Defining Employer Expectations: Communication Activities, Behaviors, and Events in the 21st Century Business Environment

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Abstract

A mismatch between academic goals and employer expectations has been an ongoing question in business communication research. For more than a century, writing instruction has been deemed inadequate for workplace purposes, while oral and media communication skills lack consistent definitions. Employers inconsistently report the value of presentational communication over interpersonal communication as a key factor in career success. Business audiences expect a level of interaction and discussion that is seldom understood as part of the undergraduate speech curriculum. Academic learning goals appear to prioritize delivery skills over content elements. Faculty and executive audiences rate presentations differently—and are perhaps looking for very different things as measures of excellence. Rather than ask which academic learning goals are most valuable to employers, this project adopts a customer service perspective to define workplace communication competence in terms of employer expectations.

A recurring motif in business communication research highlights the discontinuities among the academic curriculum, employer needs, and student performance. For more than a hundred years, business professionals have complained that University graduates lack acceptable writing skills (Adams, 1993; Russell, 1992) with writing courses becoming a standard feature of the business curriculum by the mid twentieth century (Knight, 1999; Russell, 1991) and an expectation of accreditation (AACSB International, 2013). Nevertheless, complaints have continued about graduates' writing skills (for example, Canavor & Meirowitz, 2005; Middleton, 2011; Northy, 1990; Odell, 1980; Smith, 2011; Wise, 2005).

Similarly, multiple investigations have shown continuing divergence between employer priorities and business curricula across a range of oral communication skills. Employers consistently prioritize interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and conversational skills for recent graduates (Bogert & Butt, 1996; Cyphert, 1993, 2006b; DiSalvo, 1980; Harris, 1983; Holter & Kopka, 2001; Kretovics & McCambridge, 1998; Stevens, 2005), but the business curriculum tends to emphasize prepared presentations instead (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Cyphert, 1993; Russ, 2009; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999).

In some cases, professional concerns seem to have diverged from academic priorities entirely. For example, since the mid-1980s, employers have been adamant that team communication skills are essential to success in a business career (Hyslop & Faris, 1984; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2006; Scholtes, 1998; Worley & Dyrud, 2001), a construct that covers a broad range of both conceptual knowledge and work practices. For employers, the goal is broadly participative management with workers

capable of team-based decision making and problem solving (Drehmer, Belohlav, & Coye, 2000; Flin, O'Connor, & Mearns, 2002; Nutt, 2004) requiring practical skills of meeting facilitation and creativity (McFadzean, 2002), reasoned argument (Metcalfe, 2002), and cross-functional understanding (Safoutin & Thurston, 1993). Meanwhile, academic research on and instruction of group communication focuses on underlying principles of psychology, critical thinking, or sociology, leaving research in the practical problems of collaborative decision making to practitioners and software developers. Philosophical differences, competing theories, and contradictory outcomes drive further research, but academic curiosity over the persistent mismatch offers no real impetus toward pragmatic, pedagogical solutions.

Curriculum change processes are slow compared to business' responsiveness to changing needs (Tanyel, Mitchell, & McAlum, 1999). In contrast, public, legislative, and administrative concerns for instructional accountability call for a curriculum aligned with the social, professional, and personal goals of graduates. These stakeholders might appreciate the value of pure, even esoteric, research in some contexts, but this does not negate their demand for attention to a more pragmatic research question: What expectations do employers have for communication among recent university graduates? This question includes careful attention to a) the terms used to describe expected communication tasks, b) the characteristics of specific activities, behaviors, or events described by those terms, c) the levels of expertise expected of recent graduates as they perform the tasks, and d) measures of performance that are typically used to evaluate those who perform the tasks.

The Service Industry Approach in Education

Issues of accountability, professional relevance, and objective measures of performance are no longer new for our College of Business Administration, and we turn again to a proven methodology (Cyphert & Lyle, in press).

The Targeted Skills Gap Analysis Methodology

In response to external demands for greater accountability, the university's mission to "strengthen the educational, social, cultural, and economic development of Iowa and the larger community" (University of Northern Iowa, n.d., ¶1.02) had led to the development of a framework to determine the degree to which that goal was being met. Beginning with methods developed to describe and measure quality across service industries (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988), a team of MBA students adapted the procedure to the specific context of higher education, developing the Skills Gap Analysis methodology (Manning, Meyer, & Verma, 2012).

In many respects, the educational processes of a university exhibit the characteristics of any service industry. Service industries are characterized by the *intangible*, *heterogeneous*, *inseparable* nature of their product, such that customer expectations can be relevant at multiple points in the service delivery process. The service provider is understood to be the university, while the customer who uses the service is the employer. The resulting Targeted Skill Gap Analysis framework (Manning et al., 2012, p. 5) includes seven potential gaps in the delivery of educational services to the State's employers (Figure 1).
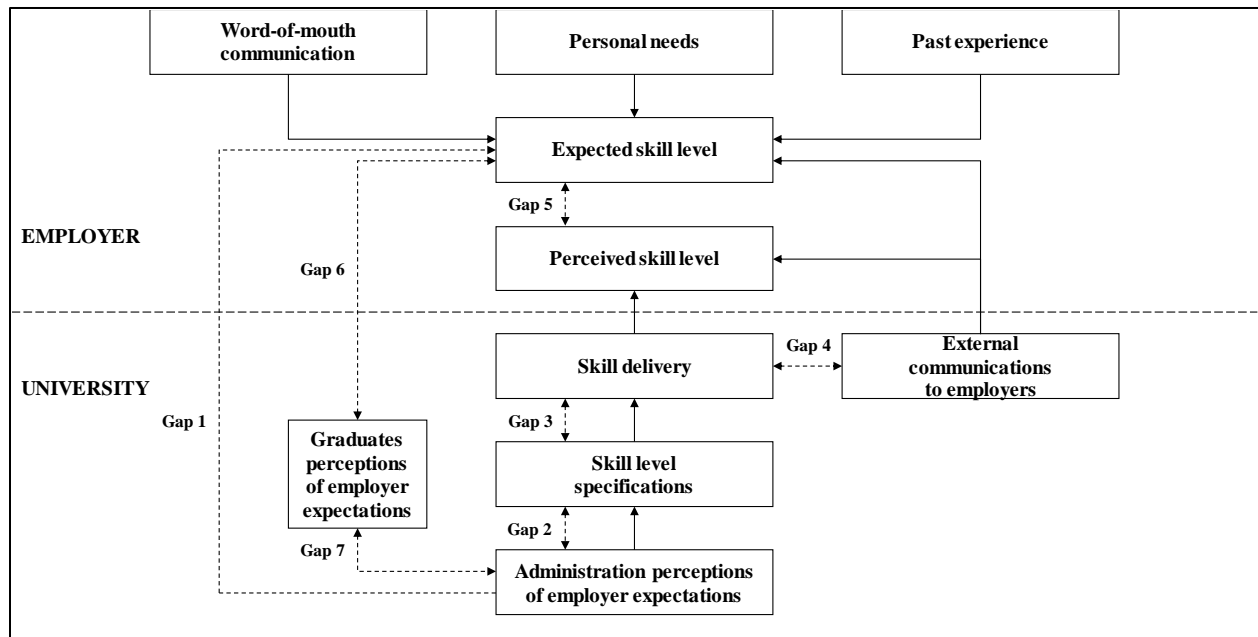
Word-of-mouth communication | Personal needs | Past experience

Expected skill level

Gap 5

EMPLOYER

Perceived skill level

Gap 6

UNIVERSITY

Gap 1

Skill delivery — Gap 4 — External communications to employers

Graduates perceptions of employer expectations

Gap 3

Skill level specifications

Gap 2

Gap 7

Administration perceptions of employer expectations

Figure 1. Possible Service Delivery Gaps.

