

Ten Steps to Improving Student Achievement and Institutional Success in the Business Communication Course: The Course Valuation Model (CVM)

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The Good News

Communication is the skill, talent and ability most sought after by employers. Year after year the National Association for Colleges and Educators (NACE) has surveyed employers on skills and qualities most important to them when hiring. Year after year, communication skills come out on top ("How you fit into the tight job market"). In fact, communication-related abilities – communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills – make up three of the top eight in the employer's rank of importance of skills/qualities in NACE's 2008 survey.

Educational institutions are benefited by producing students with such sought-after skills. When a department is innovative, actively attempting to meet workforce demands, it becomes more valuable to the community, and, in turn, to the school. Students mastering skills and knowledge bases that *clearly and demonstrably* benefit them personally and professionally increase the relevance and value of their education. This is the primary purpose of the business communication class.

Questioning Value

Yes, as a communication specialist, you know this. But, the more important question is, do your students, administrators and community business leaders know how your class is meeting the needs of employers, students, and, in turn, the needs of the school? And, is the course actively valued and supported as such? Or does it appear that your course is standing alone with seemingly distant relationships between its actual value, classroom value and institutional value? These elements of course value are reciprocal in nature and are quite interconnected.

When this connectedness is not achieved or recognized, it can lead to a scattered focus and seem as though success in one area must mean disappointment in another, or that time and personal resources invested in one must mean sacrificing the other. Even worse, they can seem at odds with each other and with instructor or institutional priorities. All of this can lead to a disjointed program where instructors seem either to strive for institutional security at the cost of a student-centered classroom or, at the other extreme, can focus so intently upon the classroom that institutional and social benefits are left to someone else to determine and promote.

It is not difficult for this disconnect to happen. Many instructors see themselves as purists – believing their responsibility to the course is to teach material to students in a classroom. The belief can be simply that a good job in the classroom results in student learning, and that is an appropriate goal in itself. Syllabi are created, lectures are delivered, assignments completed, and grades earned. Advocates of this view are often excellent instructors who don't want to be involved with the politics of institutional goals or the complexities of integrating the real business world into the course. But, when administrators seek to honor (or cut) a course, how does this one stand out?

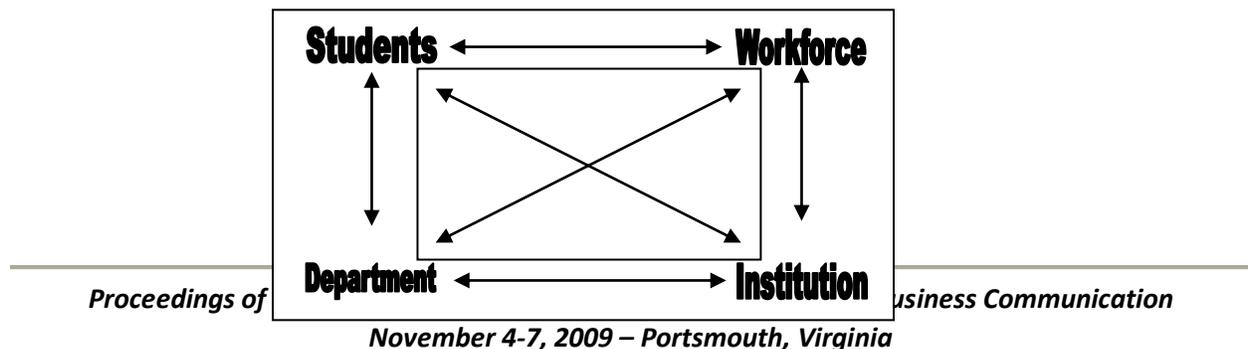
Others spend valuable time seeking ways to achieve a semblance of security for their course (and job?) by striving to become institutionally embedded. Much care is taken to make this class count for something, such as a major requirement. Alternatively, effort may be expended to link the course to the community as an expert or resource in the field, but the investment in teaching takes somewhat of a back seat. This position can be cause for indignation on the part of the purest, because it often gets the course noticed and promoted, but may not be as valuable to the students.

Granted, these are two extreme views described to make a point. But any derivation of these positions that precludes a flowing relationship between course, workforce, and institutional value is undesirable.

When we fail to see that valuations in all of these venues are not only connected, but interdependent, and how each affects the other, we can get frustrated and discouraged. Our classes can seem to be floating in a curricular wind, with the threat of being deemed unnecessary or replaceable looming in the budgetary horizon.

