

LEARNING FROM ALUMNI: USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NETWORKING, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT

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Abstract

Informational interviews with business communication alumni, facilitated by social media LinkedIn, have benefited students and the instructor in several ways. In capstone classes for the Professional Writing minor/Business Communication emphasis, students first review eportfolios created by business communication alumni. Then, using LinkedIn for alumni contact and profile data for interview questions, the students write to request an interview. Students establish their own LinkedIn profile to present themselves as young professionals and begin to develop a professional network.

Benefits from the interviews include an expanded network for graduating seniors, realistic internship and first-job advice, and affirmation of professional writing practices in the workplace. Students assert that they learned from, and enjoyed, this assignment; more than half of the 2011 students intend to keep in contact with the alumni. Findings from these network-facilitated interviews have assisted in curriculum enhancement for the advanced capstone and entry-level business communication courses.

The Project Description

At our university (University of California at Santa Barbara, or UCSB), students do not declare a minor in professional writing; rather, interested students take three pre-requisite writing courses and provide an application portfolio. Students are then selected into a small—25 students maximum—capstone cluster of two seminars and one supervised internship, all taught by the same instructor. The capstone cluster for this minor is completed during the final winter and spring quarters of a student's senior year.

Students produce a variety of memos and business letters, a status report, a news release, a brochure, a proposal, a set of instructions, and at least two oral presentations with supporting PowerPoint and handouts. Every graduating class must produce a website to showcase a resume and eportfolio, along with a hardcopy portfolio (or at least a folder with several writing samples that would be brought to a job interview).

In addition to the Business Communication track, two other tracks in the minor are available: Multi Media Communication and Professional Editing. However, for this project, only the students and alumni from the Business Communication track were part of this project.

The project was undertaken for several reasons: to encourage use of professional social media, practice conducting informational interviews, and to learn what alumni believed was useful in the Business Communication track curriculum. Conducting informational interviews is an important skill for students to acquire, both for job searching and continuing professional development, so this is an assignment commonly used for professional writing students. While most of the assigned interviews are with a professional employed in a field the student has an interest in joining, this particular assignment is focused upon alumni from the

Business Communication track (students who graduated in one of the classes between 2006 and 2010). The alumni count from classes 2006 to 2010 is 100 students.

In the Winter Quarter of 2010 and 2011, an alphabetized list of each year's graduates was given to the current Business Communication track students. Because students must secure an internship for the Spring Quarter of the capstone cluster, a point of immediate interest was the types of internships alumni had secured in the past. Therefore, the alumni list included the internship employer for each of the alumni, and this required internship experience was often the start of the interview conversation.

Students then read about the value and techniques of conducting an informational interview (Decarie, 2010; Kryder, 1999; Lambe, 2000; Rose, 2006). They selected their top three preferences for an alumnus to interview and reviewed material about their assigned alumnus. The instructor made the final selection, with the intent to honor each student's interests and preference but to avoid duplication in selected alumni. The alumni material was available through two online sources: the LinkedIn Profile and the Business Communication Capstone website (www.bizcommucsb.com). This website contains a short biography and linked eportfolio (Dubinsky, 2003) for each graduate from the Business Communication emphasis. Both of these sources gave the students background material needed to prepare questions for the eventual interview; additionally, the LinkedIn Profile provided a current channel to contact the alumnus of choice.

One of the campus career services counselors gave an excellent workshop to the students about the use of LinkedIn for internship and career searches as well as for networking. According to the "What is LinkedIn?" website, LinkedIn is "the world's largest professional network with over 120 million members" (2011). After this workshop and review of the LinkedIn alumni profiles, students became convinced that they too should join this professional community. Indeed, twenty-three of the twenty-four students in the 2011 class then created sites in the LinkedIn community. The twenty-fourth student is "considering creating an account soon" (private e-mail correspondence, 3 August 2011). This creation of LinkedIn profiles was completely voluntary (not required by the assignment). Students were encouraged to study several Business Communication alumni profiles, to learn how former students were promoting their writing and editing skills.

Students conducted their informational interviews over a six-week period, wrote a memo of interview findings for the instructor, and shared their findings with classmates in brief oral presentations. Students had animated discussions about those findings and indicated that this assignment was highly-useful. The results shared in this paper have come directly from those student-alumni conversations.

Project Results for Students

In the following spring quarter, about eight weeks after completing the informational interview assignment, an anonymous survey was given to the twenty-four students in the 2011 class. The survey explored what the students now felt about the assignment and what, if anything, they intended to do as a result. Some of the topics asked about in the survey were whether the interview was informative, and if the students intended to keep in touch with alumni (see Tables 1 and 2).

