

Teaching Oral Communication Skills: An Example of an Inspiring Communication Course Using Interactive Workshop Style Pedagogy

Chong “Joanna” S.K. Lee, California State University, CA., U.S.A.
Tom Bagwell, California State University, CA., U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

Communication skills are known to be the most important skills that all business students must acquire before they graduate. Of the most desired communication skills, oral and listening skills are ranked highest by employers of new graduates. While most business programs include a required course that teach and develop communication skills, very little has been reported about effective course content and pedagogy in teaching oral and listening skills. This paper presents an MBA core communication course experience in which the interactive workshop style pedagogy has generated a transformative learning experience while effectively teaching oral and listening skills.

Keywords

Communication Skills, Oral Communication, Presentation, Listening, Soft Skills, Self-Awareness, Empathy, Open-mindedness, Engaged Learning, Interactive Learning, Workshop Style, Communication Feedback, Communication Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of business education is to equip students with knowledge and skills that help them succeed in the workplaces they join after graduation. Of the important skills that business students should acquire, communication skills have been noted to come before others such as leadership, critical thinking, strategic thinking, and research. As such, most business programs regard communication skills as one of the key, if not the most, important skills that all MBA students should develop before graduation.

The importance of communication skills in work places has been well-documented over the years (Lee, 2006; Walker et al., 2011; Heffernan et al., 2010; Montoya et al., 2010; Sherman, 2011; Lee, 2012; Ghannadian, 2013; GMAC, 2014). According to a recent survey, employers consider communication skills the most important over teamwork, technical, leadership, and managerial skills when hiring recent business grads for a mid-level position (GMAC, 2014). In order of their importance in the workplace, employers ranked communications skills, on average, twice as important as managerial skills. The top four skills employers seek in new hires are communications-related: oral and listening skills are ranked first and second-highest, followed by written communication, presentation skills, and fifth-ranked adaptability, a teamwork skill (GMAC, 2014).

In as much as there has been widely noted importance, most business programs strive to help students develop and improve communication skills during their business education journey in the program. Therefore, the issue is not about whether or not communication skills should be taught but about how to teach them effectively. In most cases, business programs teach communication as part of the required core course curriculum and in others, as part of co-curricular programs in the form of workshops (e.g., Harvard, Columbia, Stanford). While one can deduce a program’s structural approach to teaching communication by looking at the list of core courses in the curriculum, it is difficult to gauge pedagogical approaches to teaching communication skills and their effectiveness – especially in teaching oral and listening skills (GMAC, 2014).

In search of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching and learning communication skills, one must be mindful about the course content and pedagogy that can bring the desired learning outcome out of students. Consider, for example, a student who is uncomfortable speaking in public due to a lack of confidence, language mastery, etc. In this case, the instructional goal is to help the student develop/improve presentation skills. It is imperative that the student’s concern about his/her communication barrier and lack of confidence would have to be addressed in order for the student to fully benefit from presentation skills acquired in the course.

Achieving behavioral learning should be included as the desired learning outcome when it comes to teaching ‘skills’. In other words, cognitive learning (i.e., knowing about presentation skills/tips) is necessary but incomplete unless it is followed by action behavioral learning (e.g., effectively delivering presentation). When it comes to

carrying out learned communication skills, personal psychological barriers may act as hidden obstacles that hinder productive use of learned skills in oral communication. Addressing the barriers and creating a safe and encouraging class environment become an important foundation for landing behavioral learning outcome of oral and listening skills.

In search of communication pedagogy, one turns to the Interaction Model of Communication, which offers insight into an important pedagogical element in teaching oral and listening skills. According to the model, communication is a two-way process in which participants alternate positions as sender and receiver and generate meaning by sending and receiving feedback within physical and psychological contexts (Schramm, 1997). In this view, teaching and learning of communication skills must take into consideration the interactive nature of communication and utilize feedback as part of required exercises as much as possible.