The Course Valuation Model

This paper introduces the Course Valuation Model (CVM) as a theoretical working model of course value, and offers 10 principles designed to increase course value as defined by the model. The goal of the paper is to show how each of the 10 principles enacted has value within itself, and contributes to each area of the model, and, when working together, draws upon the connection between student, department, institution, and workforce value of a course to strengthen (enlarge) the overall course value. Each of the principles/methods is presented in this paper as a function of substantiating the model with tangible ideas for increasing each element of and overall course value. This paper then serves as a framework from which each principle will be elaborated upon as successfully implemented in the business communication program of a large public university. Emphasis will be placed upon customizing this approach to increasing course value to all stakeholders – students, instructors, schools, and employers.



Value is often regarded as a subjective judgment regarding the worth, importance or significance of something to its various stakeholders. However, when criterion for shaping those judgments is known, value can become more objectively manifest and measurable. In the instance of course value, no one trait can be considered necessary and sufficient to equal summative value. Rather, the criteria that contribute to increase value can be manifest through the views and purposes of its stakeholders – students, instructors, schools and employers.

Primary university stakeholders have multiple goals (Schmitz & Whitworth, 2002). The needs and aims of various stakeholders can translate to course goals, and a course's value can be rated on dimensions that reflect its varied goals. A goal of the university may be student mastery of certain core skills prior to graduation. If a course delivers upon that goal, it may increase its value to the university. A manifestation of this value may be that the course is a "core" course for the major. Students and schools value public rewards of accomplishment. Courses can increase in value to the student and school when public displays of accomplishment are incorporated. Employers prefer highly qualified students who present themselves well. Courses that help prepare students for a job search are valued by both students and employers. Students view a teacher's effectiveness by the value they attach to the course (Young, S., & Shaw, D.G. (1999). Consequently, student evaluations of teaching can be affected by perceived course value. The key to expanding course value is to triangulate on "course value" by incorporating many measurable (and immeasurable) manifestations of various stakeholder goals.

The CVM represents four cornerstones of course value. These are Value to Students (V-S), Value to the Department or College (V-D), Value to the Institution (V-I), and Value to the Workforce/Society (V-W). Each has its own degree of value and is worthy of effort to expand and increase this value. The figure as a whole represents overall course value. The arrows indicate the connections between each of the cornerstone course valuations. Notice if one of the cornerstone values is non-existent, the flow of the model is cut off, hence decreasing relationships of the other values. If one of the relationships between values is notably less than others, the shape and flow of the relationships can be dramatically altered. Hence, the ability to keep a balanced overall program value is made more difficult.

This paper, however, will posit that when the 10 principles presented are each enacted, synergistic relationships are established between each of the four cornerstones, increasing the overall value of the course.

Ten Action Principles to Increase Course Value

1. Embed Course in the Institution

In order for your course to be effectively situated in your institution, it must visibly deliver upon the goals of that institution. A course that supports the success of the institution in visible and measurable ways will increase in value. Additionally, alignment with institutional goals assures students the course is based upon sound, school supported curricular objectives. Become aware of the learning goals of your school and department. Prepare course objectives that align with and can

deliver measurable results of these departmental and institutional learning goals. Place these course objectives prominently on your syllabus.

Design assessments of your course objectives that can demonstrate and support the student success in school learning goals called for in accreditation proceedings. If your course objectives are embedded in institutional learning goals, this should be a simple process. Your course can stand strong as a pillar of documented achievement in the school's learning goals and overall success.

Demonstrate student learning by offering pretest evaluation of critical assessments of student skills. Then test after instruction, maybe more than once. Quantitative data of improvement is a powerful tool to justify what your course is accomplishing (hence value) and lends strong support to what your department/school is accomplishing toward learning goals.

Utilize the ethics center. If your school has a center for ethical leadership or other such organization, use it. Invite guest speakers; seek out curricular units they might offer to use in your course; offer credit for student involvement in the center; encapsulate your assignments in a cloak of ethics training.

Collaborate with colleagues from other departments on assignments that commingle the subjects or disciplines. This will raise the relevance of both disciplines and enhance the value of your course regarding student achievement and institutional collaboration.

Work to make your course, or some component of your course, a prerequisite for future courses. Also, follow the appropriate procedures to have your course declared a core or required course in a school, department or major at your institution. If successful in this endeavor, the institutional value of the course is solidified in significant ways. This level of merit granted from the institution demonstrates confidence in the significance of the goals, instruction, and achievements of the business communication course. It also assures that more students will be receiving the valued training offered from the course. This type of institutional support also contributes to expanding the workforce value of the course. It is among the strongest messages of course value.