The results were overwhelmingly positive, as Table 1 indicates. Even if a student's own interview was rated only "decent," the majority of students indicated that they learned from listening to interview findings from other student interviews. Further, the students confirmed that this assignment should continue with future classes; and most were willing to serve as an alumnus to be interviewed in future. Finally, the majority of students (20) were willing to join a LinkedIn group of Business Communication alumni, if one were to be created. Survey

results indicate that the value of professional networking and learning through informational interviews was evident to the students.

Table 1. Survey: Learning from Alumni (Part A)? Source: 2011 class (23 responses; 1 student absent)

	1	2	3	4	5
	Not at all	Slightly	Decent	Informative	Very Informative
How informative was your interview with an alum?	0	0	3	10	10
How useful was your interview with an alum?	0	1	4	10	8
How valuable was the alumna's visit and conversation?	0	1	5	10	7

Table 2. Survey: Learning from Alumni (Part B)? Source: 2011 class (23 responses; 1 student absent)

	Yes	No	Maybe	No answer
Do you plan to keep in touch with "your" alum?	4	2	16	1
Do you think you might contact other alumni?	8	5	10	0
Do you recommend this assignment of alumni interviewing for future classes?	21	0	2	0
Would you be interested in being the alum asked for an interview?	18	0	5	0
Would you be interested in trying [joining] a LinkedIn Group of Biz Comm Alumni?	20	0	3	0

Students from the 2010 capstone were the first to be assigned an alumni informational interview facilitated by LinkedIn. Unlike the students from the 2011 class, they were not given a follow-up survey. However, their post-interview memo reports and discussion of findings provided positive comments about contacting alumni and a suggestion to continue this assignment with future classes. Their written comments are included in the following discussion.

Many of the students in both 2010 and 2011 classes found some comfort and assistance by establishing these alumni connections. One student appreciated her informational interview because it “allowed me to...establish a resourceful contact. As a whole, the interview offered me a lot of practical information and assured me in my job pursuits.” Another student interviewed an alumna who had graduated in 2010 and landed her “dream job” in New York City working for a publisher; the 2011 student explained that this interview “was extremely eye opening and comforting. It was reassuring to know that hard work DOES pay off, despite the economic turmoil...” Several student comments revealed a special friendliness they encountered with these alumni informational interviews. A representative comment from one student from the 2010 class explains that “I had the opportunity to talk to [alumnus] on the phone for an hour. What began as a structured interview with prescribed questions, ended in a comfortable free-flowing conversation.”

The interviewed alumni had positive reviews about the capstone courses. Alumni re-assured students that the eportfolio that they have to create before graduating “sets you above the crowd.” One alumna considers her web portfolio and her website as “the most valuable asset she gained” from the Minor, and explains that “it is still key for demonstrating her skills, whether it is to her clients or potential employers.” For more information about the eportfolios created during the business communication capstone, see “Eportfolios: Proving Competency and Building a Network (Kryder, 2011).

The alumni did not sugarcoat their comments. One 2011 accounting student shared his worry that some of the writing assignments in the minor “didn’t seem to be very applicable to my future career as an accountant.” The alumnus explained that “the writing minor is sort of like calculus: though you may never use everything you learn in your career, it gives you an extra tool to have in your toolbox...it makes you more marketable as an employee...” Another alumna explained that her least favorite task [creating her website with its eportfolio] “has been the most useful in [my] career. Employers have been very impressed with it...” A third alumnus confided that he did not like his internship but “this experience helped [me] learn the importance of taking a job that [I am] passionate about.” The student report that, at this point “he turned around the conversation and told me not to settle for [just] any internship...”

Several of the students were given advice about where they might start their career, such as “don’t be shocked, you start at the bottom and work your way up.” One 2006 graduate gave a series of practical tips that included “Do Not Feel Bad About Moving In With Your Parents” and “Clean Up Your Facebook Account.”

Alumni gave not only career advice but commented on the types of writing they do—and business communication teachers will be familiar with all of these. Students learned that the capstone genres are sound preparation for workplace expectations. The genres that were identified as “important” and “common at work” include press releases, brochures, status reports, proposals, instructions, reports, newsletters, and e-mails (one 2006 alumnus explained that e-mail practice in the capstone was very important, since “I write at least 50 each day”). Another 2006 graduate noted that “the practice writing of so many types of documents proved to be very useful. The practicality of the assignments turned out to be a great transition into what is useful in a real-world job, even if the focus was not writing intensive.” The minor, according to this alumna, is “the first step towards maturity in writing because it demands a businesslike, professional tone that is clear and concise.”

