i>		
Analyze persuasive communication theories	2.79	1.43
Analyze basic communication models	2.88	1.38
Analyze written communication theories	2.65	1.46
Analyze group communication theories	2.45	1.35
Analyze intercultural communication theories	2.40**	1.42
Analyze interpersonal communication theories	2.31**	1.31
Analyze organizational communication theories	2.26**	1.33
Analyze leadership communication theories	2.20**	1.40
Analyze public rhetoric theories	2.17**	1.36
Analyze employment communication theories	2.14**	1.34
Analyze mediated communication theories	1.81**	1.18

Note: A five-point Likert scale was used with the anchors: "1 = not covered" and "5 = covered extensively"

*The top ten topics receiving the most coverage

**The bottom ten topics receiving the least coverage

Learning Assessments

Instructors were asked to report the different types of graded assignments, as well as the number of each, they require in their business communication courses. While data in this area has not been collected in previous assessments, the list of possible learning assessments was generated and validated by a sample of instructors currently teaching the business communication course. Table 6 reports the average for each required assignment. In terms of writing assignments, instructors, on average, require students to complete approximately three graded letters ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 3.52$), two graded memos ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 3.26$), two graded emails ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 2.77$), and two graded reports/papers ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.55$). As for speaking assignments, instructors, on average, require students to give two graded individual presentations ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.54$) and one graded group presentation ($M = 1.26$, $SD = 1.47$). To test for learning, instructors give students on average, three graded quizzes ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 4.07$) and two graded exams ($M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.61$).

Table 6
Average Number of Required Graded Assignments

Assignments	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Writing assignments:</i>		
Letters	2.60	3.52
Memos	2.24	3.26
Reports/papers	1.52	1.55
Emails	1.46	2.77
Presentation outlines	1.10	1.29
Resumes	.82	.71
Document outlines	.52	1.24
Interview questions	.46	.68
Portfolios	.24	.54
Surveys/questionnaires	.28	.65
<i>Speaking assignments:</i>		
Group presentations	1.26	1.47
Individual presentations	1.52	1.54
Performance reviews	.90	1.77
Job interviews	.49	.63
Negotiations	.35	.95
Media interviews	.08	.29
<i>Tests:</i>		
Quizzes	2.53	4.07
Exams	1.52	1.61

Discussion

This study has built upon previous audits to update the current status of the introductory business communication course at colleges and universities throughout the United States. The following discusses the pedagogical and programmatic implications of the results from this study in each of the three categories: course administration, course content, and learning assessments. Additionally, when possible, findings from past audits are compared to those from the present study.

Course Administration

This study provided a series of data about how the introductory business communication course is administered at different schools, including major sponsors of the course, academic levels at which the course is taught, instructors' ideal versus actual class sizes, and modes used to deliver the introductory course.

Course Sponsors. As was the case in previous assessments, the business department is the dominant home of the introductory business communication course (Nelson et al., 1992; Nixon & West, 1993; Ober & Wunsch, 1995; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). However, in light of previous findings, appears the communication department has dramatically increased its sponsorship of the introductory course. While Wardrope and Bayless (1999) found the communication department sponsored only 7.4% of the introductory courses, that number has roughly quadrupled to 28.3% in this study. Business departments are not decreasing their sponsorship of the course; rather, there is some minor erosion in the number of English and education departmental sponsorships. It may be worthwhile for future research to explore the rationale behind these shifts. Additionally, this "shift" may only be an illusion created by a more diverse pool of respondents than what has been used in past audits. Previous audits have limited their recruiting efforts to only a handful of disciplines; however, this study purposefully expanded its research population to include instructors from various backgrounds, including the communication discipline. For instance, this study recruited participants from the National Communication Association while previous audits did not. This study's diverse participant pool might have uncovered a trend that was simply omitted from previous audits. One way to confirm or deny the presence of a "shift" would be conducting another audit in the next few years using similar inclusive recruitment strategies. Then, longitudinal trends in course sponsorships could be analyzed.

