

Improving Business Students' Oral Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

This study empirically examines a model for improving the oral communication skills of business students. First, the researchers worked to identify the elements of effective oral communication in a business setting, and to enumerate the related oral communication skills that potential employers hope to find in new employees. Next we endeavored to gauge the degree to which an intensive program of instruction in oral communication within an existing business course can improve these skills and abilities among college seniors. The study utilized a pre/post test quasi-experimental design and provides evidence that by redesigning one of the senior level business courses to include an intense oral communications element it is possible to improve a student's oral communication skills.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the need to improve business students' oral communications skills. For example, in 1990 the Accounting Change Commission called on business educators to increase the focus on communications skills and to work toward improving business school graduates' abilities in both oral and written communication (1990). In fact many business faculty have also reported that business students display poor communications skills [Miller and Budden 1984; Carruth and Tanner 1985; and Budden, Lake and Tanner 1992]. More recently, in a 1999 study involving 191 business faculty, Tanner and Cudd report that fewer than half believe that their students have sufficiently well developed communications skills.

Bevill, Gray, and Hale (2000) proposed that oral communication skills to be assessed as a competency area within the core business curriculum. Stivers, Campbell, and Hermanson (2000) found that employers identified oral communication skills as very important. Pearce, Johnson, and Barker (1995) found that college business programs have devoted much less time and effort to improving oral communication skills than have business and industry.

Several studies suggest that a concentrated, well thought-out course of study in communications may be effective in improving a student's communications skills. Specifically, Rubin, Welch, and Buerkel [1995] and Rubin and Jordan [1997] report that a semester-long communication course significantly improves performance on communication assignments and lowers the fear of public speaking, or writing for an audience.

These results suggest that communication proficiency can be improved by exposing students to a structured course of instruction. This research explores the viability of improving students' communication skills within an existing course, an option for business curriculums which have no room for additional course requirements and/or the resources to staff them. The current inquiry examines the following exploratory hypothesis (alternate form):

Ha1: The elements of a student's Oral Communication Skills will be improved by the introduction of an intense, highly structured program of oral communication instruction within a senior-level business course.

Ha2: A student's overall Oral Communication Skills will be improved by the introduction of an intense, highly structured program of oral communication instruction within a senior-level business course.

DESIGN OF STUDY

The first step toward implementing this research was to recruit a Business Advisory Board to help the researchers identify the elements or attributes of effective public speaking. A list of these attributes have been compiled and rated as to their importance. Members of the Advisory Board consisted of eight middle to upper level executives from firms representing the health care industry, manufacturing, merchandising, and services sector such as banking and accounting. The Advisory Board participated in a focus group with the researchers and one of the business communications professors to identify the elements or attributes of effective oral communication. This was accomplished during a working lunch meeting of the members of the Advisory Board, the principal researchers, and the communications expert. Based on discussion at this meeting the researchers assembled a list of the elements that the business leaders consider central to effective oral communication. Once the list was compiled the Advisory Board members were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (not important) to 7 (very important) the importance of each attribute. They were then instructed to designate which particular areas of oral communication they perceived to be challenging for many of their recently employed college graduates.

Following this meeting the research team identified and hired an oral communications instructor who was charged with developing a 4 hour training program designed to assist students develop the skills needed for effective public speaking (as defined by the panel of business executives). The oral communications instructor chosen for this part of the project has had significant experience providing business communication training to business executives. In order to avoid any rater bias in grading the students' performance the researchers also hired another independent oral communications expert to evaluate the students' presentation skills and provide pre and post-test measurement of the students' public speaking abilities.

INTERVENTION

Two work-related cases (Case A and Case B) were developed for use in the pre and post-test measurement of the students' public speaking abilities.¹ The students participating in the study were enrolled in the senior seminar course for accounting majors. The facts in both cases were carefully balanced to ensure that they contained the same amount and type of information. The pre-test was conducted early in the semester. Ten of the students were randomly assigned Case A, and the other 11 students were assigned Case B. The students were required to take the case material home and prepare a 5 minute oral presentation to their superior which outlined and synthesized the facts of the case. The students were told to work on the assignment individually, and to work on it no more than two hours.

The intervention consisted of three categories of instructional activities. First, the students were given individualized feedback on their performance in their pre-test presentation. Second, the students received four hours of instruction from an independent oral communications instructor over a four week period. This instruction was tailored to the elements of effective public speaking identified by the panel. The oral communications instructor was able to review the videotapes of the students' pre-test presentations, enabling him to identify students' individual deficiencies. Third, students made two additional presentations during the regular semester, from which they also received feedback from the course instructor.

Toward the end of the course, the post-test was administered. For the post test the students that presented Case A in the pre-test now presented Case B and those that had presented Case B now presented case A.

To protect against experimenter bias, a separate oral communications expert was retained to grade both the pretest and posttest presentations. This expert was given the videotapes of both presentations for all students. The tapes were not labeled as to whether they were pretest or posttest. The students' performance on both presentations were graded using a standardized scale of 1 to 5 on each of the elements of effective public speaking. An overall rating was also

¹ Case A was an article on electronic commerce and webtrust from the the CPA Journal, and Case B was an article on CPA eldercare services from the Journal of Accountancy.

assigned to each presentation.

FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

The following is a list of the important characteristics of good oral communications, as identified by the business executives on the Advisory Board. This group of executives indicated that to communicate effectively through oral communication the speaker must:

- be well organized,
- provide clear enunciation,
- be knowledgeable of the subject,
- display confidence,
- provide emphasis in the proper places,
- present the proper appearance,
- make eye contact with the audience,
- control nervousness, and
- avoid distracting mannerisms.

Every student's performance was measured on each of these variables using a five-point scale with 1 representing Needs Improvement 3 Satisfactory, and 5 Excellent. An overall Oral Communication score was found for each student by summing the individual scores and calculating the mean.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The experimental hypothesis postulates that a student's individual and overall oral communication skills will be improved by the introduction of an intense, highly structured program of oral communication instruction. The hypothesis is designed to allow testing using pair-wise comparisons, thus matched t tests were performed on all variables tested in this study.

Pair-wise comparison tests demonstrate the expected differences with p values of .001 or less for differences between the mean pretest overall OCS (2.94) and posttest (3.87) OCS. In addition, we tested for differences in performance along each of the 9 variables identified as important to oral communication. At a p value of .01 or less the student's scores on each of the individual elements was significantly improved by exposure to the oral communications program. The one variable that did not show statistically significant improvement was the appearance variable. The mean pretest measure of appearance was 3.82, which indicates that on average the student's appearance was above satisfactory initially. The post test measure was 4.06, showing a marginal improvement in appearance, and the matched t test had a p value of .018 for statistical difference.

As suggested by the experimental hypothesis, there is significant improvement in the individual communications elements and overall OCS of subjects after the treatment. These results provide evidence that these business students' oral communication skills were improved by participating in the experimental oral communication training.

DISCUSSION

Results from this research provide significant insight regarding efficient and effective ways for business educators to improve the way they deliver oral communications instruction. This model may provide an effective method for adding value to the educational experience at a minimal cost by allowing professors to revise business curriculums in ways that add value to the students' educational experience with minimal resources. These results may be of special importance to those institutions which are unable to offer a separate business communications course.

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