Saint Xavier University

Communicating Competence in the Workplace: A Review of Employers' Expectations, College Students' Preparedness, and the Role of Higher Education

Honors Project
Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
of the
Requirements of HONOR 352/53
and for Graduation with Honors
Spring 2016

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Abstract

This paper evaluates communication competence theory and synthesizes research conducted on communication competence in the workplace to reveal which communication skills are perceived by employers as the most valuable, whether college graduates are meeting those expectations, and the role of higher education in developing communication skills for the workplace. Academic journals published between 2005 and 2015 focusing on communication competence or communication skills in the workplace were reviewed, revealing an inconsistency between employers' expectations and college graduates perceived communication competence. An online course is proposed as the best method to help college graduates bridge this gap and build their communication competence. Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) relational competence model provides the framework for teaching the knowledge and skills required to increase the probability that college graduates will be perceived as competent communicators during their job search process. The best practices of instructional design are presented to explain the process for creating an online course.

Communicating Competence in the Workplace: A Review of Employers' Expectations, College Students' Preparedness, and the Role of Higher Education

Effective communication is consistently rated as one of the top skills needed in the workplace (Gray & Murray, 2011; Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, & Marcia, 2012; Robles 2012; Hynes, 2012; Bhattacharyya, Nordin, & Salleh, 2009; DeKay 2010). Similarly, effective communication is a skill emphasized in higher education (Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Washington, 2014; Brink & Costigan, 2015). Job descriptions demanding college degrees usually require candidates to have "excellent" or "effective" oral and written communication skills, yet employers perceptions of effective communication and expected communication skills varies. To make matters worse, job applicants often overlook communication skills as a serious requirement because communication is a part of their daily lives. In other cases, graduates overestimate their ability to communicate, resulting in poorly written resumes and cover letters, ineffective interviews, inappropriate self-disclosure, tactless networking, and little consideration for online communication. Communication scholars have asserted that this failure to communicate effectively is engendered by the graduates' lack of communication competence. In the past ten years, educators, researchers, and employers have emphasized the importance of effective communication in the workplace, with varying definitions of communication competence, and different views on the role of higher education in teaching the expected communication skills (Payne, 2005; Morreale & Pearson, 2008; Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Bhattacharyya et al., 2009; Gray & Murray, 2011; Robles 2012; Waldeck et al., 2012; Brink & Costigan, 2015).

Methods

There are 36 references included in this paper. Twenty-five sources were used to evaluate the communication competence theory and form the literature review. The remaining eleven sources were used to determine the most relevant techniques for developing an online course. Six percent of the research came from books, 88% were from journal articles, and 6% were reports. Of the journal articles, 14% used qualitative research, 45% used quantitative research, 22% used mixed methods, and 19% were literature reviews.

For the theory evaluation and literature review, Saint Xavier University's library database search-tool was used to find online journal articles that discussed communication competence and communication skills in the workplace across multiple disciplines. Most of the research was published from 2005 to 2015; however, some sources are from the 1980's when communication scholars, namely Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) and McCroskey (1982) created highly debated theoretical frameworks for communication competence. The Communication and Mass Media complete database and Google Scholar were used to supplement the multiple database searches.

Although communication competence was the primary focus of the literature review, other search terms were used to find results in non-communication journals. Keywords and phrases used to select the articles included communication competence, communication competence theory, communicative competence, relational competence, interpersonal communication competence, interpersonal competence, effective communication, communication skills, higher education, college, career, job, graduates, college graduates, and workplace. Some of the articles published in non-communication journals do not explicitly use the term "communication competence." Therefore, "communication skills" and "effective communication" serve as proxies for "communication competence" in those articles.

Furthermore, articles that grouped communication skills or communication competence with interpersonal skills and soft skills were also examined to account for employers' use of the terms interchangeably. The populations under consideration are college students, college graduates, and employees, therefore, populations outside of this scope were excluded.

Articles for the literature review and theory evaluation were found in the following journals: *Academy of Management Learning & Accounting Education* (4%), *Accounting Education* (4%), *American Journal of Business Education* (4%), *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation* (4%), *Business Communication Quarterly* (12%), *Communication Education* (12%), *Communication Research Reports* (4%), *CPA Journal* (4%), *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration* (4%), *Journal of Business Communication* (4%), *Journal of Education for Business* (4%), *Journal of Employment Counseling* (4%), *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* (4%), *Journal of Promotion Management* (4%), *Journal of Staff Development* (4%), *Performance Improvement* (4%), and *Pragmatics & Cognition*. Reports published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) and the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU) were also included.