Each of the gaps represents a point at which there can be differences in the expectations service. Gap 1 illustrates the differences between what employers expect of new employees and what the University perceives those expectations to be. Gaps 2, 3, and 4, all represent potential discrepancies within the service provider's operation. Gap 2 represents a difference in the faculty understanding on an employer's skill requirements and the skill targets specified within the educational process, while Gap 3 indicates the degree to which instructional process does not result in the targeted learning objectives. Gap 4 reflects an important insight from the service quality research: there can be discrepancies between the actual service delivered and the level of service that is advertised to consumers. The expectational discrepancy on the consumer side as well, represented here as Gap 5, has been shown to have the most impact on customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Alumni Skills as Service Characteristics

The experiential service quality characteristics have been applied to higher education (for example, Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Rowley, 1997), but the transaction is typically framed in terms of students-as-customers' satisfaction with their overall educational experience. To address the question of service quality in terms of employer satisfaction, service dimensions were conceptualized in terms of the functional and technical aspects of the students' performance of their education within the workplace. That is, the University, which includes administrative, faculty, and student partners, is understood to be serving its employer, civic, or academic post-graduate program customers by producing graduates with some set of expected knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The utility of the model depends, however, on the degree to which service indicators are salient to the targeted market. Thus, accurate assessment of the university's service quality (e.g. skills exhibited by its graduates) requires careful attention to the expectations of the customer.

Service gaps are measured by asking respondents to indicate both the *expected* level of service and their *perceptions* of the actual service delivered (Parasuraman et al., 1988), with the average difference

providing a measure of the service gap. A full map of the service delivery process would involve data collection on each of the expectational gaps shown in Figure 1 above, but in practical terms, initial data collection efforts focus on the customer's perception and satisfaction with the service experience, designated as Gap 5.

Once data is collected, the creation of a Skill Focus Decision Matrix offers guidance for managing a University's service delivery process. There could be multiple points at which a service delivery process is not providing outcomes that meet customer expectations, and any service provider will benefit from prioritizing its remedies in a responsive way. The results are plotted on a two dimensional decision matrix: skill expected versus skill received, as shown in Figure 2. The service expectation—the skill level sought in University graduates—is plotted on the x-axis, with the perception of the skill performance actually received from those same graduates plotted on the y-axis. A perfect match is represented as the dashed diagonal line, x=y, and a service gap is represented by the vertical distance between the dashed diagonal line and a plotted point. Four quadrants are created with vertical and horizontal lines drawn at the mean values of skill levels sought and delivered. These quadrants can be prioritized based on the relative skill gaps and relative skill level, prioritizing management concentration where the most important gaps occur.
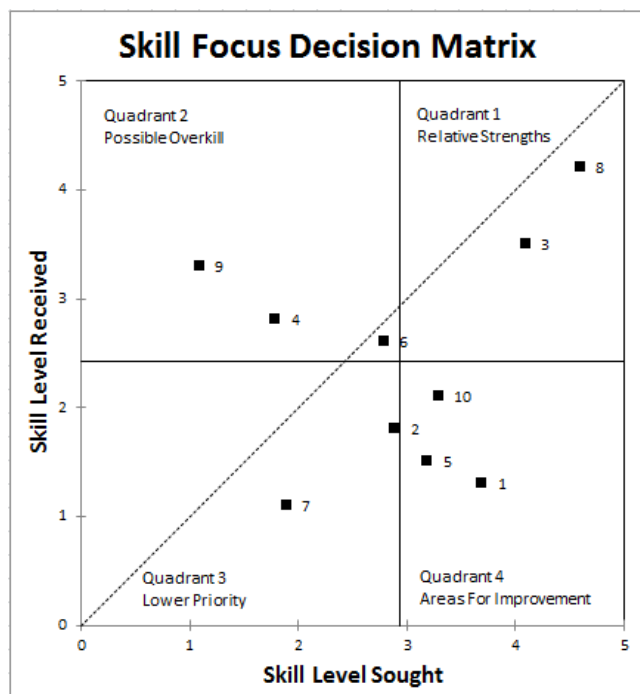

Figure 2. Skill Focus Decision Matrix (Manning et al., 2012).

In Quadrant 1, Relative Strengths, skill performance is generally being delivered as expected, although both excesses and deficiencies could exist. Because the quadrant lies above the mean with respect to the level of *all* skills expected, these skills might also represent a competitive advantage for the university. Students delivering the high level of skills desired by employers help to establish a University's reputation, but unmet expectations in this quadrant probably deserve quick attention.

Quadrant 2, Possible Overkill, includes skills that are generally delivered at a level exceeding expectations, but perhaps not to the institution's advantage. The level of skills expected falls below the mean, while skills delivered are consistently above the mean of those expected from college graduates. This quadrant thus represents areas where organizational resources might be over-allocated.

In Quadrant 3, Lower Priority, improvements could be made, but expectations and service delivered are in rough equilibrium. Both the employer expectations and the skills delivered lie below the mean of all skills, suggesting that the employer has no immediate concern with receiving these particular skills at a higher level.

The area of most concern is thus Quadrant 4, Areas for Improvement. This is the critical area where high customer service expectations are consistently disappointed. Not only does the level of service expected lie above the mean, but skills do not meet the mean level of all skills perceived. Further, the skills tend to show a negative gap between expectation and perceived delivery. This is the quadrant in which customers expect a higher than average level of service—whether due to previous experience, marketing efforts, the high-quality location of a business, or some other factor—but they receive a lower than average level of service.

In this context, skills appearing in quadrant four represent areas where the University is not providing an acceptable level of service to serve the economic interests of the state. This model could be applied in civic or social contexts, of course, with the advantage of graphically representing those dimensions of service quality that are both most important to the community and perceived as least adequately met. In an ideal world, all elements of service delivery would be addressed by a provider, but under less than ideal circumstances, the Target Skill Gap Analysis offers a way to determine where resources might be most effectively deployed.

The author's university had piloted a protocol to measure and analyze gaps between employer expectations and graduates' workplace performance (Manning et al., 2012), which had subsequently been used to explore undergraduate preparation in business research (Cyphert and Lyle (in press)). It seemed reasonable to utilize a similar protocol to define employer expectations for the business school's graduates and resolve the mystery of mismatched academic and employer goals. With a survey instrument that accurately reflects employer expectations, we can also measure the degree to which graduates meet employer needs and develop a responsive curriculum.

Methodology: Asking the Right Questions

As with service providers more generally, the primary goal of University outcomes assessment calls for a focus on graduates' delivery of targeted communication skills, Gap #5. Any measure of this gap depends, however, on definitional agreement about the skills themselves. The alternative, identified in the model as Gaps 6 and 7, is that the service provider (itself a co-constructed administration-faculty-student relationship) and customers do not share the same perception of desired outcomes. This discrepancy led to revisions in the original SERVQUAL formulation (Parasuraman et al., 1988) , and subsequent users have found the need to carefully define service expectations, developing instruments that are unique to each industry. We are thus not surprised to find that developing the survey instrument—the set of expected employee skills—is neither straightforward nor easy.