Academic Levels. As revealed by this study's results, the introductory business communication course is predominately completed by juniors and sophomores. Previous assessments have reported similar trends; however, in some cases, the number of sophomores has been greater than juniors (Glassman & Farley, 1979; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995). One possible explanation behind the heavy enrollment of sophomores and juniors is that the introductory course may be perceived as premature for first-year students and too foundational, and perhaps belated, for seniors. Since the last audit the number of first-year students taking the introductory course has risen while the number of sophomores has decreased. This finding suggests that some schools may be using the introductory course to aid first-year students in developing basic communication skills that will not only help them succeed in professional

contexts but also throughout their college years. As revealed by this study's results, the number of sophomores is still twice the number of first-year students. Thus, the introductory course appears to remain a mid-level class. Nevertheless, future research could explore whether students' academic levels influence the business communication course curricula.

Class Sizes. This study revealed a gap between instructors' desired and actual class sizes. While a majority of instructors prefer smaller classes, there was a preponderance of larger class sizes. Specifically, there was an increase in the percent of schools offering larger class sizes (more than 31 students) between Ober and Wunsch's (1995) audit (12%) and today (17.3%). Further, there was a slight decline in the number of schools offering medium-size classes of the introductory course (around 21-30 students) between the 1995 audit (64%) and today (57.7%). The percent of schools offering small classes (around 20 students or less) has generally stayed constant since the 1995 audit. One possible explanation behind the increase in larger-than-desired class sizes may be budgetary restrictions preventing administrators from hiring new staff members and, subsequently, offering additional sections. In a related vein, inflated class sizes may be caused by external pressures from accreditation agencies to ensure students are being taught by "academically qualified faculty" (as defined by the agencies). Administrators may reduce or eliminate sections taught by "non-academically qualified" staff to increase the size of sections taught by those with the desired credentials. Perhaps yet another reason for the trend toward larger class sizes is that administrators may hesitate in investing the necessary resources to keep the size of the business communication course small because they underestimate the true value of such a class. A growing library of research has sought to demonstrate the pedagogical and practical value of the introductory business communication course (e.g., Zhao & Alexander, 2004). It seems worthwhile for the discipline to continue publishing this line of scholarship and for instructors to promote the findings within their schools to help enhance the credibility of the introductory course and ensure its future vitality.

Delivery Modes. A majority of teachers (73.5%) still teach the introductory course in a traditional classroom setting. However, a small percentage of teachers (3%) teach the introductory course entirely online and an even larger percent (23.6%) teach the introductory course using a hybrid format with a mix of online and classroom instruction. This assessment is the first to collect data in this area. However, if these results parallel national trends in higher education, there has likely been a surge in distance learning to teach the introductory course. Further, this trend will likely continue as online education becomes more commonplace. One possible explanation behind this rise may relate to financial challenges; in other words, as departmental budgets decrease, the reliance on distance learning likely increases. Despite this trend, it is important to note the debate surrounding the use classroom versus online education. Some argue that delivering the introductory course online is just as effective as delivering it via the traditional classroom format, while others disagree (J. P. Bowman, 2003; Fortune, Shifflett, & Sibley, 2006; Whyte & Whyte, 1984). There is consensus from both sides that all relevant decision-makers involved in putting a business communication course online should carefully examine the advantages and disadvantages (both pedagogical and programmatic) of distance education, not only from instructional or administrative perspectives, but also from a students' perspective. In the end, the delivery mode that generates the most effective and desired learning outcomes, whether online, classroom, or both, should be used.

Course Content

As class time is extremely limited, instructors must carefully consider the topics they will afford the greatest and least amounts of coverage. Perhaps an asset as well as a liability, the business communication discipline is multifaceted. To this end, instructors often face difficult choices when deciding which content to cover, and to what degree. Further, instructors must also choose between breadth or depth; that is, covering many topics briefly or addressing a few in depth (Plutsky, 1996). This study provided revealing data about the topics that received the most and least coverage in the introductory course.