The remaining eleven sources for best practices (deliverable) section were also gathered from journal articles using multiple library databases. The keywords used in the search included: teaching online, instructional design, course design, design, online course design, e-learning, courseware, and best practices. Given the rapid advancement in technology and online learning, only articles published between 2012 and 2015 were considered for the deliverable section. Articles that discussed instructional design or online courses without giving best practices or recommendations were excluded.

The articles for the best practices section were found in the following journals: *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* (4%), *International Journal of Learning* (4%), *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning* (8%), *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Journal of Experimental Education* (4%), *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* (4%), *Journal of Online Teaching & Learning* (8%), *European Journal of Contemporary Education* (4%).

Communication Competence

Defining Competence

Communication competence is a broad theory that seeks to describe the cognition, behaviors, and skills required for individuals to be competent communicators in any given context (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). Aspects of communication competence have roots in the study of rhetoric during the era of Aristotle (McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). However, the study of competence has continued to evolve as theorists have expanded on works of past scholars. From the beginning, researchers had to make assumptions about the components and definition of both "communication" and "competence" (Tsai, 2013), leaving the study of communication competence ambiguous.

As a theory, communication competence seeks to encompass everything necessary to predict, describe, and explain competent communication. Scholars studying the theory have attempted to identify universal components of competence, ultimately raising the question of whether competence is a set of teachable skills, a set of inherent traits that only some communicators have, or neither (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). The study of communication competence in the U.S. sparked during the competency movements of the 1970's (McCroskey, 1982; Backlund & Morreale, 2015) when several scholars proposed theories for communication

competence. Each new theoretical framework engendered debates and disagreements about the definitions and assumptions of competence. For example, Spitzberg's 1983 article "Communication Competence as Knowledge, Skill, and Impression" analyzed McCroskey's 1982 communication competence framework prior to Spitzberg proposing his own.

While criticisms and discussion are both functions of a valuable communication theory (Littlejohn, 1998), debating did not lead to a consensus. Over fifty years later, countless articles and books have been written on the topic without an accepted theory or definition of communication competence (Backlund & Morreale, 2015). Instead, communication scholars have spent decades grappling with the challenges of defining, conceptualizing, and assessing competence (Spitzberg, 2015; Tsai, 2013; Morreale, 2015). Researchers' attempts to reconfigure and redefine the theory have resulted in oversimplified approaches that only identify a set of communication skills or behaviors (Spitzberg, 2000). However, because the study of communication is partial to competency bias, it is difficult to avoid the notion that communication competence is just a set of skills or techniques (Spitzberg, 2000).

Theoretical Evaluation

Despite inherent drawbacks, communication competence is open to possibilities (Littlejohn, 1998), perspectives, and interpretations. This openness has lead researchers to study the complexity of communication in more narrowed contexts. Consequently, some form of communication competence has been studied in other disciplines including linguistics and psychology (Tsai, 2013; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Within those disciplines, scholars have taken various, sometimes conflicting, approaches to the conceptualization of competence ranging from fundamental competence to relational competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984).

While the openness of the theory is problematic in some instances, it also affords the theory its heuristic value (Littlejohn, 1998). Competence has been studied in intercultural, interpersonal, and computer-mediated contexts and continues to evolve as globalization and technology become more prominent in society. The more narrowed approach to competence emerged from the theorists' acknowledgement of communication competence's incompleteness (Littlejohn, 1998). The more narrowed approach has made the umbrella theory of communication competence less popular. In fact, Spitzberg (2000) questioned whether competence is obsolete as an approach to good communication, declaring that the criteria of communication competence remain problematic.

A major reason why communication competence continues to be challenging is that the claims of the communication competence are not consistent with the assumptions of the theory (Littlejohn, 1998): the communication competence theory promises a set skills and behaviors that will help determine if an individual is a good communicator. Given that premise, the theory assumes that there are always a set of skills applicable to a given context. As a result, communication competence lacks generalizability (Littlejohn, 1998), because it cannot be applied across situations. While some theorists try to take into account competing variables (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), the theory in general is incapable of considering all contexts in which communication is judged.