The authors began with the observation that our own College had not revisited its communication goals since the invention of email--not to mention social media, slide decks, and walking meetings. We expected

that technology and global supply chains would have influenced professional communication practices. We also recognized the ongoing evidence of misaligned workplace and academic priorities across multiple communication domains. Our research thus proceeded in two stages.

First, in an effort to ensure that our own academic assumptions and priorities did not inadvertently bias our efforts to define employer expectations, we reviewed previous research, which we found in five major categories of misalignment, and identified several cautionary issues within each. Our aim was to locate potential reasons for the ongoing problem of mismatch so that we might avoid replicating those factors. Our second step involved primary research with employers. Validity in the measurement of customer expectations requires careful attention to both operational accuracy and salience to the service experience. Guided by the insights from our literature review, we developed an appropriately professional interview vocabulary and refined the interview results in multiple iterations of content analysis and employer review.

Previous research was located across multiple disciplines, including journals in composition and writing instruction, speech communication, management, and business communication. The results appeared as five general areas of concern: written communication skills, the relative importance of presentational and interpersonal communication, presentation styles, team communication skills, and the relative importance of written and oral communication. Our aim was not to create a formal typology, although a cursory comparison of the issues does suggest that these categories might reflect qualitatively different sources of misalignment.

Professional and Academic Perspectives on Written Communication

We begin with mismatched expectations in the area of written communication, in part because those were among the earliest published complaints of unprepared college graduates. We find three primary explanations for the problem: the implicit gatekeeper role of educational institutions, dissimilar professional and academic discourse communities, and the nature of instructional practice.

Foundational Skills, Educational Access, and the Gatekeeper Role

The earliest charges of insufficient writing preparation can be traced to post Civil War calls for "more practical" university curricula (Russell, 1991, p. 46) coupled with faculty complaints as universities evolved from traditionally oral recitations and exams of the liberal arts university toward modern academia's disciplinary structure and reliance on written examinations. Harvard responded with a writing entrance exam in 1874, which more than half the incoming students failed. The university thereupon instituted a freshman writing course in 1885, intended as a stopgap until "the secondary schools could improve" (Conners, 1995, p. 5). Most US universities quickly followed suit, and land grant universities, faced with expanding enrollment as well as the increasing emphasis on professional specialization, replaced disciplinary writing requirements with a writing course in the English department (Russell, 1991).

A similar response to the post-WW II expansion of educational access led many universities to replace the classical liberal arts curriculum with a foundational general education core that included general writing courses (Russell, 1995). Another wave of expansion took place in the late 1960s, when social and political pressure forced universities to accommodate large numbers of "students from previously excluded groups" and reshaped both curriculum and composition research "along developmental lines" (Russell, 1992, p. 32). Recession and global trade pressures in the 1970s led to yet another expansion of foundational writing courses. The focus on "basic skills" needed in the workplace (Business Council for

Effective Literacy, 1987; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), 1991) led to a "renewed emphasis on mechanical correctness and 'skills' –now dubbed 'back to the basics'" (Russell, 1992, p. 35).

Universities entering the 21st century find themselves facing yet another expansion of their student bodies, with universal education touted as the stepping-stone to the middle class. The proportion of high school graduates with solid writing skills has remained steady since the 1980s, but the number of graduates seeking higher education has soared (Jameson, 2007). Thus far, writing instruction has not kept pace with the expansion of college education and lowered levels of literacy and writing preparation (Jameson, 2007).

One factor in the mismatch of writing preparation begins with a failure to recognize the double role of language as both communication tool and community identifier, discussed below. Beneath surface complaints about writing, lies an implicit expectation that a university education ensure that graduates' maturity, social conformity, and social class will meet social and professional expectations (A. Anderson, Brown, Shillcock, & Yule, 1984; Beason, 2001; Beder, 1991; Cameron, 1995; Crowley, 1995; Hairston, 1981; Johnson, 2003). As practitioners, business professionals report a priority of effectiveness and appropriateness over grammar (P. V. Anderson, 1985; Beason, 2001; Leonard & Gilsdorf, 1990; Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008), but at the same time, basic language skills signal cultural and social work readiness independently of the communication task (Reinsch, Gardner, & Berland, 2011).

We discuss specific instructional issues below, but on purely philosophical grounds, many academics have resisted the gatekeeper role, charging that concerns with professional preparation distort the proper function of a university (Kolowich, 2009; Nisbet, 1971). However, business faculty seem comfortable with the presumptions of both professional readiness and foundational writing models, often pointing to the importance of enforcing K-12 language skills as a prerequisite to the development of more sophisticated critical thinking or rhetorical skills (for example, Cyphert, 2011; Plutsky & Wilson, 2001; Smith, 2011; Stine & Skarzenski, 1979).

The Unique Discourse Practices of the Business Community

The notion that groups of people exhibit distinctive discourse practices is credited to sociologist Martin Nystrand (1982) and further developed by linguist John Swales (1990), who documented the unique features of academic writing—and academic writing instruction. Over the next couple of decades, research had clearly demonstrated the distinctive features of business discourse, which is very unlike academic discourse (Daniel, 2012; Hill, 1995; MacKinnon, 1993; Davies, 2000; Mabrito, 1999), as are the practical factors of timeliness (Neher & Heidewald, 2015), collaboration (Mabrito, 1999), variability (Petraglia, 1995; Mendelson, 1987), socio-political dynamics (Davies & Birbili, 2000; Miller, 2000; Hill, 1995; Paradis, Dobrin, & Miller, 1985; Beaufort, 1999), rhetorical complexity (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999; Bazerman & Paradis, 1991; Beaufort, 1999; Broadhead & Freed, 1986; Couture & Rymer, 1993; Henry, 2000; Matalene, 1989; Odell & Goswami, 1985), unfamiliar content knowledge, and greater cognitive demands (Davies & Birbili, 2000) of a professional setting.

Writing skills develop as a student develops expertise with a particular context, activity or task, moving over time from a peripheral, apprenticeship position toward fluency (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Johnstone, Ashbaugh, & Warfield, 2002; Wardle & Roozen, 2012). New employees, regardless of their academic writing skill, will require socialization and learning to become adequate professional writers. Regardless of learning goals, faculty effort, or instructional quality, it might be that competent workplace writing simply

cannot develop in the classroom (Anderson, 1985; Petraglia, 1995; Hill, 1995; Freedman, 1994; Shaver, 2007).

Instructional Deficiencies in Type, Quantity, or Quality

A considerable literature blames poor writing skill on changes or failures in instructional practices. Writing proficiency exams, once common in liberal arts universities, are a thing of the past (Grant, D. personal communication 5 Jul 2016), grade inflation runs rampant (Jaschik, 2016), and business majors, in particular, study less (Glenn, 2011) and develop weaker thinking and writing skills than other majors (Arum, Roksa, Kim, Potter, & Velez, 2011). Some instructional problems might indeed stem directly from structural changes in the academic environment. General economic and social factors undoubtedly play a role, with all university faculties facing larger class sizes and teaching loads, more students working part time jobs, and increasing pressure for retention and graduation rates. Nevertheless, research has pointed to specific problems in writing instruction that cluster around four basic issues: isolation of writing from a social or disciplinary context, authenticity of the writing task, separation of language from content, and instructional resource allocations.

