

TRENDS: A RESEARCH UPDATE OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION FACE-TO- FACE ONLINE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

How does delivery of an online business course compare to a more traditional face-to-face delivery of the same course? The purpose of this study is to examine key elements of the online business communication course as indicated by members of the Association for Business Communication through a research survey. This study focuses on differences in how the course is delivered in comparison to face-to-face sections of the course. The findings show that, in general, online instructors have been able to present a writing-intensive course and present similar topics as a face-to-face course. Therefore, it is possible that online education is able to provide a similar learning experience for online learners.

Key Words: online education, course delivery, business communication

INTRODUCTION

When business students graduate, they must be prepared to enter the ever-changing world and dynamic environment found in today's businesses. Business Communication, one important part of the business environment, is sure to be one component of these students' successes. Textbook authors Thill and Bovee (2013) believe that business communication is more complex than other forms of social communication; therefore, it is important that students understand communication in a complicated business environment. These students, tomorrow's future employees, must adjust to various legal and ethical constraints, changes in technology, diversity issues, and experiences in the team environment (Lehman, DuFrene, & Walker, 2017). However, the essential communication skills that employers desire are often lacking in new hires (Shwom &

Snyder, 2016), which makes it especially important that today's business communication instructors teach students to meet this need.

Employers expect employees who can organize and express ideas, listen effectively, communicate with those of diverse backgrounds, use acceptable standards of quality writing, and utilize communication technology (Thill & Bovee, 2013). This ability of future employees to communicate effectively upon graduation is a key to their business success. If these students can master the skills of both oral and written communication, they can stand out in a broad field of candidates (Shwom & Snyder, 2016). Consequently, one of the objectives of the business communication course is to prepare students with the communication skills that help them critically analyze a situation in any business field (Russ, 2009).

Over the last fifteen years, the business communication course has evolved from a traditional face-to-face delivery system as online technologies have become more prevalent. Other issues of interest are where the business communication course is located (department and college) and what is the focus of the course (theory, writing, and/or oral communication). Wardrope's (2001) study of business department chairs across the U.S. reported that 76% of business schools required a business communication course, and almost 50% of these courses were a junior-level course in the college of business. His study also reported that the chairs believed that written skills were four of the five top important skills to teach. In a more recent study, Russ (2009) found that universities offer business communication courses 60% of the time in the school of business. Overall, universities offer 53% of the courses at the upper level and the most covered topic in those courses features written communication. In addition, Russ noted that instructors of business communication courses prefer smaller class sizes than what they actually teach. Most instructors (70%) prefer less than 20 students in a course, 17.3% of instructors teach courses with more than 31 students, but only 2.4% prefer doing so (Russ, 2009).

Sharp and Brumberger (2013) reviewed course syllabi posted on university websites. They reported 76% of business communication courses are in the business school, 73% are at the junior or senior level, and 38% focus on both written and oral skills. In addition, 71% of universities offer at least one business communication course.

Business communication instructors teach in the business school (70%) and include writing assignments in the course (93%) according to the most recently published study of the subject by Moshiri and Cardon (2014). The authors focused on the online course specifically and found that instructors teach the course in a variety of delivery methods. Only 3% of those surveyed teach the course fully online. Instructors also use the traditional face-to-face format (60.7%), the online method (33.9%), and a hybrid approach (23.8%).

This finding is similar to Russ (2009) who reported that 73.5% of instructors taught at least one course online. Moshiri and Cardon (2014) were quick to point out, "our findings do not indicate a significant change in delivery methods in the past 5 years" (p. 319). The findings of these studies show that business communication classes appear to be widely offered in undergraduate education and their general format seems to have remained relatively constant over the last fifteen years.