The theoretical scope of communication competence is broad, but not comprehensive (Littlejohn, 1998). Aiming to account for communication behaviors in multiple contexts with multiple participants has made the conceptualizing of the theory difficult. In response to legitimate criticism of the lack of an inclusive theory, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) sought to provide a comprehensive framework for communication competence that was beyond the one-

dimensional frameworks of competence as a set of behaviors or a set of cognitions. Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) relational competence is the communication competence construct that is most parsimonious (Littlejohn, 1998). Relational competence has spawn several studies that have built on construct, making it one of the default theories of communication competence in research (Payne, 2005; Keyton et al., 2013)

Relational Competence

Spitzberg and Cupach's relational model endeavored to identify the probabilities that certain communication skills are linked with certain outcomes (Spitzberg, 2000) in order to increase the likelihood of being a competent communicator in a given context (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). The theoretical framework is grounded in seven assumptions: competence is perceived appropriateness and effectiveness, competence is contextual, competence is a matter of degree (more or less competent), communication is functional, competence is molar (abstract impressions) and molecular (observed behaviors), competence is an interpersonal impression, and competence is an interdependent process. All seven assumptions are supported by the claims of the theory (Littlejohn, 1998). The first assumption, competence is perceived appropriateness and effectiveness, is the cornerstone of the theory, and has served as a definition for competence by some researchers (Payne, 2005; Keyton et al., 2013).

The relational model included five key elements: motivation, knowledge, skills, context, and outcomes (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). To be perceived as a competent communicator, an individual must have the motivation, knowledge, and skills to communicate as well as be sensitive to the context that the communication occurs (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). For example, in higher education, students are taught to manage their communication apprehension and identify their goals for communication (motivation), shown the rules and techniques for

communicating (knowledge), and are given various lists (skills) that can be used in various communication interactions (contexts) (Spitzberg, 2000). However, the relational competence model acknowledges that being more motivated, knowledgeable, or skillful would not guarantee competence. Instead, the model could only increase the probability of being considered competent in a certain context, with other motivated, knowledgeable, skilled communicators (Spitzberg, 2000).

Spitzberg continued to add to the original model, highlighting and clarifying key parts of the framework. A key element of the theory is that communication competence is located in perception rather than behaviors. This claim is grounded in the assumption that competence is an interdependent process. Competence cannot be measured without taking into consideration all of individuals involved in the communication act (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Moreover, communication competence consists of subjective evaluations of the appropriateness and effectiveness of a communicator (Spitzberg, 2000). Reactions and perceptions are the key to measuring competence. The relational competence model recognizes that a communicator can go on a job interview, follow all of the techniques suggested by a career counselor and still not be considered competent by the interviewer (Spitzberg, 2000). Despite the insistence from scholars that communication competence is not equivalent to communication skills, employers and professors alike relate to communication competence as a set of pre-determined, unchanging skills.

Literature Review

Because communication skills are emphasized in college, it is presumed that college graduates have the communication competency required to succeed in the 21st century workplace. Yet, college graduates are unable to meet the expectations of employers (Hart

Research Associates, 2015). Both employers and researchers are in disagreement on the definition of communication skills. With no clear understanding of how communication skills translate from the classroom to the boardroom; this literature review will explore how researchers have defined communication, the communication skills employers expect in the workplace, and the role of higher education in developing those skills. The following research questions guided the literature review:

RQ1: How do researchers studying workplace competencies define communication?

RQ2: Which oral and written communication skills are perceived by employers as the most valuable?

RQ3: Are college graduates meeting the communicative expectations of employers?

RQ4: What should be the role of higher education in developing communication skills for the workplace?

Defining Communication

DeKay (2012) argues that despite recent research identifying interpersonal communication skills as being crucial for new and experienced employees to succeed, the connection between interpersonal communications skills and the workplace remain ambiguous. However, the disparity is not caused by a lack of research. Instead, the numerous studies on the subject fail to provide clear definitions of soft skills and their relationship to communication (DeKay, 2012). Consequently, varying definitions of communication are presented in studies measuring communication competence or communication skills expected in the workplace.