The first pedagogy-based calls to abolish freestanding writing courses, which were quickly becoming a permanent institution, began before the end of the nineteenth century (Conners, 1995). By the 1930's programs in "writing across the curriculum" were developed to solve the original problem of insufficient secondary preparation without succumbing to the "erroneous assumption that 'life-long habits of expression can be modified in a relatively short period of time'" (Conners, 1995, p.11). Beyond the straightforward problem of time allocated to instruction, discussed further below, composition theorists have presented multiple deficiencies in the "foundational" writing instructional model, which assumes writing involves learning transferrable skills that can be later applied to a wider range of civic, career, and social contexts (Conners, 1995; Petraglia, 1995; Russell, 1995). The desire for curricular efficiency leads to teaching vague, abstracted principles that have no specific utility, likened to offering courses in general ball-handling skills with the expectation that students could thereby improve their performance in "ping-pong, jacks, volleyball, basketball, field hockey, and so on" (Russell, p. 58). Programs that return writing instruction to the academic disciplines allow students to learn "the genres that are important to each discipline" (Russell, 1995, p. 72) and foundational to absorbing the norms of disciplinary thought (Langer, 1992). Success requires considerable faculty development and participation (Farrington Pollard & Easter, 2006), but studies show that students do develop transferable, professionally relevant skills by practicing them across their entire academic program (Dana, Hancock, & Phillips, 2011).

A similar problem arises at the level of instructional practice. Not only are there important differences between academic writing learned in a general writing course and disciplinary genre, there are also socially embedded cues that govern the rhetorically relevant *act* of writing within a social context. Highly linear, process-focused models of writing are rejected, for instance, because they do not represent (or socialize students into) an authentic writing environment (Couture & Rymer, 1993; Odell, 1992; Sommers, 1980). Professional measures of good writing include timeliness, appropriateness, effectiveness and clarity—measures necessarily defined in terms of the goals, intended audience and organizational context that make up a specific rhetorical situation. Learning language styles or composition steps accomplishes little without learning *when* to use the styles or take the steps to accomplish professionally relevant communication tasks. At the most practical level, only rhetorically authentic social norms can motivate students to engage in the difficult and time-consuming work of developing their writing skills. Students readily admit to skipping steps of audience analysis, revision, and proofreading because they perceive them to be more time consuming than warranted by their impact on the subsequent grade (CBA Students,

2012). Effective writing, like any communication behavior, develops over time with multiple rounds of socializing feedback, but motivations for revision are lacking in the instructional setting where students instead take a "satisficing" approach and do only the steps needed to fulfill assignment requirements (Rappaport & Cawelti, 1993).

Regardless of the discipline or context, research finds a strong and consistent relationship between knowledge of the topic and overall quality of writing (Langer, 1984). Writing deficiencies can be traced to inadequate understanding of the subject matter (Cyphert, Malm, & Goro, 2012; Russell, 1992), and writing has been shown useful in developing cognitive knowledge and understanding of a content area (Emig, 1977; Fulwiler, 1982). In practice, disciplinary faculty rarely challenge students to explain claims or conclusions, with most assignments asking only for a summary of information presented in lecture or textbook (J. A. Langer, 1992), and the influx of students not already fluent in conventional middle class language forms face unique developmental needs (McAlexander, 2000). Nevertheless, writing across the curriculum proponents consistently point to disciplinary writing as a means to develop superior content knowledge (Petraglia, 1995).

Throughout the research, the pragmatic issue of instructional resources appears as a factor. A reallocation of resources drove the 19th century invention of general writing courses. Disciplinary faculty, previously engaged in developing students language and thinking skills, now had to spend their time and energy on research, graduate teaching, and the practical topics of their own field (Russell, 1991). Subsequent reductions in the number of required writing courses were similarly motivated (Russell, 1991), and by the 1940s, first year composition courses were the province of junior, temporary and graduate student instructors (Russell, 1992). Meanwhile, the disciplinary attention to writing was "almost entirely at the discretion of individual faculty members, who had few incentives from their institutions or from their disciplines to pursue these tasks" (Russell, 1992, p. 25). Resources remain a factor even at the instructional level. The best writing instruction involves time-consuming interactive feedback activities (Redd, 2012; Riordan, Riordan, & Sullivan, 2000), literary criticism (Egan, 1998), personal or reflective writing (Lawrence, 2007), service learning (Cyphert, 2006a), and individual conferencing (Haswell, 2008), but instructors opt for easier and less time consuming, but less effective methods (Haswell, 2008; Smith, 2011). The most common tactic, simply correcting students' mechanical and grammatical errors (Russell, 1992), has been shown to be a largely ineffective instructional method (Boehnlein, 1995; Cox, Bobrowski, & Spector, 2004; Haswell, 2008; Rappaport & Cawelti, 1993; Welker & Berardino, 2009).

Even the ongoing dissatisfaction with student preparation reflects resource allocation at a social and civil level. Many college instructors, administrators, and researchers point to the nation's K-12 preparation as the source of most college-writing problems. The general writing course was a response to expanded access to college education in the first place, but by many accounts, the gap has grown larger. Grammar is no longer consistently taught in US high schools, considered by some to be a major difficulty for both university level coursework and ultimately, professional contexts (Quible, 2007). Some reject a focus on basic mechanics as discriminatory (Kotzee, 2011), judging critical thinking (Kotzee, 2011) or cognitive development (Ruenzel, 1995) to be more important at the secondary level. The latest effort to fix the problem involves the Common Core initiative, which dramatically raises the bar for acceptable high-school writing performance (Tyre, 2012). Nearly all states have signed on to the program, incentivized by stimulus funds in 2010, although resistance among educators and the general public appears to be growing (Kirp, 2014; Ujifusa, 2007).

Conclusions and Cautions

1. Distinguish between relational (i.e. maturity, attitude, status) markers and task elements of communication events.
2. Avoid any decontextualized sense of skills apart from their rhetorical context; focus on tasks as they actually occur.
3. Recognize the inherent connection between writing process and content, such that preparation steps of research or organizational knowledge might be key skill elements.
4. Instructional resources should not drive the selection of learning goals, although we might be cautious about assuming that we could ever be able to prepare students to communicate in a fully professional way prior to graduation.

Prioritizing Presentations Over Interpersonal Communication

Overall, there have been fewer public concerns about graduates' preparation in oral communication skills, but the literature demonstrates slowly developing misgivings about the academic emphasis on formal presentations at the expense of interpersonal communication skills (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Means, 1983). Three factors seem to explain this emergent mismatch: fading distinctions between management and employee skill expectations, an academic bias toward formal speech instruction, and difficulties in designing theoretically and methodologically sound research on the topic.

Interpersonal Sophistication in a Flat Organization

Over the past half-century, numerous studies have demonstrated increased expectations for strong interpersonal communication skills among entry-level workers. Explanations have included increasing corporate attention to communication across a global supply chain (Swenson, 1980), a technology-driven shift to an information economy (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010). Complaints about poor employee preparation were first brushed aside as industry's normal desire for better gatekeeping, as discussed above, but by the late 1980's technological change, global trade, and the end of recession had clearly led to lean organizational structures with more complex jobs that required better skills (Fabris, 2015).