2. Reward Excellence Publicly

Set up a system of reward for achievement. Possibilities include a certificate program for skill mastery, contests among work teams, a showcase of deliverables on the school calendar, or an implementation of top service or problem solving projects on campus. This type of reward program brings an element of institutional legitimacy to student success. And, if your course curriculum is linked to department and institution learning goals, this also brings an added layer of pride and success to the department and school. Everyone likes rewards. We like earning them, giving them, and watching our own achieve them.

Involving the workforce or community in your rewards program is an excellent way to integrate a real-world element to authenticate student assignments. It can also add greatly to the

workforce/community value of your course. Perhaps have local business leaders judge a contest, or establish student work teams to write analytical reports “commissioned” by businesses to research and make recommendations to solve a problem identified by the business leaders. Then, invite the business leaders to hear the final reports, and give them a copy of the finished written product. Involving students in community service projects aligned with course (and school) objectives is yet another way to achieve this kind of added course valuation.

3. Connect to the Real (Business) World

Increasing your course’s value to the workforce and society is dependent upon the job you do as an instructor to keep current with business practice and future directions and continuously realign your course in ways that meet the need of the current workforce. Keep business contacts fresh and positive. Research what various business sectors are looking for and prepare your students to meet and exceed expectations. Stay abreast of current research and practice in the communication field. This may involve bringing in guest speakers to discuss the field and coupling the experience with a class assignment reinforcing the skills discussed.

Assist your students with the communication aspects of the job search such as resumes, cover letters, interviewing, searching key sources for job possibilities, and discovering the necessary preparation for the type of employment they seek.

4. Be an Honorable and Worthy Example

Perhaps most important of all in a business classroom is to be an example of an honorable human being with integrity in all aspects of life, especially communication, interpersonal relationships and business practices. This is one very direct impact you as the instructor have upon the valuation of your course by students, colleagues, your department, college and the business community. Make it a priority to be a worthy example of all you are teaching and want your students to become. With the recent and current controversies caused by unethical and dishonorable conduct in the business community, it is more important than ever that we teach how to be an ethical and honorable businessperson by example. Everyone is watching, and your influence is great.

5. Offer Something Distinctive

Nothing feels better as an instructor than to have students remember and discuss the value of that special part of your class. Although it may involve more planning and effort, having your course be distinctive for a positive reason can increase its value to students, the institution and eventually, the workforce. The key to this distinction is usually something that students take with them and can feel positive about later.

This distinguishing factor can originate from numerous sources. In many instances, it is a thoughtfully planned course, or part of a course, that prioritizes having a distinctive flavor, or fundamental nature. It could be a capstone assignment that pulls all course material together in a

practical fashion. Portfolios of student work can also be distinctive in that students leave the course with a tangible product of their efforts that can be used in job searches, as reference materials once in a job, or simply as a memoir of accomplishment. Some instructors include a particularly memorable project, perhaps a cross disciplinary project, or one that includes applying course concepts by working with business leaders and real world-business concerns, or creative team building projects. Another possibility is making the course plan itself distinctive. A course that departs from traditional arrangements and perhaps integrates technology in a meaningful way, encourages students to take ownership of some aspect of the course, or involves experiential learning can give the course that sweet flavor of autonomy and experiential learning.

Though these plans for distinctiveness are often effective, personal factors should not be overlooked or downplayed. For some instructors, teaching style and personality are the most distinctive aspect of their course. We can all recall a professor who used humor so effectively we still remember the material linked to his or her jokes, sayings, acronyms, or body language. Though this is an enviable trait, we don't all possess such talents and skills to pull it off. But equally effective can be an attitude toward students that is perceived as particularly professional, caring, fair-minded, or engaged. A distinctive quality to your course can increase students' valuation of it, and, depending upon the distinctive quality, call attention from the department, institution, and even the local workforce.

6. Encourage Student Ownership

Ownership increases learner engagement, skills in team development, team processes and conflict management (Scott-Ladd & Chan, 2008). When **students** are taught to manage the processes of teamwork and take greater **ownership** of managing conflict and team relations they report less conflict and less social loafing and are more satisfied with their **learning** outcomes (Scott-Ladd & Chan). Encourage student ownership of what goes on in your course. Explain course objectives to invite "buy in" to the whole process. Draw links to the relevance and importance of the course to their futures. Adopt a course or unit plan that promotes student ownership. Instead of policing their every move, allow them to develop teams and projects that they feel are genuinely theirs and are something to be excited about and proud of. This will not only increase the value of your course to students, it will make them authentically better skilled in team development and conflict management.