Despite the discrepancies concerning communication terms, “appropriateness” was used in three of the definitions presented. Boyle, Mahoney, Carpenter, and Grambo (2014) defined communication skills as the effective exchange of reliable and meaningful information, using

appropriate context. Payne (2005) also cited appropriateness as a requirement for competence. By extending Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) relational competence model, Payne (2005) defined organizational communication competence as the judgment of successful communication where employees' goals are realized using messages that are perceived as appropriate and effective within the organizational context. Keyton et al. (2013) research furthered built on Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) relational competence approach, yet those researchers defined communication competence as "communicative effectiveness". Although their definitions have similar elements, they are not the same. Payne (2005) believes competence remains a vague concept without a widely accepted definition, process, or measurement because of competing definitions.

The definitions of communication presented in each article directly affected the competencies examined in the studies. Brink and Costigan (2015) defined communication as the exchange of information between two or more parties. Because of how the researchers defined communication, they choose not to use social or interpersonal skills in their study, stating that interpersonal skills are separate research constructs that deserve their own consideration as workplace competencies (Brink & Costigan, 2015). This view is different from Boyle et al. (2014) and Robles (2012) who chose to incorporate broader soft skills in addition to communication in their studies. The researchers' disagreement about what communication behaviors should be examined directly affected which communication skill was studied, thus leaving gaps in the research.

Employers' Perceptions and Expectations of Communication

Communication Competencies. Waldeck et al. (2012) data revealed six communication competencies expected in the workplace: relationship and interpersonal communication skills, mediated communication skills, intergroup communication skills, the ability to communicate

enthusiasm, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit, nonverbal communication skills, and speaking and listening skills. Additionally, workplace writing is an essential competency in the 21st century and plays a vital role in making students valuable to potential employers (Washington, 2014).

Oral Communication Skills. Oral communication skills needed in the workplace include giving instructions, providing training or coaching, persuading, client communication skills, speaking on the telephone, conveying knowledge, socializing, giving presentations with and without visuals, and asking for clarification and feedback (Gray & Murray, 2011). Keyton et al. (2013) findings adds to the list with ten additional communication skills: listening, asking questions, discussing, sharing information, agreeing, suggesting, getting feedback, seeking feedback, answering questions and explaining. There is little overlap in the oral communication skills found in the studies aside from listening.

Brink and Costigan (2015) found that listening is the most important skill for the workplace, ahead of conversing and presenting. Gray and Murray (2011) agree with those findings, citing listening skills as highest value by accountancy employers. In contrast, Waldeck et al. (2012) findings cite speaking and listening as some of the least important competencies. Instead, Waldeck et al. (2012) believes that employees should embrace new skills, such as storytelling (which goes beyond basic communication skills). The results of the Bhattacharyya et al. (2009) study concluded that the three most frequent internal and external oral communication activities were meetings, team communication, and non-technical discussion.

Interpersonal "Soft" Skills. Studies that examine communication skills often examine interpersonal skills or soft skills as well. Robles (2012) defines "soft skills" as "character traits, attitudes, and behaviors" that are "intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that

determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (p. 457). According to Robles (2012), Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009), Glover and Frounfelker (2011), and Boyle et al. (2014) studies, communication is considered a "soft skill."

Robles' (2012) results suggest integrity and communication are the two most important soft skills needed by employees in today's workplace with all rating the two skills as very important or extremely important. Other soft skills reported as important included courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic (Robles, 2012). Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) found similar skills citing interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, intercultural or multicultural communication, reasoning, critical thinking and analysis as the most desirable workplace communication competencies. In contrast, different skills were found important in Boyle et al. (2014) such as respect, active listening, building trust, building relationships, using information technology, building rapport, demonstrating self-control, building team bonds, relating to people of diverse backgrounds, writing business correspondence, and initiating open discussion. Glover and Frounfelker (2011) study revealed a different set of competencies in six areas including time management, advocacy, building partnerships with consumers, working as part of a team, face-to-face communication, and networking.

While there are some overlap, the skills examined vary substantially, with some studies concluding that teamwork and flexibility are most important and others citing building rapport and relating to people of diverse backgrounds as most important. Despite the differences in soft skills expected by employers in each study, communication skills were always rated the first or second skills most important skill by employers (Robles, 2012; Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Boyle et al., 2014; Glover & Frounfelker, 2011).