As discussed above in the realm of written communication, changing business practices require continuous attention, but in the case of interpersonal communication, the academic response has been complicated by curriculum distinctions between *management* and *employee* education. With post-WWII transformations in managerial theory, that discipline quickly recognized the importance of communication for effective organizational management (Argyris, 1967; Deming, 1986; Drucker, 1959; Fayard & Weeks, 2004; Mintzberg, 1975; Terziovski, 2002; Weick, 1979), and theorists have developed a rich understanding of the organization as a communicating, learning system (Senge, 1994; Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick, 2002). Managerial communication skill is widely recognized as foundational to career success (Reinsch, 1997; Halfhill, 2007).

As a result, communication is often included in management curricula at both the MBA and undergraduate level (Bigelow, 1999) and constitutes a requirement for accreditation of such programs (AACSB International, 2013). The accreditation language is typical—and telling. Communication learning goals are bifurcated, separating instrumental information transfer ("communicate effectively orally and in writing") from organizationally relevant interaction ("able to work effectively with others and in team environments"). No intellectual history fully explains this seemingly arbitrary conceptual distinction

between *communication* and *interpersonal* skills, but the effect has been to focus undergraduate business education on instrumental message creation, reserving more sophisticated but increasingly important relational and strategic aspects of communication for management majors and graduate students.

By 1980, a typical MBA program might include interpersonal and organizational communication, while undergraduate programs emphasized "oral presentations" along with written communication (Means, 1983, p. 2). Management textbooks typically include a chapter on communication that theorizes organizational communication topics such as information flow within an organization (Certo, 1994), managerial impact of channel choices (Daft & Marcic, 2004; Jones & George, 2008), communication technology and crisis communication (Daft, 2012) and social media (Schermerhorn, 2013), but offer virtually no specific skill development instruction. On the other hand interpersonal communication skills are common textbook topics in managerial communication (Clampitt, 2012), leadership (Gamble & Gamble, 2013), negotiation, or organizational behavior, and these courses are far more likely to ask students to engage in the critical thinking (Ireland, 2012) and reflection (Lawrence, 2007) that are foundational to rhetorically competent interpersonal communication.

Meanwhile, the business communication course typically taken by all business majors, explicitly geared toward instrumental communication, focuses on workplace writing, professional communication protocol, business presentations, and job search communication (for example, Guffey, 2010; Bovee, 2011; Munter, 2011). In spite of radical transformations in organizational structure and business practices, academic curricula reflect the top-down communication presumptions of the 19th century: management demands the use of sophisticated, organizationally relevant interpersonal communication skills, while employees perform work by effectively transferring information.

Academic Bias for Familiar, Easy, Assessable Instruction

Although the underlying issues might be far more complicated, a proximate cause of the enduring mismatch probably involves academic bias and inertia. Many academic faculty have had minimal experience as business professionals, and what experience they have had might not be recent. As a result, they might simply be unaware of the relative importance and sophistication of interpersonal communication in that highly complex social environment. Brink and Costigan (2015) point further to an "egocentric bias" that projects the frequent academic use of formal presentations onto other professional contexts (p. 215), while Cyphert pointed out the degree to which instructors defer to textbooks' emphasis on presentation skills (1993).

Even acknowledging the importance of interpersonal communication skills, the difficulty of developing professionally relevant skills, especially in a decontextualized classroom setting, has been acknowledged by communication faculty (Ford & Wolvin, 2009). Coupled with institutional pressures to achieve assessed learning outcomes, Brink and Costigan (2015) somewhat cynically suggest that attention to presentation skills simply offers the "safest and easiest way" for a business curriculum to meet learning goals in communication.

Contradictory reports from different elements of the business community further complicate the situation. Corporate executives often attribute career success to speaking skill (J. C. Bennett, 1971; K. Bennett & Rhodes, 1988), and no empirical evidence disproves this claim (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Given the robust history of teaching presentational communication as part of the business curriculum (Krapels & Arnold, 1996), faculty might reasonably choose to continue on what appears to be a successful path. Given two

equally important types of communication and limited instructional resources, staying with the tried and true seems perfectly sensible.

Insufficient Knowledge About Workplace Communication

A lack of adequate research is a commonly cited reason for the mismatch in oral communication preparation. Some have framed the solution as a relatively simple matter of developing closer, ongoing connections with the business community (Conrad, 2011) and appreciation for "practitioners' emphasis on...practical outcomes" (Conrad & Newberry, 2011, p. 113). However, the issue involves more than finding time for job shadowing or willing research participants (neither of which is trivial). Research has suffered from theoretical lapses and poor methodology as well (Adkins, 1978; P. V. Anderson, 1985; Hanna, 1978), some echoing the definitional anomalies noted previously.

Brink and Costigan (2015), for example, point to an "absence of communication theory, a bona fide typology of workplace [oral communication] skills or even a common definition of [oral communication]" (p. 215), but their review of the attempt presupposes the possibility of tightly defined and functionally differentiated skills. The rich history of scholarship in organizational discourse (for example, Latour, 1979; Matalene, 1989; Odell, 1985; Cooren, 2013; Boden, 1994) and organizational communication (for example, Cheney, 2001; Deetz, 1990; McPhee, 1985; Putnam, 1983; Shaw, 2004; Taylor, 2000) demonstrates the rhetorically complex nature of any large organization. All communication necessarily encompasses both functional and relational elements (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Keyton et al., 2013), refuting any meaningful distinction between *communication* and *interpersonal* skills and highlighting the fundamental impossibility of assessing communication competence independently of the rhetorical situation (Beebe, 2003).

After an exhaustive review of the inconclusive and contradictory results to create an objective typology of business communication skills, Cyphert and Wurtz (2009) concluded that previous research had not taken into account the different communication goals, discourse norms, and outcome criteria assumed by academic, human resources, and management subjects (see also Keyton, et al., 2013). Successful interpersonal communication must be appropriate as well as skillful (Cupach, 1983), and without accounting for the rhetorical situation in each case, it is simply impossible to predict or evaluate the importance or effectiveness of a specific communication behavior.

A second area of concern involves a research focus on vocal, face-to-face modes of communication despite the highly mediated contemporary work environment where the importance of non-verbal signals is well-established (Richmond, McCroskey, & Powell, 2013). Brink and Costigan (2015) offer no reason to set aside electronic communication or the "nonlinguistic" elements of communication, but they do note that their final constructs, "presenting, listening, and conversing" are traditional in "management and HRM research" (p. 208). At least part of the mismatch might stem from inertia, rather like the reliance on the traditional instructional focus noted above.

Conclusions and Cautions

1. Recognize both the social and instrumental aspects of human communication in a complex, contemporary organization and to recognize the "managerial" communication needed by entry-level employees, even if the tasks themselves are not necessary acknowledged or described as such.
2. Avoid any arbitrary distinctions or limitations to certain types of communication technology, instead allowing the interviewees to define the unit of analysis.

3. Take steps to insure that theoretical constructs and vocabulary are being used to mean the same things by both employers and faculty doing the analysis. It might be true that there is a mismatched prioritization, but it could just as easily be that employers use the words very differently, as demonstrated in the next discussion of presentation priorities.

Professional and Academic Priorities in Presentations

In addition to mismatches in the relative priority of interpersonal and presentational communication, we find anecdotal evidence that academic and executive listeners value different aspects of a formal presentation, although to be fair, there also appears to be little consistency within the business community. These mismatches might be attributable to academic concerns for conceptual theory over pragmatic effect as well as the incommensurate rhetorical situations presented to students.