Feedback is very important in developing and improving communication skills and must be emphasized in designing communication pedagogy. Especially in teaching oral communication skills, a behavioral rather than cognitive outcome should be the goal. Communication courses should aim at providing an experience that shows results of behavioral change/improvement utilizing feedback to engage students and create supportive and encouraging environment that motivates and helps students develop confidence. This is a necessary condition to accomplish the behavioral learning outcome of improved oral communication and listening skills at an individual level. While business programs widely emphasize the importance of oral communication skills in the core curriculum, little has been reported to share effective pedagogy and course example in teaching oral communication skills to business students.

The purposes of this paper are to present the experience of teaching communication skills – with emphasis on oral and listening skills—to MBA students and to report the effectiveness as perceived by students as well as their performance in the assessment of the program learning outcome. The details of the course, the format, the materials and exercises, and the results of the course in terms of student impact and learning experiences are reported in the following sections.

THE COURSE AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The Course

The focus of the course, Managerial/Leadership Communication, is to develop and improve MBA students' leadership communication skills with an emphasis on oral and listening skills. The course uses lectures, review of articles, reading of a text book and analysis of real life business cases in managerial and leadership communication. The lectures cover the major concepts and analytical tools focusing on illustrating the application of concepts and analytical tools. The course takes behavioral approaches and uses assignments and activities that help students apply concepts and tools in developing and improving their skills to understand, connect, listen, tell stories and give presentations. With the goal of achieving behavioral learning, the course utilizes intensive feedback and is designed to be extremely interactive.

Every class meeting begins with a student-led Jump Start Meeting exercise. The purposes of this exercise is to set the tone and engage students by giving ownership of the course to students. The class progresses with lecture and discussions and exercises on the discussed communications tools. Students are often expected to move around to work in pairs or teams and are often expected to present at a moment's notice. All course assignments are created to allow them to translate the conceptual knowledge into actual practice. The course also uses extensive coaching. The instructor brings 5-6 experienced coaches to guide small group communication exercises. The second half of the three and a half hour class meeting usually goes into break out session of small group practice of listening, story-telling, feedback and coaching. The shared belief that guided the development and management of the course was that the best way to learn about anything is to practice it. As such, the course was designed to achieve the purpose of providing interactive learning by practice with ample opportunity for feedback and correction, focusing on behavioral learning of developing oral, listening, and story-telling skills.

Course Learning Outcomes

The course was intended to achieve a number of student learning outcomes related to communication skills. Upon successful completion of the course, a student is expected to be able to:

Understand and apply managerial communication concepts

Write effective managerial communication documents including memos and letters.

Analyze and present complex managerial communication cases within local, national, and international contexts.
Describe and apply oral managerial communication skills.
Describe and apply effective interpersonal communication skills in areas such as listening, teamwork, and interviewing.
Describe and apply effective small group (team) communication strategies in areas such as managing conflicts, and negotiation.

Textbooks and readings

The course used books and articles to support the lecture and to facilitate the discussion and understanding of concepts and analytical tools. They include the following:

Resonate – Nancy Duarte

Leadership Presence – Kathy Lubar (et al)

Art of Possibility – Benjamin Zander

Article: Storytelling that Moves People

<http://web.mit.edu/tibbetts/Public/Storytelling%20That%20Moves%20People.pdf>

Article: Discovering Your Authentic Leadership <http://www.aawccnatl.org/assets/authentic%20leadership.pdf>

As shown in the list of books and articles, the course uses non-conventional reading materials to establish the context for tools learning and skills exercises.

Course Assignments and Activities

The course utilizes many homework assignments and in-class activities, all of which are intended to provide facilitative and interactive learning experiences and feedback opportunities. The following presents four major assignments that are highly valued by students:

Soul Portrait: Illustrate (with drawings or magazines picture clippings) a white envelope (approx. 9”x11.5”), that illustrate symbols of a student’s strengths and values. Write the student’s name on the inside flap and illustrate on the side with the flap. Also turn in a written 1 page, single space. 1” borders, 11pt font. Answer the following questions:

This is what I want you to know about me.