Higher Education's' Response to Employers' Demands

Meeting the Demands. Morreale and Pearson (2008) revealed communication helps students succeed in their careers and in business, declaring interpersonal and general communication skills as the most sought after skills in the workplace. To determine if communication curricula have been keeping up with the demands of the workplace, Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) analyzed the communication curricula offered at 148 four-year colleges to compare current trends in communication curriculum in relation to trends found in a 1999 study. They concluded that the trends in communication curricula in higher education suggest that overall the communication discipline is responding to the demands of students and the workplace (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009).

Not Meeting the Demands. Brink and Costigan (2015) evaluated the alignment of oral communication skills (presenting, listening, and conversing) between the workplace and accredited business schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Brink and Costigan (2015) analyzed a sample of the learning goals of 207 of the 465 AACSB-accredited U.S. undergraduate business programs (45%), revealing that 76% of the business programs had a learning outcome for presenting while only 22% had learning outcomes for conversing and 11% for listening. Brink and Costigan (2015) revealed a misalignment between the oral communication skills needed in the workplace and those emphasized in higher education. Instead of looking at course offerings like Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009), Brink and Costigan (2015) focused on the learning goals of the business programs, which could be the reason for the variance. Gray and Murray (2011) agreed with those findings, stating that presentation skills were not ranked important for new graduates although they are often included in university curricula. Communication tasks such as conveying respect

and interest in a conversation with a client, asking a manager for feedback or clarification, and speaking on the telephone, were ranked by employers as being highly important skills, but are seldom skills taught in college (Gray & Murray, 2011).

Roles of Higher Education

Communication Programs. There is much debate among researchers on whether communication programs should be responsible for teaching college students workplace communication competencies. Some researchers believe communication studies programs are uniquely positioned to lead students to the skills, abilities, and experiences that will be essential for success in the workplace (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Morreale and Pearson (2008) goes further, stating that communication educators should be mindful of the vital role communication plays in the future lives of communication and non-communication majors alike. However, the studies that examined the communication competence of certain majors, namely, engineering, accounting, and business, begs the question of whether communication competencies should be woven into courses in each major instead of placing the focus on communication studies courses (Bhattacharyya, Nordin, & Salleh, 2009).

Private Business. Though there is no agreement on whether communication educators specifically should be responsible for teaching workplace communication competence, Washington (2014) believes colleges should be held accountable for preparing students with the writing skills necessary to effectively communicate in the workplace. In contrast, Gray and Murray (2011) assert that university training is not capable of encompassing all the variables of the workplace, and therefore, businesses that employ new graduates and the graduates themselves should be responsible for developing workplace communication competencies. Boyle et al. (2014) builds on this concept, suggesting that organizations should invest in programs to

develop interpersonal and communication skills in employees they believe have potential. Although there is something to be said for the responsibility of the employers and graduates, communication is complex and warrants the instruction of experts. A partnership between higher education and employers would best help prepare students (Brink & Costigan, 2015).

Changes to Curricula. To meet the expectations of employers, researchers and scholars need to better understand what communication activities occur most frequently in the workplace so that they can enhance existing communication programs (Bhattacharyya et al., 2009). Waldeck et al. (2012) spoke on the disconnect between public speaking courses and the needs of today's workplace. There needs to be a shift from business speaking as public address to creating and telling a story (Waldeck et al., & 2012). Bhattacharyya et al. (2009) proposed communication courses incorporate more realistic examples to build authentic learning experiences for students. Hynes (2012) builds on this recommendation by suggesting case-studies as a way business communication courses could better teach communication competencies. Overall, scholars and educators should embrace the changes in relevant skills in the workplace, mainly, the importance of collaboration and cultural interconnectivity (Waldeck et al., & 2012).

Graduates' Preparedness

Although higher education has taken an active role in helping students gain workplace communication skills, employers agree that overall college student's communication skills need improvement (Stevens, 2005; NACE, 2008; Hart Research Associates, 2012; Hines & Basso, 2008). More than 70% of employers believe college graduates are not prepared to handle the oral communication and writing communication needed for entry-level positions (Hart Research Associates, 2015). One-third of employers cited communication skills as the top skills college

graduates lack for the workplace, noting that new graduates lack writing skills, face-to-face communication skills, interview skills, presentation skills, phone skills, and interpersonal skills (NACE, 2008). Moreover, employers are not satisfied with the writing, speaking, interpersonal skills of recently hired college graduates and believe graduates need stronger computer-mediated communication skills as well (Stevens, 2005). Communication professionals reported low scores when asked to rate the writing proficiency of entry-level employees, indicating graduates lack the necessary writing skills for the workplace as well (Hines & Basso, 2008). Overall, recruiters report that poor communication skills (e.g., presentation, interviewing, and business etiquette) are a barrier that recent graduates must overcome to be employable (Stevens, 2005).