Academic Attention to Theory and Analytical Methods

Empirical research is somewhat limited, but there seems to be little agreement among business professionals and academic faculty over the relative importance of various aspects of a presentation (Cannon & Scotti, 2015; Neher & Heidewald, 2015). Some research suggests that academic observers focus on specific skills, perhaps viewed as teachable elements, while professionals prefer to give a holistic assessment of effectiveness (Campbell, Mothersbaugh, Brammer, & Taylor, 2001). There is limited evidence that faculty values delivery skills over content elements (Campbell et al., 2001; Neher & Heidewald, 2015), and academic instructors neglect the question-and-answer period, which professionals see as an integral part of a presentation (Cyphert, 2014; Neher & Heidewald, 2015; Sheckels, 1997). Business professionals expect visual and narratively structured presentation slides, as compared to academic outline formats (Cyphert, 2007; Sheckels, 1997). At the same time, faculty recognize a need for better visual aids (Wardrope & Bayless, 1994), even though professional presenters consistently warn against prioritizing visuals over audience rapport (Bly, 2001; Ganzel, 2000; Jaffe, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Simons, 1999, 2000). More recent work has shown that graphics—charts and tables—serve as proofs for professionals (Neher & Heidewald, 2015), while academics understand them as illustrations of verbal points. Within the business community, business professionals tend to focus on content issues, while presentation consultants advocate attention to delivery (Campbell et al., 2001).

The authors compared faculty and professional evaluations of MBA student presentations over two years, confirming both a faculty preference for delivery over content and the professional recognition of visual arguments. We also found wide variability in assessments, with executives rating presentations lower than faculty on nearly all elements. Faculty assessments were highly inconsistent, however, with general agreement on excellent and poor presentations but wide discrepancies across the mid-range. This suggests the professionals might indeed be making more holistic assessments, making less effort to parse performance on specific elements, with business faculty attempting to make finer distinctions despite any prior discussion of performance or rating standards.

An analysis of comments on organization and content found professionals noting nearly twice as many "strengths" as faculty, despite their lower numeric ratings, and results suggests the students might simply be doing things that faculty value and teach better than they do things that business professional value. Professional evaluators mentioned presentation elements that allowed them to make decisions on the presentation content: goal-directed content selection, relevance of data to the problem, explicit explanations, explicit attention to the background context of the project, and substantive data to support claims. Meanwhile, faculty mentioned elements that emphasized the careful analysis of data to support a

conclusion: well-organized content, clear display of data, confident explanations, explicit statements of assumptions and reasoning, and substantive data, both cited and accurately displayed.

In short, the limited evidence that faculty value delivery over content or presentation over audience discussion might reflect fundamental differences between academic and professional goals. Faculty, charged with teaching general theories and critical thinking, value a clear and complete display of those analytical skills. Meanwhile, business professionals focus on the context-specific decision-making outcome, hoping to hear relevant information and reasons to take the recommended course of action. As discussed earlier, these two institutions represent distinct discourse communities, and the professionalization of students prior to graduation might be impossible.

Lack of Rhetorical Authenticity Within Instructional Settings

In any situation, "a person is most likely to be perceived as a competent communicator when he or she is motivated, has the relevant knowledge, and is skilled at performing the needed behaviors" (Beebe & Barge, 2003 p. 278). As with nearly any domain, the instructional problem does not end with presenting a body of knowledge or skill set. Students must also learn to retrieve knowledge and apply it appropriately and proficiently. In performative domains, success requires practice with both selection and application. To some extent, the mismatch in presentational expectations might reflect the hard reality that workers simply try harder to do well, taking more time to strategize, prepare, and practice their presentations before evaluation.

Business faculty readily admit that students often fail to address the business application of their presentation content, spend insufficient time preparing, and fail to practice. Even senior level teams, some speaking as part of national competitions requiring significant preparation, seem to lack an appreciation for the complex interrelationship of research, composition, problem solving, and audience analysis involved in a business presentation.

One competitive team interviewed by the authors described their presentation's flaws in terms of judging preferences on specific content points. Their post-contest demonstration, in fact, began without any introduction and went directly to their case's third point because it was the point the judges had most appreciated. Its delivery was confident and generally competent, but the team consistently failed to provide complete, reasoned explanations for its recommendations. The team spent considerable time and energy to prepare for the competition, but in a process described as a marathon weekend of brainstorming ideas. The team mentioned no research or analysis and admitted to dividing up to work separately on the development of a solution and the plan for its implementation. Only when finished preparing content did the team regroup to "polish" its presentation. Even these highly motivated students seemed to gauge a presentation in terms of a polished presentation of unique points to impress an audience rather than as a carefully considered presentation of solutions to a business situation.

A more systematic study of senior level teams presenting capstone course work to area business clients found similar results (Cyphert, 2014). Students consistently framed these presentations as class-required knowledge displays, and they readily admitted to curtailed preparation in favor of other demands on their time and attention. Their descriptions offered more subtle reasons, however, for limited preparation even with an important professional audience. First, because they were intimately familiar with their presentation content, an intensive semester-long project in their own majors, they found no reason to prepare extensively. Secondly, to the extent that they did prepare, they did so without any attention to the

rhetorical situation. The process was limited to creating attractive slides, organizing their speaking order, and memorizing selected content.

Assessments of the resulting presentations found them to be adequate, although in all cases the teams were obviously unprepared for any discussion with their clients or other audience members. Several students suggested that such interaction had been unfair and disrespectful, staged to throw them off or display their knowledge for the instructor. The students deemed clients' questions, most of which involved applications of the project to their own businesses, inappropriately "out of our scope of the project." The students clearly had no sense of the broad decision-making context within which professional presentations occur.

Conclusions and Cautions

1. General terms such as "delivery" or "content" might mean very different things in academic and professional contexts. We must ensure measures of performance accurately reflect actual behaviors rather than abstract concepts.
2. Careful attention will go to the contextual cues and organizational expectations that surround professional presentations. Whether those elements can translate into classroom-based instruction remains unknown.

Professional and Academic Orientations Toward Groups and Teams

The clear call for curricular attention to team communication (AACSB International, 2013) seems uncomplicated by charges of mismatched expectations or priorities. A comparison of work practice and communication pedagogy suggests, however, that academic course content and instructional methods do not prepare students for professionally relevant activities. Causes appear to involve the academic partitioning of processes that remain fully integrated in the workplace, as well as an academic preference for theoretical knowledge at the expense of pragmatic skill building.

Divergent Fields of Problem-Solving Discussion, Group Communication, and Team Processes

Contemporary corporations rely heavily on teams, which have grown from an operational innovation in lean manufacturing (Evans & Lindsay, 2002; Fang & Kleiner, 2003), through company-wide productivity device (Joinson, 1999) to their ubiquitous adoption as a primary work structure and decision-making format. Team skill thus encompasses a wide range of specific communication tasks, many of which represent entire domains of academic study. Problem solving, information sharing, conflict resolution, leadership, relationship maintenance, and decision-making could all be daily team endeavors, and each represents a rich domain of research. Conversely, team contexts appear as a specific application within each academic domain, and no one field offers instruction in the specific skills associated with work team communication.

