Assessing business presentation skills: Assuring learning through assessment, analysis, and curriculum improvement

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ABSTRACT

The ability to present one's thoughts clearly and concisely is a required skill by employers. This leads to the question by all stakeholders as to whether business graduates display the verbal communication skills needed for success. The onus falls upon business schools to provide knowledge and application of these skills to their students prior to graduation. The dearth of literature related to assessing and assuring learning of verbal communication skills in business does not make it easy for business schools to conduct such activities. This manuscript provides one proven method for assessing and assuring learning of verbal communication skills in an undergraduate program.

Keywords: business presentations, assessment of learning, assuring learning, undergraduate curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Employers, as well as business faculty, value business speaking skills in business school graduates (Hansen & Hansen, 2013). This is exemplified by a survey of the top ten skills employers identified and the top ten skills taught at 25 elite business schools. Business speaking skills were ranked third in desired skills by 72 percent of employee respondents, while ranked fourth in skills taught in 25 elite business schools (Ghannadian, 2013). This is supported by a similar study that found "When it comes to the importance of candidate sills/qualities, employers are looking for team players who can solve problems, organize their work, and communicate effectively…" (NACE, 2014). Clearly, the ability to successfully communicate with all stakeholders in today's organizations is a crucial skill for a successful career. It is imperative, then, for business faculty to assess whether their students are proficient in presentation skills in order to assure that all graduates are competent in verbal communication.

In a continuing effort to guide business school curriculum, AACSB International, the accrediting body for business schools, has revised standards for assessing and assuring that graduates of accredited programs are, in fact, learning what is important for every successful business graduate to know (AACSB, 2013). The goal of assessing learning is to use direct and indirect measures of learning to improve the process and to support continuous curriculum improvement in the business major.

There is a dearth of research on how successful business schools are assessing, analyzing, and assuring successful business presentation skills across the undergraduate program curriculum. Further, there are few documented procedures for implementing a systematic process for documenting whether or not students are gaining the needed communication skills to obtain and maintain successful careers. At the same time, it is critical for business schools to assess business presentation skills and assure that graduates are learning this important skill. This paper provides an overview of assessment of learning and details one proven method of assessing and assuring that students are learning effective business speaking skills across the curriculum at the undergraduate level.

ASSESSMENT AND ASSURANCE OF LEARNING

Since the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) first introduced Assurance of Learning (AoL) standards in 2003, assessment and assurance of learning have been an important topic in business education (Martell, 2007). However, the importance of assessment and assurance of learning is not limited to business programs. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) promotes and advocates assessment practices across all undergraduate programs through the development and endorsement of its Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics (AAC&U, 2014a). More specifically, AAC&U advocates that higher education ensure that all college and university students are achieving the 16 learning objectives, which it argues are essential for work, life, and citizenship (Sullivan, 2014).

In general, assessment refers to the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development (Palomba & Banta, 1999). For business programs, AACSB characterizes acceptable assessment practices as being direct measures of student learning that represent what graduates of a specific degree program possess (AACSB, 2013). Although a variety of

assessment options are available, many programs follow AACSB recommendations for the use of course-embedded measures, which refer to artifacts that are generated through classroom activities as a natural part of the educational process and designed to assess student achievement of learning objectives (McConnell, Hoover, & Miller, 2008). As such, the assurance of learning process starts with the collection of artifacts, which can be assessed, aggregated, and communicated to stakeholders for continuous improvement to a program's learning experience. Ultimately, the assurance of learning process should be designed to demonstrate accountability, provide education that is consistent with stated learning objectives, satisfy legislature and accrediting requirements, and facilitate continuous improvement to the education process (Zhu & McFarland, 2005).