The research presented here highlights the misalignment between graduates' current communication skills and the communication skills needed in the workplace, emphasizing the need for graduates to improve their communication skills to compete in the marketplace; however, it does not address other inconsistencies, largely due to the scope, methods, and goals of the research presented.

Limitations and Future Research

Even though the contexts varied, several studies reviewed only looked at oral communication skills (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Keyton, et al., 2013; Gray and Murray, 2011; Bhattacharyya et al., 2009). Washington (2014) and Hines and Basso (2008) are the only studies presented that looked specifically at writing as a communication competency. The remaining studies examined soft skills in addition to communication skills (Robles, 2012; Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Boyle et al., 2014; Glover & Frounfelker, 2011). Bhattacharyya et al. (2009)'s study looked at a non-U.S. population like Gray and Murray (2011). Both dealt with implications

of English as a second language, which might be better categorized as intercultural communication competence.

Glover and Frounfelker's (2011) research on competencies in the workplace is one of the only studies done using qualitative methods (observations and interviews); consequently, the sample size (n=13) was considerably smaller than the other studies. The quantitative studies varied substantially, mainly in whom they chose to survey. For example, Boyle et al. (2014) surveyed employers while Bhattacharyya et al. (2009) surveyed students to understand what communication activities they took place in and used a recall method. All of the studies surveyed respondents on different sets of communication skills, which makes it difficult to compare the top skills from each study.

While this literature review combines articles written about communication competencies in the workplace and college graduates' preparedness, few studies actually combined the two concepts. To address the gaps in the research, studies should be done on college graduates employability in relation to their communicative competence. Moreover, research done on communication competence in the workplace would be more useful if respondents were given similar skills to rate.

The literature remains mixed on which communication skills employers' perceive as most valuable, and the role higher education plays in developing communication skills for the workplace. However, the researchers overwhelmingly agree that graduates are not meeting the expectations of employers.

Senior Seminar II Deliverable

An online course will be created to address the gaps in the communication knowledge and skills that college graduates need in the workplace. The course will function as a stand

online website instead of being added to a learning management system. The primary objective of the course will be to give college graduates communication knowledge that can be applied to their unique job search processes. Spitzberg and Cupach's relational competence model will inform the content of the course with the intent of increasing the likelihood that users will be perceived as competent communicators by future employers. Unlike other employment resources, the online course will help users understand how they will be perceived by employers while giving them the knowledge to communicate appropriately and effectively during their search.

Methodology

The goal of the online course it to help recent graduates leverage communication competency to find the right job after college. However, with so many options for content, the website that houses the online course must compete with social networking sites, blogs, and popular news sites for the attention of graduates searching for a communicative edge. Moreover, the course needs to cater to the needs of the targeted audience (Alsadhan et al., 2014) if it is going to grab their attention. Therefore, the online course will present content in different formats, using both text and multimedia. By adhering to the best practices of layout, design, and structure in online courses, the website will appeal to the target audience while also providing invaluable content.

Rationale

Based on the research presented, the communication skills taught in higher education do not match the level of competence employers are seeking from recent graduates. Therefore, graduates need an avenue to obtain the communication knowledge and skills required in the workplace to accompany their motivation to find the right job. The most effective way for

college graduates to increase their communication competence is to take a course that highlights all the key areas they need to focus on to impress future employers. Moreover, the course will be taught online via a standalone website. Online is the best medium for a communication course with this audience and content for various reasons. First, it will reach more of the target audience by meeting them "where they are." An overwhelming majority of college graduates spend hours every day online via smartphones, tablets, laptops, or desktop computers. Second, an online course allows for interaction and examples that will enable the audience to build their skills beyond what the classroom could offer. Finally, an online course would allow graduates to go at their own pace and select what content is most relevant to them in their search for the right position.

Although, the online medium is undoubtedly the most effective way to reach a vast audience of millennials, a traditional online course is not. As stated previously, the research has revealed that on their own, traditional communication courses in higher education are not sufficient for instilling all of the communication skills needed for succeeding in the workplace for most college students; thus, the online course will take a different approach. The online course will combine the best practices of instructional design and the fundamentals of website development so that the information remains informative without being structured like a traditional course. Generally, the intended audience will better receive the educational content if it is presented in a way that is different from how they normally receive instruction.