Communication scholars, for instance, have studied effective group decision-making and problem solving methods for decades (Rothwell, 1998) and teach a basic six-step model considered a foundational critical thinking and collective reasoning method in public discourse (Keith, 2007; Young, Wood, Phillips, & Pederson, 2001). During the 1960s, the model was applied to management decision-making systems like PERT (program evaluation and review technique) and CPM (critical path method)(Phillips, 1965, 1966) and in business conference settings (Gulley, 1963; Zelko, 1957). Virtually all contemporary pedagogy in managerial problem solving replicates the same six steps of problem definition, causal analysis, solution

criteria, solution identification, and solution evaluation (Young et al., 2001). This rich body of knowledge continues to grow in the journals of public discourse, philosophy, and political theory without significantly informing the business curriculum. Meanwhile, problem solving appears in the business curriculum without any special application to team contexts.

Group communication research, on the other hand, reflects roots in communication theory, social psychology, and interpersonal communication. The domain includes a broad range of group contexts, only a small proportion of which involve the bona fide groups found in a workplace (Putnam & Stohl, 1996). A few principles have found their way into the management curriculum, but not always with attention to their applicability to workplace teams. The ubiquitous Tuckman (1965) model of group development, for instance, dealt with untrained, zero-history groups drawn predominantly from counseling and therapy settings (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The clever *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing* rhyme aids memory, but suggests a spontaneous inevitably to group processes that belies the influence of effective team communication skills. Research has established the value of formal team training (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Salas et al., 2008; Thomas & Busby, 2003; Tullar & Kaiser, 2000), but business schools typically accept the false premise that simply forcing students to work in teams will magically develop effective skills (Hansen, 2006; McKendall, 2000; Schullery & Gibson, 2001; Young et al., 2001).

A third stream of research from management, especially operations and technology management, looks explicitly at team productivity but almost exclusively from a management perspective. Students might learn important principles of team composition, institutional support, and project management, but there has been little attention to informal, embedded leadership roles (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010) or specific communication skills required for collaborative decision-making, relationship maintenance, meeting facilitation, or project documentation. This is not to say that business faculty has no access to useful pedagogy (for example, Kennedy, 2008; McKendall, 2000) or that instructors cannot embed that pedagogy into team projects across the business curriculum. The relevant curriculum must be drawn from communication studies, rhetoric, psychology, and project management, however, and as noted above, without textbook coverage to guide curriculum planning, group communication instruction remains problematic.

Disassociation of Theory and Application

The gown-town tension between abstract, conceptual knowledge and everyday practice has a long history with particularly strong influences on business research and pedagogy (Pearce & Huang, 2012). As with many aspects of business, team research and pedagogy give priority to theories of behavior or implications for organization strategy. Specific team applications and skill building have become the province of practitioners and consultants. Similar pressures have driven research in communication theory, where the discovery of general principles overshadows skill-building pedagogy across all modes of communication.

Communication competence involves socialization within a specific community, amply demonstrated by the workplace ethnographies cited above, and individuals who learn *about* effective and appropriate communication practices do not reliably demonstrate them in practice (Standerfer, 2006). Every group is a unique system of interrelated and interacting parts that exists within a specific organizational environment (Young et al., 2001), and skills training accounts for only a portion of team effectiveness (Hirokawa & Keyton, 1995; Salas et al., 2008; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998). Study of general team principles meets academic needs, but there is little to indicate it will help students apply effective communication behaviors after graduation.

The focus on general principles and theory building might also distort our understanding of effective practice. For instance, academic curiosity has led to a focus on interpersonal dynamics, even though social cohesion does not necessarily lead to better team performance (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Greene, 1989; Langfred, 1998). With widespread agreement that systematic discussion techniques led to optimal group outcomes (Gouran, 1982; Hirokawa, Ice, & Cook, 1988), research focus shifted toward understanding how interpersonal dynamics prevented participants from following the prescribed methods (Gouran, 2004). The effort to keep instructional content current and relevant might cause us to ignore the most important, if fundamental, elements of effective team performance. A similar preference for general principles over content-specific application has led to the conceptualization of "facilitation" as a generalized, decontextualized team skill, to the neglect of effective group member participation (Aakhus, 1998) and overgeneralized principles that confuse the processes and outcomes across different types of groups (Young et al., 2001). This is not to say that such contemporary research lacks validity or significance. It might be wrong to assume, however, that undergraduates should learn innovative theory rather than the effective application of established methods.

Conclusions and Cautions

1. Maintain the integrated nature of communication tasks, including attention to all aspects of team behavior, regardless of its academic home, as well as the integration of team processes across written, presentational, technologically mediated, and interpersonal communication modes and genre.
2. Identify and address the practices desired by employees, not at the expense of important theoretical knowledge, but with sufficient context and practical detail to ensure skill development.

Forced Choices in Communication Mode and Genre

A final area of mismatch involves the relative emphasis given to written communication in the academic environment when employers, if asked, consistently rank oral communication skills to be more relevant for career success. The literate nature of formal education has had an obvious impact on the academic presumption of writing's primacy.

Academic Presumptions of Literacy and the Value of Written Communication

Published complaints about insufficient writing skills predate concerns about oral communication skills, but by the 1920's, researchers had noted, "oral language is found very much more frequently than written language" among working adults (Rankin, 1928, p. 623) and called for a more balanced curriculum to include both. Surveys at mid-century found supervisors prioritizing oral communication over written (Swenson, 1980), but written communication still appears three times more often as a learning goal of AACSB accredited business schools than does oral communication (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Recent efforts to unpack the ubiquitous agreement on communication as an important business skill have led to better understanding of both written and oral communication expectations, as noted above, as well as the more fundamental realization that written and oral communication play interrelated but distinct roles within an organization.

Until the twentieth century, business interactions were largely oral, with written contracts or bills prepared only when legal documentation was required. The invention of the typewriter created an opportunity for direct communication of instructions, policies, and decisions on a mass scale, giving rise to the modern organization (Yates, 1989). With the explosive use of written communication, institutional

processes were structured with generic communication forms (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), and business educators responded with careful attention to the development of students' skills with the business letters, memos, and formal reports that came to define business writing.

Once research stopped collapsing oral and written communication into a single concept, their different purposes and principles have begun to emerge (Reinsch et al., 2011). Business is still transacted orally, and oral skills effect effectiveness and career success. Writing, on the hand is better understood as a "threshold competency" (Reinsch et al., 2011). As discussed above, language habits signal desirable educational and socio-economic status, and fluency with written genre signals conformity with institutional norms. Certainly, both oral and written communication are important to career success, but writing skills might be more important to securing a professional position, while oral skills have greater impact on long-term career success.

Conclusions and Cautions

1. Include all communication activities without arbitrary divisions by technology or genre.

<p align="center">Defining Communication Skills</p>

Armed with some cautionary wisdom from the literature, we have proceeded in three stages. First, we developed an inventory of communication tasks from recent practitioner literature and research and a series of interviews with professionals. We then engaged in cross-functional multi-industry interviews to review the lists, ensuring that vocabulary and definitions would be consistent and clear to all employers. Finally, a pilot survey with a representative group of employers will confirm the clarity and accuracy of all descriptors.

The first round of vocabulary building began with identifying words most commonly used by practitioners. A Google search for *communication*, even paired with *business*, *professional*, or *workplace*, yields academic organizations, textbooks, and advice from professional authors and consultants and general categories: presentations, writing, interpersonal. Taking contextual cues from business periodicals, we located descriptions of communication tasks and goals such as build effective work relationships, resolve conflict, convince investors, sell a product, hold an effective meeting, solve problems, listen to customers, and so on. The distinct difference, coupled with our desire to avoid decontextualized skill descriptors and include the full range of workplace activities and technologies, led us to create interview questions that focused on tasks and goals.