Most Covered Topics. Older audits consistently found that written communication has been the primary focus of the introductory course (Glassman & Farley, 1979; Nelson et al., 1992; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995). As Glassman and Farley (1979) noted, “Despite the general title, an analysis of topics being taught shows that educators tend to equate the term ‘business communication’ with written communication” (p. 44). However, that trend appears to be changing as instructors reported investing equal (and, in some cases, more) time teaching other business communication issues. The pedagogical choice to place more emphasis on other areas of business communication is supported by changing business demands. As Wardrope (2002) noted, “The characteristics of the contemporary workplace suggest that topics others than writing may be equally important for the business communication course” (p. 61). For example, instructors reported giving the issue of public speaking more equitable coverage (e.g., giving individual and group presentations as well as creating effective visual aids). This suggests the orientation of the introductory course may be shifting to address both written and spoken modes of communication, a finding consistent with the most recent audit by Wardrope and Bayless (1999). This shift is also supported by previous research revealing that most employees spend a larger percentage of their day speaking than writing (Maes et al., 1997).

Another topic receiving high levels of coverage is persuasive communication. In fact, instructors reported that “analyzing principles of persuasive communication” received the most coverage in their classrooms. Yet, in the last audit to include this topic, instructors gave it dramatically lower levels of coverage (Glassman & Farley, 1979). The decision to spend greater levels of coverage on persuasive techniques may be based on current research suggesting that much of students’ professional success in the contemporary workplace hinges on their ability to communicate clearly and persuasively, on paper as well as in person (Cialdini, 2001). To this end, the ability to influence others is considered a critical skill of recent college graduates (Reinsch & Shelby, 1997).

Ethics also received a great deal of attention from instructors in the business communication classroom. The issue of ethics was present in almost all previous audits, but received moderate-to-low levels of coverage from instructors (Nelson et al., 1992; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). One possible explanation behind instructors’ greater emphasis on ethics may be recent scandals and crises surrounding high-profile corporate organizations (McQueeney, 2006). Perhaps by infusing discussions about ethics into the introductory course, instructors hope to teach students about the importance of communicating with integrity as well as the consequences of not doing so.

Another topic receiving considerable attention from instructors was composing effective resumes. Previous audits have reported similar coverage levels of this issue (Glassman & Farley, 1979; Nelson et al., 1992; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). Considering the consistently high-levels of coverage bestowed upon this subject over the past thirty years, the issue of resume composition will likely remain a staple in the curricula of most introductory business communication courses well into the future.

Additionally, instructors reported spending considerable time teaching students to use email effectively. Based on this study's results, instructors are spending more time on this topic than was reported in the previous audit conducted by Wardrope and Bayless (1999). This is most likely because email has advanced as the primary channel for workplace communication over the past decade (Warisse, Grube, Tinsley, Lee, & O'Pell, 2006). Thus, it appears that instructors have modified their curricula to address strategies for communicating via this relatively new technology.

Least Covered Topics. As was true with the "most covered topics," there was also consistency among the topics that instructors did not emphasize. Most noticeably, instructors gave the lowest coverage ratings to almost all of the items related to theoretical analyses. Only a portion of previous audits have collected data on instructors' coverage of theory. Those audits that have collected such information report conflicting results. These studies revealed that instructors place anywhere from a light to strong emphasis on theoretical analyses (Nelson et al., 1992; Ober, 1987; Ober & Wunsch, 1983, 1991, 1995; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999). Those audits greatly differ from the present study as they only used a single item to assess instructors' coverage of divergent business communication theories. One potential explanation behind this trend is that instructors are almost exclusively focusing on teaching technical skills (e.g., such as writing and speaking techniques) and lack sufficient time or desire to help students analyze the theories behind the hands-on skills. As such, there is a heavy emphasis on teaching practice and a light-to-nonexistent focus on teaching theory. A number of scholars would find this type of pedagogical imbalance troubling. For instance, Du-Babcock (2006) argued the introductory course is in the unique position for acquainting students with sound theory and research underpinning effective and ineffective business communication practices. From this perspective, the introductory class could help students bridge the gap between academic theory and workplace communication. Littlejohn (2007) posited that underscoring the teaching of praxis with theory promotes critical thinking as well as helps students explain, predict, and describe communicative behavior. Future research is warranted to explore the reasons behind instructors' potential omissions of theory from their business communication curricula.

Other topics receiving scant levels of coverage include the specialized mediated technologies of instant/text messaging and video conferencing. Curiously, while instructors have augmented their coverage of email instruction, they have avoided addressing newer technologies. One possible reason is that these tools have only recently become commonplace (which also explains why these topics were excluded from previous audits). Additionally, teachers may still be personally unfamiliar with these media and, thus, feel uncomfortable teaching students (many of whom are technically savvy) how to use them.