The sources consulted regarding online courses and instructional design posed different models and approaches for building an effective digital course including the Plan-Do-Study-Act model (Gazza, 2015), ADDIE model (Farrington, 2012; Sözcü & Ipek, 2014), DDD-E model (Sözcü & Ipek, 2014), the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)

model (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014), and the objectivist and constructivist approaches (Chen, 2014). While elements from all of these models have informed the best practices presented here, the DDD-E model (Decide, Design, Develop, and Evaluate) will be used to structure the research presented.

Decide

During the decide phase, the instructional designer must determine project goals, brainstorm content, and conduct research (Sözcü & Ipek, 2014). Moreover, the decide phase is when all of the planning for the course takes place. Planning is vital for both the development and distribution of any course since the objectives of an online course cannot realized without adequate planning (Alsadhan et al., 2014).

To determine the goals of the online course, the instructional designer should begin by answering questions about the scope and aim of the project. Most important, the instructional designer should define what problem will be solved by the training (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013).The objectives should be informed by how the course will be assessed, if the target audience already knows any or all of the content, and what people and materials will be needed (Farrington, 2012). The instructional designer should also identify what additional people and resources are needed to produce the course (Farrington, 2012).

Once the goals are set, the instructional designer must brainstorm the content for the course (Sözcü & Ipek, 2014). The content should be analyzed, categorized, and placed into a course outline. To create the outline, the major topics identified in the brainstorming should be put in the ideal order for the audience to access them (Farrington, 2012). For example, the target audience would probably access content about resumes before content about interviews. The list of broad topics then becomes “modules” with each subtopic being a separate lesson. Next to each

module and lesson, the instructional designer should determine how much time each lesson will take (Farrington, 2012). Depending on the complexity, each lesson will vary in time and therefore, vary in the amount of time needed to develop the content and multimedia elements. For each designated lesson, the course designer should add learning objectives, rationales, and activity ideas to the outline (Farrington, 2012).

Design

Choosing the most appropriate learning design will greatly influence how the audience views the content. Overall, the most vital elements of an online course are structure (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014), accessibility (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014; Forni, & Holcombe, 2013), aesthetics (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014; Forni, & Holcombe, 2013; Lixian, 2015), and content (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013; Fenesi et al., 2014; Lister, 2014).

Structure. Although the course proposed will be a nonlinear course, structure is still important. In some online classes, the structure is presented in an initial orientation (Lister, 2014). Similarly, the website created for this course will have an informal orientation via a "welcome" video. The orientation video should clearly articulate the course's benefits for graduates, instead of listing the features (Holcombe, 2013). In lieu of a typical syllabus, this proposed online course will present different guides geared toward different audiences. Each module will also incorporate self-assessments for users.

Although a course that functions as a standalone website would not present guidelines and expectations for students, it should tell the audience what they could expect from the course. There will be explicit instructions on every page to help the audience understand how they can get the most out of the content. The online course will use external web content when

appropriate (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013), discussion threads (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013), and pre-test and post-tests (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013).

Aesthetics. The aesthetics of an online course includes all of the visual communication elements including character design, color design, graphic design, layout design, and interface design (Lixian, 2015). Color is an important part of design because it is the first visual impression that an audience has, making it responsible for their initial emotional and psychological reactions (Lixian, 2015). All of the colors (Lixian, 2015), fonts, logos, resolution size, and file types, (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013) on the website should be consistent with the theme and content (Lixian, 2015; Forni, & Holcombe, 2013). Utilizing templates (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013; Farrginton, 2012) are a simple and effective way to keep the design balanced and consistent.

Content. The website will address the three main aspects of Spitzberg and Cupach's relational competence: motivation, knowledge, and skills with each module incorporating advice or information that motivates, informs, or demonstrates a communication task. To make the course well-rounded, the ten dimensions from the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS): self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, altercentrism, expressiveness, supportiveness, immediacy, and environmental control (Rubin & Martin, 1994) will be addressed in the appropriate modules to help participants measure their competence.