Historically, many instructors were skeptical about offering the business communication course online (Dyrud, 2000) because they believed that the collaborative pedagogies that were common in these courses would not transfer to the online format. However, Wardrope (2001) believed that the transition to online should not be overlooked, but instead the online "interactive features should be utilized to their maximum potential, allowing for verbal and nonverbal exchange between teacher and student and among students" (p. 96). As Moshiri and Cardon's

(2014) study showed that 73.5% of instructors teach online at least some of the time, it is evident that instructors have been able to overcome at least some of the forewarned obstacles. As the online business communication courses became available, Bowman (2003) stressed the importance of flexibility and planning on the behalf of instructors and students in this new environment. He warned that, “Teaching and learning in an online environment are not the same as teaching and learning in a traditional classroom environment. The skills required for success may overlap, but they are not identical” (p. 77). This initial apprehension by researchers may be one reason why course instructors are still more likely to teach the course in the traditional face-to-face format, as found by Moshiri and Cardon (2014).

However, opinions of online education have changed in the last fifteen years. Administrators have recognized the value of online learning, and, in 2012, administrators indicated that online classes were the same or better than face-to-face classes 77% of the time. In 2013, an average 70.7% of post-secondary institutions had some online classes. Additionally, the larger the institution, the more likely online courses are offered (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Beaudoin (2015) stressed the importance of institutions to be innovative and meet the needs of students in the online environment. He stated, “every college and university must strategically plot its future position along the continuum between face-to-face and distance instruction” (p. 34). Offering a course online can be challenging, and institutions struggle to find a way to continue the quality of education when course deliveries are changing to new methods. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2015) found that students taking all online courses at both the freshman and senior academic levels felt challenged in their online courses. Non-traditional students were also more likely to feel highly challenged when taking all courses online.

As the prevalence of online courses across disciplines becomes more common, business communication faculty will continue to offer the course in a fully online format. Teaching a course online can bring its own challenges as instructors must adapt the content in this new format, and it may be possible instructors may change class content to accommodate differences in the delivery methods. Collaborative learning is one of these challenges to overcome, and, according to Staggers, Garcia and Nagelhout (2008), “team building is lacking in online environments” (p. 474). This study will attempt to address some of the issues with offering this course in the online format and compare how the course may differ between the different delivery methods.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is for researchers to provide an overview of how business communication instructors conduct the course in an online environment. The research will provide an update to some of the key components of recent studies completed by Russ (2009) and Moshiri and Cardon (2014). The object of the study is to find general trends in online business communication courses across the world and to assess some differences between online and face-to-face courses. The following areas will be examined in this study.

- Demographic information about both online and face-to-face courses and instructors
- Average class sizes of online and face-to-face sections
- Types of assignments given to students for both online and face-to-face courses
- Differences, if any, in the approach to teaching the course in international courses.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The Institutional Review Board of the authors' institution examined the study proposal for human subject protections and approved the study. A copy of this approval can be obtained upon request.

This study is a quantitative study using the online survey site Qualtrics. The researchers developed an email for distribution by the Association for Business Communication (ABC), who forwarded it to all current members throughout the world. Members followed a link provided in the email to complete the questionnaire. Responses to the survey were analyzed using statistical data to report on trends and to compare the results against previous studies. In addition, the survey concluded with three open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide additional information that may be useful with further explanation of the data.

Ninety-four members of ABC responded to the survey. However, only 91 respondents completed the survey. A response rate cannot be accurately determined as ABC executive offices did not verify the exact number of emails sent to members. However, assuming that ABC sent the email to all of the 1709 members listed in the online directory, the approximate response rate would be 5.3% of members. Members of ABC are able to access an online membership directory, which groups members by their regions. With this information, the authors estimated where the worldwide members were located to compare with survey responses. For classification purposes, respondents to the survey selected their geographical region of the world as shown in Table 1:

Region	Number of Members	% of Membership	Number of Responses	% of Responses
Eastern U.S.	175	10.2%	8	9%
Midwest U.S.	248	14.5%	29	32%
Southeast U.S.	188	11%	16	18%
Southwest U.S.	120	7%	8	9%
Western U.S.	137	8%	13	14%
Canada	41	2.4%	2	2%
Europe, Africa, Middle East	103	6%	8	9%
Caribbean, Mexico, Central/South America	19	1.1%	4	4%
Asia and Pacific	107	6%	2	2%

Based on actual responses versus the membership directory percentages, the authors believe that the survey results are representative of the worldwide members of ABC. The percentage of each membership region is similar, with the exception that the Midwestern U.S., Southeast U.S., and Western U.S. regions seem over-represented in the sample.