However, there is an on-going debate regarding the role and implications of the AoL process in business programs (see Marques & Garrett, 2012 for a review). On the one hand, perceived advantages of AoL include increasing clarity among students and faculty about the effectiveness and usefulness of educational content (Kelley, Tong, & Choi, 2010), improving alignment between educational quality and learning objectives (Sampson & Betters-Reed, 2008), and providing business programs a competitive advantage (Romero, 2008). On the other hand, concerns include the significant investment of resources required to conform to process expectations (Scott & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006) and the potential for creativity-inhibiting uniformity among business programs (Kilpatrick, Dean, & Kilpatrick, 2008).

Regardless of the debate, business programs have adopted a variety of learning objectives based upon AACSB's suggested list of general skill areas for undergraduate business programs. First among AACSB's suggested list is written and oral communication (AACSB, 2014). The importance of communication skills is not surprising given that a survey of employers also rated verbal communication as the most importance skill when evaluating a job candidate (NACE, 2014). In fact, the business simulation company Capsim compiled 280 specific learning objectives from more than 50 business programs and identified communication skills as one of the seven most common learning objectives (Capsim, 2013). AAC&U (2014b) defines oral communication as "a prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors."

With the clearly identified need to ensure business students gain much coveted verbal communication skills, the onus falls on business schools to develop curriculum that adequately prepares students for future success. Approaches for imparting verbal communication skills range from cross departmental collaboration to self-delivery. Regardless of the method, the learning goal remains the same - students will demonstrate the ability to prepare and deliver purposeful presentations designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors. Though there are a variety of curricular methods for achieving the desired outcomes, the following provides one framework for assessing whether or not the institution is cultivating the desired attributes in students.

AN ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR BUSINESS PRESENTATION SKILLS

Working from the understanding that students will demonstrate the ability to prepare and deliver purposeful presentations, a framework was developed to assess whether or not the current curriculum was meeting the goal, and if not, what needs to be done to the curriculum to achieve the goal. The primary mechanism for delivering and reinforcing business speaking skills is The College of Business Center for Professional Communication. Skills are initially introduced

through learning modules delivered by Center faculty in a sophomore/junior level course. The business speaking content is then reinforced throughout College of Business courses where any verbal presentations are assigned. In order to fully understand the impact of the current curriculum, assessment takes place in multiple courses at various levels. For the example used in this process, assessment currently takes place in two courses with a third course proposed for future assessment. The two current courses are a sophomore/junior course and a senior capstone course. The proposed third course is a freshman course. Assessing in multiple courses at various levels allows for assessing the development of the desired skill – entering, progressing, and exiting. The same assessment rubric should be used for all courses and levels.

Measurement Process across the Curriculum

In the development of the curriculum, specific attention was paid to best practices for verbal communication skills. The best practices were gathered through a combination of reviewing current business communication texts, an exploration of professional organizations and publications, and attendance at executive presence training. Particular attention was paid to the selection/development of a quality assessment instrument, in this case a rubric. Developing a quality assessment instrument is critical for both the assessor and the students. "The learning intensions of a lesson or series of lessons tells students what they should know, understand and be able to do, and the success criteria (criteria for assessment) help teachers to decide whether their students have in fact achieved the learning intention" (Curriculum Corporation, 2014).

The common verbal communication rubric utilizes seven criteria (central message, analysis and support, organization, visual aids, language, delivery, and questions & answers) and is based on the AAC&U Oral Communication VALUE Rubric (Exhibit 1: Modified AAC&U Oral Communication Rubric in Appendix A:). The assessment evaluates students on incomplete (69% or below), below expectations (70% - 77%), meets expectations (78% - 89%) or exceeds expectations (90% or above). The established goal is for at least 85% of students to meet or exceed expectations. Whenever developing an assessment instrument, it is important to make sure that each criterion can be evaluated separately in order to develop appropriate plans to improve student outcomes in regards to those areas.

Progressing Assessment

During the sophomore/junior level course, students receive instruction and coaching focused on verbal communication skills. The progressing assessment is intended to assess whether the instruction and coaching are achieving the desired outcome of students being able to prepare and deliver purposeful presentations as previously noted. Though the presentations are team presentations, the assessor evaluates each speaker as a single speaker. Video is often used to assist with the evaluation process. During the sophomore/junior level course, students engage in a minimum of six presentations – two formal presentations and four briefings. Additionally, each of the two formal presentations requires specific presentation skills (standing, seated, virtual, etc.).