7. Be an Expert and a Resource

Your position, expertise and willingness to reward accomplishment and to act as a resource can improve students' feelings of empowerment in your course and affect evaluations of your teaching. This reflects well upon the value of your course. French and Raven's (1959) taxonomy of the bases describes the various types of power one entity can have over another. Reward power is B's perception that A has the ability to mediate rewards for him. Coercive power is B's perception that A has the ability to mediate punishments for him. Expert power is B's perception that A has some special knowledge or expertness. Referent power is B's identification with A. Legitimate power is B's

perception that A has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for him (French & Raven, 1959, p. 263). Though teachers have a degree of each of these types of power, specific combinations make a difference in learner empowerment and student evaluations of teaching. Referent, reward, and legitimate power account for 66% of the variance in learner empowerment, while referent, *expert*, and coercive power account for 80% of the variance in teacher evaluations (Schrodt, P. et al, 2008). As a teacher, you should be willing and able to be used as an expert resource for students, other faculty, your department, school, and community. Being perceived as an expert who is willing to share your expertise and experiences to empower others can add value to what you have to offer at the university and increase student perceptions of your value and effectiveness.

8. Innovate and Advance

Don't fall prey to inertia, sluggishness, apathy, disinterest and eventually inaction. Strive to be continuously innovative in your classroom and to advance in your field of scholarship and/or the business realm, thus always increasing your relevance and expertise. Your students will continue to respect and be eager to learn from you, expanding the value of your course to them. The business communication field will benefit from your continued pursuit of knowledge. Students leaving your class with experiences and learning sought after by the business community increase course value to the workforce, and institutions appreciate and reward innovative curricula, experiential learning programs, and public reward programs.

9. Quantify and Document Results

The warm gushes of seeing a student succeed, or hearing the compliment of an administrator, or the thanks of a community business leader may be enough for you to realize the value of your course. However, when times are tough (and even when they aren't) it pays to have quantified evidence of success, admiration, gratitude, reward, progress, innovation and advancements, connections, honor, distinctiveness, and expertise. Coalescing with the purpose of this paper, evidence of all these contributes to the perceived and actual value of your course in all four areas of the CVM.

10. Read the Horizon

Keep on the lookout for future trends, changes, and opportunities that can keep your course on the cutting edge. When you see them, responsibly begin to make adjustments to your course so that your students, school and business community reap the rewards of your foresight.

The CVM and 10 action principles are intended to help business communication teachers and scholars see the interconnectedness and dependence of course value to various communities in touch with the business communication course, and to offer ways to increase value to each of these communities separately and in total. Student achievement and improving the value of your course within the institution are not at odds with each other. In fact, just the opposite, they each foster the growth of the other. When instructors adopt this perspective and begin to align efforts with the 10 action principles

for improving course value, the relationships between value to students (V-S), value to department (V-D), value to the institution (V-I), and value to the workforce (V-W) can begin synergistically to enhance each other and the overall valuation of the business communication course.

Limitations and Future Research

This paper introduces a theoretical model based upon many years of experience with teaching, building communication programs, involvement with successful and unsuccessful exemplars, and years of working within schools, departments, and communities to increase awareness and value of communication programs. There are several limitations to the paper that should be noted. Particularly, as a theoretical and practical piece, it lacks results of empirical testing on the CVM and each of the 10 action principles. Also limiting is the lack of previous research done on this topic that would allow for a more robust grounding in theory and empirical social science. These are limitations that can be addressed by future research. As these are limitations on the paper that call for additional research, it has strength in its relevance to a wide audience, depth and scope of the information, its importance to the communication field, and its ability to be tested.

While it is duly noted that each business communication course occurs within a unique context, and not all action principles may have an appropriate fit to courses in all institutions, the model offers foundational ideas to improve the value of a business communication course, and opens doors for additional inquiry.

Future research could include empirical studies of the theoretical CVM, the 10 action principles purported to play a role in the cornerstones of the CVM, and the relationships between them. Both quantitative and qualitative studies examining the actual effect the 10 action principles have upon overall course value and the relationships between student, department, institution and workplace value of the course would move the discussion to a more measurable plane. The creation of scales to measure the cornerstones of the CVM is underway and should be useful for such future research.

Studies investigating the relationship between course value as prescribed by the CVM and course value as enacted by the departments and institutions hosting the course would be another avenue of inquiry. Methods and effectiveness of the instructor's or course director's communication regarding the course to the institution and the local workforce could inform as to the role communication *about* the business communication course plays in its course valuation.

Studies involving one or more of the 10 action principles and their effectiveness with instructors across many schools would provide several new avenues of research. An instructor self-assessment based upon the CVM and 10 action principles could inform as to the level of implementation these already enjoy in the classroom and reasons why instructors do or do not employ these principles.

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