Another alumna reminded students about the importance of being concise: “People hate reading really long things. Short is better.” And a number of alumni specifically recommended LinkedIn for networking—and reminded the students to keep their profile and experience areas updated with new skills and accomplishments.

Two alumni—one from the 2009 class and one from the 2007 class— both found that at first not all their skills and abilities were used at their jobs. But, in time, their previous familiarity with a variety of business genres and their proven ability to write and to work collaboratively (finessed during the capstone classes), accelerated their visibility in their jobs and advanced their careers. Both recommended that students bring their print portfolio to all interviews (the Business Communication emphasis requires both an eportfolio and a print portfolio). As one alumna explained, “Even if they [the interviewers] don’t have time to read everything,” the portfolio leaves a positive impression about the job candidate’s abilities.

Another alumnus, from the 2006 class, joined a Big Four accounting firm. According to his interviewer’s report, “His writing ability with clients earned a special privilege.” Because he had a firm grasp on corporate communication, “[that] gave him a competitive advantage over other employees. [He] was one of the few employees that were allowed to email the company’s clients (a rare privilege for someone of entry level).”

In a smaller organization, one of the alumni was very fortunate to rely upon her Business Communication skills. She explained in an e-mail interview response that

As I got more comfortable with my new colleagues and company in general, I was able to branch out and the skills I got from the writing minor really made me stand out among the other people at my level. They knew I had that background and when we had some layoffs because of the economy, they looked to me to help with writing proposals and help with their marketing campaign.... I [led] a small group to get a marketing strategy going and we created a brochure, a capabilities presentation that our project managers could pitch to clients, and written proposals on our different areas of expertise. Working in tandem with the project managers, I interviewed them and made sure I had all the information they wanted to put in the materials and even wrote some of the proposals. I also helped update the content on our website. These skills really made me stand out and in this economy with companies having a lot of layoffs, you need something that differentiates you!

During the oral reporting session when this particular story was shared, the students gave this alumna comment special attention. It seemed to give the students more confidence in the value of the different documents they needed to produce throughout the capstone cluster. Further, it suggested that patience was important for the newly-employed because it takes time to earn trust and responsibility in an established organization. A fair number of students gained a new respect for the capstone courses they were taking. As one student in the 2010 class reported, “I think the informational interview with [alumna] helped me appreciate the minor in many different ways. I was very surprised at how passionately she felt about the minor and how far it helped her get professionally.”

Some of the alumni gave much more than advice. One of the 2011 students interviewed a 2009 graduate who was now working for an international corporation headquartered in Santa Barbara, Yardi Systems. That alumna had begun her career at Yardi as an intern through the Business Communication capstone internship requirement. She gave advice, recommended books on professional success, and gave the student conducting the interview a copy of one of the recommended books (*The Purple Cow*). This alumna was inspired to ask her management if some of the 2011 Professional Writing Minors could apply for internships and, as a result, three of the Business Communication students were able to secure paid internships in the Yardi Marketing department.

Another alumnus from the 2010 class had helped co-found an environmental education non-profit, Environmental Education for a New Generation (EENG). The organization wanted to work on grant acquisition

and the development of social media; it also offered four internships to students from the 2011 class. The social media campaign that these interns created helped that nonprofit to win a \$100,000 prize (Gautschi, 2011).

Project Results for the Instructor

The alumni feedback supported the variety of projects and genres the capstone cluster offers over two quarters. These include at least two collaborative projects with deliverables to a community “client” (usually a local non-profit or business). Deliverables for different projects have included a social media marketing campaign plan, a proposed website re-design, a media kit, newsletters and brochures.

Several alumni remarked on the need for more in-class, timed writings. These alumni explained that writing tests were given to them as part of the job interview process. Also, they noted the frequency of having to write documents (news releases, in particular) in a short amount of time. A 2008 alumna noted that “it would have been beneficial for the Minor to prepare students more for impacted deadlines through timed in-class writing assignments. This would have simulated and prepared [me] for the requests...to write press releases in under an hour.”