My deepest fear?

My Communication Goal for this course is...

What’s holding me back?

Purpose: to facilitate self-reflection in depth; encourage understanding of self, openness, and sincerity; to help students overcome self-induced communication barriers.

“Curtain Up / Curtain Down” stories and presentations: Partner up with a classmate and share a story based on the in-class parameters. Prepare to spend a minimum of ½ hour prior to the next class. Presentation in the next class.

Purpose: build listening skill through the active listening exercise; develop story telling skill by telling their story to their exercise partner and help them tell their story others based on what they heard; develop empathy; develop a skill to connect with others

RIVER of LIFE on a Poster board and Presentation in class: Identify major life events that had major impact on the student in the course of the student’s life to this date on a white Poster Board minimum 20”x30”. Each student gives his/her presentation in a story telling format going over the poster board. Students are required to turn in note of appreciation to each student in the next class.

Purpose: Understanding of self; understanding of others; facilitate openness and confidence building; develop story telling skill.

Final Paper – Write a 5-6 page paper about the 3-4 topics that moved students during the course and how the students going to incorporate them into his/her life. Should be in single space. 11 pt. font, 1” margins. Depth and authenticity are desired.

Purpose: To reinforce the learning experiences of the student as they deem valuable to them; to understand the

impact of the course on teaching communication skills to MBA students.

In addition to aforementioned major assignments, the course also uses the following assignments to facilitate self-reflection and to help build confidence in giving presentation:

Giving MYSELF an “A” assignment

Prepare a 5 slide PowerPoint on an idea or topic or cause that the student is passionate about

Why I Got an “A”

Appendix I illustrates a detailed course schedule outline showing the context in which these exercises are assigned including the relevant reading and course activities.

Other Class Activities:

The class uses many interactive activities and exercises in class. Throughout each class, students experience other interactive activities appropriate for the day’s course topic/agenda and are often required to change seats and rotate partners and group members. For example, they may include practices of eye contact, voice tone, body gestures, presentation of opposite views, etc. It is noted that, a flexible classroom with movable tables and chairs, is needed to support the rotating, stand up, interactive in-class activities. The class also utilizes several activities to help students develop and reinforce positive attitudes of a leader, including the following:

Random Acts of Kindness Activity

Gratitude Letter Exercise

Count Your Blessings Assignment

A note of appreciation to each student on the River of Life presentation.

“Best Possible Self” Activity

Forgiveness Activity

As to the structure and the organization of the course, Appendix I illustrates the course schedule outline. As shown in the appendix, the course schedule presents how the lecture, reading, activities and assignments are woven together to offer the desired flow of the course experience in a ten-week course schedule, operating in a quarter system.

CONCLUSION

The Impact of the Course

The course has been extremely successful in teaching oral communication and listening skills to MBA students in the program in discussion. The interactive workshop style pedagogy coupled with course contents has proved to be effective in teaching students not only oral communication skills but also other soft skills and attitudinal skills that are foundational for being an effective communicator. Such attitudinal components may include openness, empathy, positive mindset, and confidence.

Student Learning Outcomes

The program’s outcomes assessment data shows that students exceeded benchmarks established for the goal of demonstrating advanced oral communication skills. A couple of external evaluators assessed student presentations using the advanced oral communication rubric that looks to students’ ability to “demonstrate proper use of Content and structure, Voice quality and pace, Mannerism and Body language, Professionalism and appearance, and Rapport with audience and use of media.” The program set the overall proficiency benchmarks at 75% of students either Meeting or Exceeding expectations. The assessment reports show that 96% of students either met or exceeded overall performance expectation in 2015 and 100%, in 2016. With an exception of the component ‘Voice quality and pace’ students performed well in all rubric components according to the most recent assessment report (CSUEB MBA Outcomes Assessment Report, 2016)