FINDINGS

Respondents for this study are employed full time (85%) and are experienced teachers (50% have taught at least 10 years). Respondents are also well educated, with 64% holding a doctoral degree. Colleges of business (65%) or English (15%) offer the business communication course at the sophomore (41%) or junior (47%) level. The course is required for business majors 88% of the time, and 69% of respondents stated that the basic course was the only business communication course required of students.

Survey results show that the average class size for the basic business communication course offered in all formats is usually small: 26% of respondents indicated their classes had 20 students or less and 62% had class sizes of 21-35 students. There was some difference in the class size based on location, with the international locations more likely to have larger class sizes as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 Size of Class by Location				
# of Students in class (on average)	U.S Region # of Responses	U.S. Region % of Responses	International Region # of Responses	International Region % of Responses
Less than 20	21	28.4%	2	12.5%
21 - 35	48	64.9%	8	50.0%
36 – 50	5	6.8%	4	25.0%
51 – 70	0	0.0%	1	6.3%
More than 70	0	0.0%	1	6.3%

According to survey responses, business communication courses in the U.S. seem to have smaller enrollment per section than courses outside the U.S. All U.S. regions indicated their courses have, on average, 50 students or less, but a small number of the international courses have more than 50 students.

ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY METHODS

In response to questions about course delivery, respondents to the survey showed that 29% of courses were fully online, and 23% offered the course in a hybrid format (some class meetings and some online activities). In addition, 62% of respondents who did teach business communication online indicated their online courses are approximately the same size as their face-to-face courses. Of these, only 11% indicated the online course was larger.

Few instructors, only 9%, preferred the fully online course, but 28% preferred a hybrid course. Other respondents preferred face-to-face (52%) or lecture/lab combination classes (students meet some days in a class with lecture format and other days in a lab) (11%). The instructors who teach this course online indicated 81% of the time that they used the same assignments in the online course, with only minor changes, that they used in the face-to-face courses. Overall, 88% of instructors view their course as writing intensive; however, this differs based on location. Instructors in the U.S. considered the course writing intensive 93% of the time; whereas respondents in other regions only indicated 63% of the time that their course was writing intensive. Among international respondents, only 6% of respondents (1 of 15) indicated that they taught a course fully online.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Writing is an important part of the course: overall 60% of respondents reported that writing counted toward at least 50% of the final course grade. Face-to-face and online courses offer the same types of assignments. Table 3 shows the types of writing assignments that are required in the course and shows that written assignments are still very prevalent in the course:

Table 3: Assignments by Delivery System

Assignment	Online (26)	Face-to Face (73)	Hybrid (21)	Lecture/Lab Combination (17)	Overall Total (90)
Composing letters/memos	96%	89%	95%	100%	90%
Composing emails	85%	78%	67%	82%	78%
Taking quizzes	85%	71%	52%	59%	69%
Designing visual support (PowerPoint or Prezi)	81%	75%	86%	65%	77%
Completing a resume/application message	77%	62%	71%	76%	67%
Writing an individual research report	73%	56%	62%	47%	77%
Completing an individual oral presentation	73%	64%	67%	59%	66%
Taking objective exams	62%	53%	43%	53%	50%
Writing a team research report	50%	56%	67%	53%	58%
Using social media	50%	36%	33%	24%	37%
Completing a group oral presentation	42%	52%	71%	53%	57%
Taking short answer/essay exams	38%	29%	29%	47%	29%
Writing blogs	8%	10%	14%	6%	11%

The top four assignments for both online and face-to-face courses are composing letters/memos, composing emails, taking quizzes, and designing visual support (PowerPoint or Prezi). Faculty offer quizzes more often in online courses (85%) as compared to face-to-face courses (71%).