Exiting Assessment

To assess the business students' abilities to effectively deliver an oral presentation, students deliver a comprehensive final presentation in the senior level capstone course. The presentation emphasizes the findings and recommendations from the course project. This exiting assessment allows for a full review of the verbal communication curriculum. Are the students demonstrating the skills acquired during the progressing assessment course? Have they continued to improve? The exiting assessment is a critical piece of the assessment process: it assures that students are receiving the training and that they also continue to utilize the acquired skills.

Assuring Learning – Refining the Process and Product

Because assessment is an ongoing process, evaluating the assessment process as well as the curriculum against the results is critical. As part of this ongoing process, a new evaluation point was identified and proposed for future assessment. The proposed entering assessment is a critical piece to the development of appropriate curriculum.

The conducting of an entering assessment allows for curriculum to be developed with a baseline understanding of current skill level. The entering assessment should take place as soon as possible. The proposed assessment course for the entering assessment is a freshman learning community. Students in the learning community already have two presentation assignments during the semester, but no verbal communication training is offered as part of that course. This would allow of an accurate baseline of entering students' skills for further curriculum development.

Assessing at the entering, progressing, and exiting stages allows for the most opportunity to make impactful changes in the curriculum in order to ensure students gain the much needed skill of effective verbal communication. After all, "Whether you're presenting information to a board, persuading skeptical buyers or motivating your staff, your ability to speak effectively is critical to your success and to the success of your business" (Lantz, 2003). Business schools have an inherent responsibility to identify the knowledge and skills students need and to provide appropriate instruction in those areas along with assessment to assure the learning is taking place.

CONCLUSION

With a full understanding of the need for business schools to identify and teach key knowledge and skills, developing and implementing a quality assurance of learning process is vital to demonstrating the accomplishment of this task. By developing clear learning goals and objectives and then assessing those objectives, business schools can ensure they provide their students with the skills they need. Furthermore, knowing that students are being equipped with the knowledge and skills that employers demand will help ensure not only the students' future success but the school's as well. The described method for assessing verbal communication skills across the curriculum is a proven method. It assesses the goal that students will demonstrate the ability to prepare and deliver purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values,

beliefs, or behaviors. This ultimately leads to curriculum improvements and further student success.

APPENDIX A: MODIFIED AAC&U ORAL COMMUNICATION RUBRIC

Verbal Communications Rubric

Verbal Communications Definition: Verbal communication is prepared, purposeful presentation designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors (AACU 2013).