However, a number of scholars argue this omission in the curriculum may be problematic, especially given the rise of these new technologies in the workplace (Du-Babcock, 2006; Warisse et al., 2006). Such scholars argue that instructors must stay abreast of new business media if they are to enable their students to compete in the professional marketplace. As Du-Babcock (2006) asserted, “Our challenge is to teach students how to cope with and communicate in this increasingly complex and diverse global, multidisciplinary communication environment” (p. 257).

Another topic receiving little attention in the business communication course is negotiating (an issue that has been also been noticeably absent in previous audits). One explanation for why negotiations have received little attention in the introductory business communication course is because they are not typically required of new college graduates who often are hired into entry-level jobs. Business communication instructors may not sufficiently cover negotiations (as well as new media such as instant/text messaging and video conferencing) because they are, or feel they should be, addressed in other courses.

Learning Assessments

Instructors require a diverse array of writing and speaking assignments to assess students’ learning. Interestingly, most instructors require students to complete almost three times as many writing assignments as speaking assignments. This implies that instructors place a stronger emphasis on teaching writing versus speaking skills, underscoring the course’s historic, almost solitary, focus on written communication. An alternative explanation is that instructors value both competencies, but speaking assignments, such as individual and group presentations, consume significant amounts of class time; instructors are limited in how many speeches they can assign during a single term. On a related note, it is difficult to discern any trends regarding the increase or decrease of required assignments as the most recent audit’s data on this subject is generally incomparable to this study’s data (Ober & Wunsch, 1995). However, the findings from this study have provided great detail regarding the types of written and spoken assignments instructors required in their introductory courses. In terms of writing assignments, most instructors grade students’ abilities to compose effective messages in multiple formats including memos, letters, and emails. Curiously, while a majority of instructors reported spending great amounts of time teaching students how to compose a resume, most of them do not officially grade such efforts. In terms of speaking assignments, a majority of instructors did not report grading students’ performances during mock job interviews; however, they reported spending considerable class time teaching them how to interview effectively. Perhaps instructors assume that students develop such skills in other courses or from their school’s career center. As for other speaking assignments, most instructors reported giving multiple opportunities for students to hone their oral abilities. Specifically, most instructors reported assigning two individual speeches as well as at least one group presentation. Lastly, most teachers test students’ learning using traditional evaluation techniques: two quizzes and two exams. As this audit was the first to collect such detailed information about required learning assessments, it seems worthwhile for future assessments to collect identical data, allowing for evaluation of longitudinal trends.

Conclusion

This audit has contributed numerous programmatic and pedagogical insights about the introductory business communication course. Considering the last audit was conducted at the end of the 20th century (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999), the present investigation provides a timely snapshot of the evolution of the business communication course over the last decade. Results from this study have revealed critical insights about the changing contexts of teaching business communication and the evolving landscape of what should be taught in this area. This study raised several important about the rationales behind these changes, warranting attention in future scholarship. Future research ought to collect similar data on a global scale so as to business communication curriculum at U.S. versus international colleges and universities. Additional analyses in these areas will provide multifaceted and global barometers of the status of business communication education in general.

On a final note, instructors and administrators interpret this study's results with caution. As Wardrope and Bayless (1999) advised, results from an audit should not be used as an independent benchmarks for justifying or altering decisions about teaching or administering business communication courses. Rather, findings from this study should be ratified with systematic feedback from constituents directly and indirectly impacted by the introductory course, including students, alumni, employers, faculty, and administrators. Hopefully, when viewed through a cautionary lens, this scholarship will aid stakeholders in designing and delivering an introductory course that motivates students, helps them achieve academic learning outcomes, and improve their business communication competencies in the 21st century workplace.

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Biography

TRAVIS L. RUSS, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Communication in the School of Business Administration at Fordham University. Dr. Russ teaches courses in business and management communication on the graduate and undergraduate levels. His research explores the intersections between organizational communication, learning, and change. His work has been published in a number of journals including *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, *Communication Education*, and *Communication Teacher*.