Faculty incorporate working with teams differently in face-to-face and online courses in this study. Survey respondents indicated that they required teams in their face-to-face courses 80% of the time, but only 23% required teamwork in their online courses. (Respondents could choose multiple answers about how they used teamwork, so responses did not add up to 100%. In addition, using social media appeared to be more prevalent (50%) in online courses than in face-to-face courses (36%).

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study seem to support the findings from previous studies concerning the course (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014; Russ, 2009; Sharp & Brumberger, 2013; Wardrope, 2001). Most

likely, experienced faculty in a college of business are teaching business communication as an upper-level course. Among other topics, teaching writing skills is still the focus of the course.

The survey allowed respondents to add comments to clarify their answers, but most of the comments did not address the online component of the class. These comments were very diverse and many attempted to explain that they might have responded differently depending on the course they taught. Some institutions offered more than one basic communication course – one focused on writing and one on presentations – so the respondents often stated they focused on the writing course. Another respondent commented that he or she taught classes in the large-class lecture with small-class lab format, but that person chose to write about the large-class format. One respondent expressed frustration with course delivery, stating, “I do teach online but have not been allowed to teach business communication fully online. A hybrid course is being piloted.” This response seems to indicate that administration may still be reluctant to allow the online course, which supports findings from (Dyrud, 2000). Another respondent seemed doubtful about adapting to changing the course delivery when expressing concerns about “Faculty are not able to keep up with changes in technology.” Although the ability of faculty to keep up with technological change was addressed by Wardrope (2001), the increase in the number of online courses since that time indicates faculty have found ways to overcome the distance challenge.

Another respondent indicated, “My online students are primarily working adults.” This comment may indicate that the online course prepares students in this target audience differently from the traditional face-to-face students.

Online teamwork appears to be an activity that is limited in the online environment. With only 23% of online courses requiring teamwork, but 80% of face-to-face requiring it, the online course seems to continue to struggle to overcome challenges when working with teams online. This is a key issue that may require more study. The online comments left by respondents did not address this topic specifically.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions and recommendations section addresses limitations of the study, conclusions and recommendations, and implications for future research.

Limitations of the study

The small sample size limits the findings from the survey. Although the authors hoped to survey all members of ABC, at least some members did not receive the survey request. There were some technical issues with ABC sending email to its members, so it is likely that many members never received the message to participate. Increasing the sample size could yield additional results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this study further support the findings about the course from prior researchers, but what this study does provide is some insight into the international perspective of teaching the course. Teachers outside the United States teach slightly larger class sizes that may explain why the international courses are less likely writing intensive. One can assume that as the class size increases, the amount of required writing in the course will decrease.

The conclusions and recommendations from this study will provide current direction for business communication faculty. Frequently, administrators and other faculty ask questions concerning practices of business communication faculty at other institutions. This updated

information on key components will provide direction for both teachers and administrators in making critical curriculum decisions.

The findings do show that, despite several authors' apprehension to teaching the business communication course online, institutions have found a way to implement the online component into the course. It does seem that, in general, online instructors have been able to present the course and cover similar topics as the face-to-face courses. Therefore, it is possible that online education is able to provide a similar learning experience for online learners.

Implications for Future Research

Future research could focus on a larger sample size that attempts to reach more members of ABC through a direct email account. In addition, not all instructors of the business communication course are members of ABC, so inviting non-members may increase the number of participants. With a larger sample size, researchers could use correlation statistics to see if there is a statistical significance to the differences among delivery systems.

Future studies could also look at challenges that online instructors have faced when presenting the course to ensure there are opportunities for student interaction in the course, as suggested by Wardrope (2001). This study could review specific pedagogical techniques used to increase student interaction with teachers and other students. Specifically, researchers should examine team effectiveness in online environments more comprehensively.

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