With IRB approval, we conducted interviews with a cross-section of business professionals including employers within the region, alumni of the College, and professional contacts maintained by the faculty. An initial round of 21 telephone interviews asked just four questions:

1. What events happen at your company where any kind of prepared communication occurs?
2. What specific communication characteristics or behaviors are important or desirable during those events?
3. What specific communication characteristics or behaviors would be considered inappropriate during those events?
4. Are there any subsets, interim, or milestone activities that are elements of these events?

The responses yielded well over 100 distinct tasks (i.e. "prepare talking points," "one-on-one review with manager," "take a phone call from a client"). A few additional descriptors from recent practitioner research (Baker, 2015; Brumberger, 2015; Cannon & Scotti, 2015; Hynes & Wesner, 2015; Keyton et al., 2013; Loney, 2015) were included to avoid omissions due to the small sample. Recognizing the dangers noted in previous research, we avoided assumptions that communication should be categorized by technology (i.e. face-to-face, electronic, written, etc.), or underlying academic or theory-based skills (i.e. listening behaviors, language fluency, rhetorical sensitivity, etc.). These factors were clearly important and discussed at some length by several interviewees, but the most robust categories clustered multiple communication methods to accomplish common communication goals: requesting and providing information, developing relationships, establishing reputation, and solving problems.

Over several rounds of discussion, the faculty team categorized the tasks into a matrix of commonly named expectations (Table 1), following the protocol used in Cyphert & Lyle (2016). Keeping pedagogical goals in mind, the categorization process aimed primarily at finding a relatively short list of similar tasks expected across all industries and job functions. One set of tasks was set aside because they were mentioned by just one respondent and appeared to be functionally specific: marketing communication (i.e. preparation of a blog post, marketing brochure, internal newsletter article, etc.) appeared to be typical tasks only for those hired as communication specialists within a marketing function. Although the domain of business includes communication functions such as media relations, marketing, internal communications, and community relations (Conrad, 2011, p. 5), our primary concern was with the day to day communication tasks that could be anticipated by any business graduate, regardless of major or specialty.

Conversely, some tasks that might seem to be major-specific such as sales calls (marketing) or audit interviews (accounting) were described in such similarly strategic ways across multiple industries that they were included in the final matrix. Curriculum planning would benefit from a careful research-based distinction between industry-specific job requirements communication tasks that all business majors can expect to perform.

Table 1

Attend company-wide, industry, or community event; may involve clients, vendors, or industry professionals and several meetings, training, or social events over several hours or days. Common terms: training meeting, supplier meetings, national sales meeting/event, quarterly/management/all-staff/all-hands meetings/updates, community event, board participation, mixers, socials, dinners, new hires meeting
Participate in a planned meeting of two or more individuals: may be in person or electronically hosted; may involve client, vendor or other functional departments in a project context. Common terms: meeting, internal/team/dept/staff meeting, standing/weekly meeting, conference call, online meeting, informational or training meeting, sales call, planning meeting, wheels, cross-functional teams, committee, group project meeting, team huddle, phone meeting, forecast meeting, sprint call, weekly touch base, walking meeting
Coordinate or facilitate a meeting with two or more individuals: may be in person or electronically hosted; may involve client, vendor or other functional departments in a project context. Common terms: set up a training meeting, coordinate a meeting, host a client discussion, run the meeting, arrange a meeting, organize an event
Address a business problem: initiate or participate in communication to identify and/or resolve a problem, set of issues, ongoing responsibility or strategic response. May be F2F conversation or small

meeting, either in person or electronic. Typically involves documentation of the issues, either before (proposal, brief, talking points) or after (summary) the meeting. Common terms: strategic/planning/action meetings, continuous learning, product demo, workshop, client meeting, project presentation, training teams, case studies, presentation, mock simulation, proposal, one-on-ones, annual review, performance updates, account review, culture meeting, conversation, brief the boss, touch or touch base, walk and talk, problem/project summary, explanations, aftersale/installation/training, report, pre-meeting review, pitch
Address a personal/professional problem: initiate or participate in communication to resolve an issue of personal importance, either private or career related, to self, peer, or report. May be F2F conversation or small meeting, either in person or electronic. Might involve documentation of the issues, either before (brief, talking points) or after (summary) the conversation. Common terms: one on one, talk, conversation, mentoring opportunity, ask advice, address an issue, appraisal, corrective, raise concern
Provide information for others, either upon specific request or as a regular job responsibility. May be email, phone, or in a F2F conversation or meeting. Common terms: email, summary email with attachments, self-intro or background statement, email newsletter, monthly summary, cover page for reports/printouts, topic summary, update, on-time analysis, transactions (iPad or other electronic device), slide deck, report deck, slide doc, data visualization
Request information, assistance, cooperation, or further communication. May be by phone, email, or F2F, and may involve co-workers, other departments, vendors, clients or business partners. Common terms: email, express interest, set meeting, research, call/email/conversation to obtain or clarify data, resolve issues, on-time analysis, one on ones, phone/email request, customer/team call or email, request backup data
Strategic communication: planned in advance to meet a specific goal such as solicit information, determine issues, or establish a relationship. May be F2F or electronic and generally involves some risk of conflict or failure. Common terms: customer visit, sales call, client conversation, client call, elevator pitch, client update meeting, phone calls, cold calls, touch point with client, status meeting, client appointment, customer email, customer interaction, customer service, notes to customers, on time analysis, follow up questions, presentations, meetings, interpret, manage impressions, interview, career coaching, correction interviews, consulting, coaching
Communicate recognition: **show appreciation for peers, reports, supervisors, customers, vendors, or anyone else who performs in a way that meets organizational, team, or personal interests.** Common terms: say thank you , acknowledge others, reward, recognize
Task-related interaction: informal, day-to-day in-team chat, conversation about ongoing tasks. May be to face-to-face, electronic (chat or IM) or phone, skype, or text. Common terms: conversation, stop by desk, cover letter, email, explanations of tasks, decisions, team communication, training, customer contact/response

Within each of the major tasks, various sub-tasks and preparatory steps emerged from the interviews. Across the entire range of communication goals and tasks, for example, virtually every respondent mentioned selection of appropriate technology and planning of the content. Interviewees frequently mentioned, as well, gathering and reviewing the intended content knowledge and command of the chosen technology. The full set of tasks with subtasks were then vetted and revised in another round of 19 cross-functional and cross-industry interviews with individuals recruited with the assistance of the University's alumni association and the local business alliance.

A finalized set of tasks with subtasks will be presented to all interviewees in an electronic survey format for final review. The primary goal will be to verify that we have accurately represented their views and vocabulary. We will additionally ask these interviewees to judge the level of expertise expected of entry-level employees, utilizing skill level distinctions that were developed over the course of the interviews. While we might expect students to have some awareness of all these skills upon graduation, our College's learning goals might be reasonably limited to areas in which entry level employees are expected to exhibit moderate or expert skills.

The final step will be to develop and test a Skills Gap Analysis survey instrument, which differentiates entry-level workers by industry and function. Along with creating a baseline for novice, moderate, and expert skill expectations, we anticipate gaining some insights into current discrepancies in communication instruction across academic disciplines. With the assistance of the Career Center, the completed survey instrument will be administered electronically to employers that actively recruit on campus.

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