Alumni commented specifically on the value of three capstone elements: (1) informational interviews, (2) a fund-raising letter, (3) and project status reports. One student who works at a high-tech marketing agency asserted that the group project planning and execution required for the collaborative projects was valuable experience because “the people who climb fast are not the best writers or thinkers, but [they are the] project managers—those who excel at managing accounts with a large number of moving parts.”

Alumni feedback supported recent communication trends, such as the use of online social networking by business, government, and non-profit organizations. They also commented on increased use of informational videos.

Business Communication teachers may want to incorporate a similar assignment for an informational interview with their alumni. Because UCSB is a “young” university (founded about 50 years ago), it does not have a deep alumni network such as many East Coast and Midwest universities have. Our professional graduate schools are in education and environmental science, with no MBA program. So the business communication students really can benefit from the opportunity to make these alumni ties. Students in sororities and fraternities may have stronger alumni ties with more frequent encounters, but many of the students are not members of the Greek System. Thus, efforts made in business communication classes can fill an important need.

Discussion of Findings

So far, the initial findings reported through the student-alumni informational interviews, simply affirmed the relevance of the curriculum offered and sparked some curriculum enhancement. This instructor plans to continue use of LinkedIn and informational interviews, and will add some alumni-inspired assignments.

The frequency of employer-administered, timed writing tests and the pressing time constraints for modern work convinced this instructor to include at least two timed writing exercises (to be performed on a computer in our computer lab) to the Business Communication track’s curriculum. Based on other alumni suggestions, the 2011 curriculum included the study and use of social media and team-authored informational videos.

LinkedIn is a professional networking community and proved to be a useful tool to facilitate contact; it also can serve to motivate students to begin crossing the boundary between academic and workplace settings. As Christina Decarie asserted in her recent *Business Communication Quarterly* article, social networks (her article focused on Facebook) require “persuasive writing strategies” and skills, and if used wisely are “a means of self-representation and self-promotion” (2010). It is helpful for the graduating seniors, especially, to see how alumni have framed their undergraduate experiences. The following two-part assignment will be used. Students would be required to view selected alumni profiles to observe the responsibilities and writing skills noted by the alumni. Then students would be asked to construct their own profile *as they might post on LinkedIn*. Students would not be required to actually establish a profile and presence on LinkedIn, but perhaps their review of other profiles and the construction of an offline profile might spark a useful self-assessment that motivates professional development. This assignment, as well as a timed, in-lab writing, will be included in the instructor’s entry-level business communication course.

More ethnographic studies of business communication alumni in the workplace should be conducted. We need to discover how new employees learn and what role mentors and professional networks play in their successful transition from school to work. Several researchers (among them Adam, 2000; Beaufort, 2000; Brady, 2007; Katz, 1998; MacKinnon and Spilka, 1993) have noted that new employees experience “situated learning” which enables their successful transition into the professional workplace. Can the business communication curriculum provide a similar learning opportunity through use of social networking and required informational interviews with alumni?

Conclusion

This contact with alumni, facilitated by LinkedIn, provided what Rebecca Pope-Ruark identified as the important “authentic audience” for business communication students (2011). While alumni cannot be expected to function as mentors (although a few have been very generous), it seems that alumni can serve as helpful guides for students in their transition from academic to workplace settings. This supports an argument made by Jeanne Marie Rose in her 2006 article published in the *Business Communication Quarterly*: “by using alumni as a means of accessing corporate culture, the [alumni informational interview] offers a new frame for teaching undergraduates about the complexity of workplace communication” (284). The modeling available through LinkedIn profiles and the ability for students and alumni to meet in a virtual community of professionals, perhaps make the transition between academic and workplace communities more successful.

The informational interviews with alumni and facilitated by LinkedIn were conducted by the students, not by the instructor, so that students could benefit personally as well as professionally from the experience. The assignment’s data-gathering and reporting was an exercise for written communication and rhetorical development, but the assignment as a whole had a larger purpose: for business communication students to practice professional networking and to learn through that networking. Simply, the informational interview was a vehicle to interact with an authentic, outside-the-classroom audience.

Students often feel disoriented as they move from one known environment (school) to the unknown professional world. Yet this project’s alumni-student interaction may bring some comfort for that transition. As one student from the 2010 class reported, “This interactive, learning experience coupled with my two interviewees’ valuable wisdom [the student had conducted two alumni interviews] has most definitely improved my interviewing and writing skills. In addition, [these alumni] are now part of my networking community seeing that I am connected to them through LinkedIn” Additionally, by establishing a presence

within the LinkedIn professional community, the students have taken another step across that challenging boundary between school and workplace.

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