Rating Criterion / Performance Dimension	Incomplete (Rating 0 or 1)	Below Expectations (Rating 2 or 3)	Meets Expectations (Rating 4 or 5)	Exceeds Expectations (Rating 6)
Rating Criterion / Performance Dimension	Equivalent to: letter grade F or D; percentage score 0-70%; average rating (0-6 scale) 0.00-1.50; "manager troubled" evaluation	Equivalent to: letter grades C- or C; percentage score 71-77%; average rating (0-6 scale) 1.50-3.49; "manager disappointed" evaluation	Equivalent to: letter grades C+ through B+; percentage score 77-89%; average rating (0-6 scale) 3.50-5.49; "manager satisfied" evaluation	Equivalent to: letter grades A- or A; percentage score 90-100%; average rating (0-6 scale) 5.50-6.00; "manager impressed" evaluation
1 Central Message — The ability to articulate an easily understood, compelling, and memorable purpose or main point of a presentation.	Central message is missing OR central message can only be deduced because it is not explicitly stated in the presentation.	Central message is basically understandable but is not often repeated and is not memorable.	Central message is clear and consistent with the supporting material.	Central message is compelling (precisely stated, appropriately repeated, memorable, and strongly supported.)
2 Analysis and Support — The ability to provide credible, relevant, and convincing information (e.g., explanations, analogies, quotations, statistics, examples, contexts) that is effectively analyzed and supports the principle ideas of the presentation.	Information provided (explanations, analogies, quotations, statistics, examples, contexts) is insufficient to support the principle ideas of the presentation or to establish the presenter's credibility/authority on the topic.	Information provided (explanations, analogies, quotations, statistics, examples, contexts) is somewhat appropriate; analyses of information partially support the principle ideas of presentation and partially establish the presenter's credibility/authority on the topic.	Information provided (explanations, analogies, quotations, statistics, examples, contexts) is appropriate; analyses of information generally support the principle ideas of presentation and generally establish the presenter's credibility/authority on the topic.	A variety of appropriate information (explanations, analogies, quotations, statistics, examples, contexts) is provided; analyses of information significantly support the principle ideas of presentation and fully establish the presenter's credibility/authority on the topic.
3 Organization — The ability to group and sequence ideas and supporting material such that organization reflects the purpose of the presentation, makes ideas easier to follow, and accomplishes the goal(s).	Organizational pattern (specific introduction and conclusion, sequenced material within the body, and transitions) is not observable within the presentation.	Organizational pattern (specific introduction and conclusion, sequenced material within the body, and transitions) is intermittently observable within the presentation.	Organizational pattern (specific introduction and conclusion, sequenced material within the body, and transitions) is clearly and consistently observable within the presentation.	Organizational pattern (specific introduction and conclusion, sequenced material within the body, and transitions) is skillful and makes the content of the presentation cohesive.
4 Visual Aids — The ability to use high-quality visual aids that support the central ideas of the presentation, enhance the credibility of the presentation, and add value for the audience.	Visual aids (over-heads, slides, handouts) are missing entirely OR are ineffective; visual aids are difficult to read/understand, distracting, or inadequate for presentation.	Visual aids (over-heads, slides, handouts) are adequate; visual aids are readable, understandable, and somewhat support the central ideas of the presentation.	Visual aids are good; visual aids are easy to read/understand, attractive, and enhance and support the central ideas of the presentation by supporting the central ideas of the presentation, and add value for the audience.	Visual aids are highly effective; visual aids are easy to read/understand, help to establish credibility, support the central ideas of the presentation, and add value for the audience.
5 Language — The ability to use appropriate vocabulary, terminology, and sentence structure appropriate to the topic and audience.	Language choices are unclear and minimally support the effectiveness of the presentation; language in presentation is not appropriate to audience.	Language choices are mundane and commonplace and partially support the effectiveness of the presentation; language in presentation is appropriate to audience.	Language choices are thoughtful and generally support the effectiveness of the presentation; language in presentation is appropriate to audience.	Language choices are imaginative, memorable, and compelling, and enhance the effectiveness of the presentation; language in presentation is appropriate to audience.
6 Delivery — The ability to use posture, gestures, eye contact, and voice to enhance the effectiveness of a presentation.	Delivery techniques (posture, gesture, and vocal expressiveness) detract from the understandability of the presentation; speaker appears uncomfortable.	Delivery techniques (posture, gesture, eye contact, and vocal expressiveness) make the presentation understandable; speaker appears tentative.	Delivery techniques (posture, gesture, eye contact, and vocal expressiveness) make the presentation interesting; speaker appears comfortable.	Delivery techniques (posture, gesture, eye contact, and vocal expressiveness) make the presentation compelling; speaker appears polished and confident.
7 Questions & Answers — The ability to understand, manage, and answer questions credibly and effectively during and after the presentation.	Ineffectively answers or does not answer most questions with correct information.	Effectively answers most questions (50%-75%) yet may not fully understand questions, expand on answers or establish credibility.	Effectively understands questions and provides relevant, correct, and credible answers to most questions (75% or more).	Effectively understands questions and provides relevant, correct, and convincing answers; answers all questions.

Performance Dimension Source = Adapted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) Oral Communication VALUE Rubric (2013).

Rubric Source = Adapted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) Oral Communication VALUE Rubric (2013).

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