By default, the online course will utilize the constructivist approach which relies on students to control the learning process and solve problems based on real world task, with emphasis on flexibility (Chen, 2014). A variety of activities and choices will be incorporated to meet the needs of the users (Lister, 2014). Authentic tasks (meaningful activities that take a

hands-on, real life approach), samples, (Lister, 2014), real life examples, and scenario-based content (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013) will be incorporated to give the audience the most realistic experience. Finally, social support, learning support, technical support will be included because they are necessary for a successful online course (Chen, 2014).

Development

As the online environment becomes more interactive, online users crave more interactive experiences (Alsadhan et al., 2014). To satisfy that need, the online course will incorporate multimedia content such as audio, video, graphics and images. Courses that incorporate multimedia are more effective than traditional courses for certain content (Lixian, 2015) since it appeals to more than one type of learner. To complement most learning styles, effective courses incorporate components for people who learn best from text, audio, and video. Given the media richness of multimedia components, the creation and production of those elements must be systematically planned out.

Audio with non-redundant text and images has the greatest effect of actual understanding from learners (Fenesi et al., 2014). Consequently, the multimedia and text components of the course will be complementary instead of redundant. Additionally, whenever possible audio will be accompanied by text and images that help create a deeper understanding of the content for the audience (Lister, 2014). Lastly, videos will be utilized whenever complex, specialized, or dry information is presented and to display communication scenarios (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013).

Content Modeling. To create multimedia elements the first step is "content modeling" which consists of analyzing the audience and objectives of the course as well as coming up with the overall design of the multimedia content (Alsadhan et al., 2014). Throughout the process, all materials will be stored in a Dropbox (Farrington, 2012).

Content Development. The next step of the development process is the "content development" phase, which requires gathering all of the technical equipment needed to create the content including video and audio equipment and editing software (Alsadhan et al., 2014; Sözcü & Ipek, 2014). The content development phase also requires creating storyboards (Alsadhan et al., 2014; Sözcü & Ipek, 2014; Forni, & Holcombe, 2013) and cases scripts (Sözcü & Ipek, 2014). It is important to adopt the *less is more* philosophy when creating text and multimedia content; therefore, the proposed course will keep the word count low, the audio brief, and avoids unnecessary anecdotes and visuals (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013). During the development phase, animation, graphics, audio and video components are all brought to life.

Content Production. Finally, the content is produced and integrated into the online course. When putting the course together, it is vital to only select the materials most aligned with the goals of the course (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013). Moreover, it is important to be open to developing additional materials (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013) and resources as the needs of the audience changes. Multimedia components for an online course must be accessible to the intended audience (Alsadhan et al., 2014); therefore, they must be seamlessly incorporated into the website layout.

Evaluation

To be successful the online course should fit the needs of the audience and their learning style (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014). In addition, the content presented must be appropriate to help the learners reach the learning objectives (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014).The features of the course must encourage both the learning of the communication knowledge and the implementation of the communication skills. Consequently, to test the online course, the instructional designer should put together a small group to try out the program (Sözcü & Ipek,

2014). It is important to uncover flaws in course design in the testing phase. To determine if the content presented on the website is truly accessible and clear, the audience must actually engage in and navigate the online course (Gazza, 2015). Therefore a survey will be created that focuses on a few key metrics: multimedia elements (Alsadhan et al., 2014), use of technology and tools (Gazza, 2015), and amount of information (Gazza, 2015), design (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014), layout (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014), structure (Easton & Morganti-Fisher, 2014; Lister, 2014) and content (Forni, & Holcombe, 2013; Fenesi et al., 2014; Lister, 2014).

Conclusion

Communication competence has failed to predict, describe, and explain the behaviors, cognitions, and perceptions required to be a competent communicator. This lack of consensus has affected how communication competence is taught in higher education and how it is perceived in the workplace. Educators, researchers, and employers have continued to treat communication competence as a set of predetermined skills and traits that can be measured even though research has proven that communication competence is more complex. Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) relational model offers a more parsimonious way to conceptualize competence without losing any of the complexity. The relational model of communication is advises that motivation, knowledge, and skills are needed to communicate effectively and appropriately in a given context. Spitzberg and Cupach's framework will be used to teach college graduates how to communicate to be perceived as competent by future employers. The communication knowledge and skills taught via an online course will use text and multimedia components to compete with other web-based resources. The online course will give graduates a communicative edge, increasing the probability that employers will perceive them as competent communicators.

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