Student Evaluation of the Course

In addition to delivering the intended learning outcomes, the course has shown to generate phenomenal student responses in both formal and informal observations. Since its inception in Spring 2014, the quantitative student evaluation of the course has been consistently over 3.9 on a 4 point scale where 4 being the highest score depicting “outstanding.” The qualitative student responses have been predominantly and consistently positive over the years. Students’ written comments indicate that the course not only taught them communication skills but also provided them a life changing, transformational learning experience. The vast majority of the students testify that this was one of the very few, if not the only, course that they looked forward to coming to the class each week and that they would like to take more of the similar course that would help them continue on with the path of learning experience

that the course provided. The following statements showcase a few representative student comments about their course learning experiences:

“I am changed. I leave this class, MKTG 6120, as a person who has not only grown professionally and academically but also personally. I can say with great confidence that this class has been the biggest eye opener for me and the class in my educational career that sprung me to action—to better myself.”

“In such a short amount of time, every activity done this quarter has truly helped me grow so much more as a person. I have been able to take a step back and re-evaluate myself as a person on a deeper level. The course activities have helped me not only improve with my public speaking skills, but it has also shown me the skills a great leader has. By being in this class, my peers and I have exemplified what it takes to become a better person, and an even great leader.”

“I am so grateful and thankful for all the change the course (MKTG 6120) brought in my life and for all the good things it taught us. They are helpful not only in professional life, but they also help in our personal lives.”

Students Perception of Course Learning Experience

One of the course assignments included the final paper, which required students to write a 5-6 page paper about the 3-4 topics that moved the student during the course and how the student was going to incorporate them into his/her life. Students' final papers from two sections of MKTG 6120 were subjected to the Wordle, a word cloud generator, which creates image of words by giving greater prominence to words that appear more frequently. The figure 1 shows the word cloud image of 'what students say' about their course learning experience/outcome showing most salient student learning experiences reported in their final papers.

Figure 1: Word Cloud Image of Perceived Student Learning Outcomes of the Course



As shown in the Figure 1, students frequently associate the course with words such as 'tell,' 'story,' 'impact,' 'share,' 'give,' 'presentation,' 'listen,' 'connect,' 'communicate,' 'change,' 'positive,' 'better,' 'best,' 'open,' 'empathy,' etc. The words presented in the image are frequently mentioned words in students' final papers. The size of the words on the image indicates the relative saliency as reflected in the papers. In other words, the more frequently the words used, the larger the font size of the words on the image. The word presentation on the cloud image, coupled with knowledge of the course contents and design as well as the reading of all final papers in their entirety lead one to conclude that the course had a strong positive impact on students' learning to communicate in terms of story-telling, listening, and presentation, all of which are considered as the primary learning goals of the course. The word cloud image also indicates that students associate the course with learning to connect, share, give, empathy, positive, kindness, and change. It is refreshing to note that the course not only teach tangible oral communication skill sets (e.g., theatre skills, voice, tone, arguments, eye-contact, story-telling) but also help students bring the best out of themselves and others by surrounding the course experience with positive attribute building activities. We believe that it is this combination of interactive workshop style pedagogy and the positive

action-encouraging and feedback-packed course materials, assignment, and approaches that resulted in such phenomenal life changing, transformative learning experience while effectively teaching MBA students oral communication skills.

In retrospect, a number of key components are worth noting as they are responsible for the exceptionally successful course. They include the focus on behavioral learning, frequent feedback and coaching, interactive workshop style of course management, engaging course materials and exercises, engaged students, and an inspiring instructor. Most importantly, the role of the instructor is critically important in creating a trusting learning environment in a feedback intensive course in which students need to willingly engage to open oneself to evaluations, comments, and suggestions from others in public. Therefore, the instructor's ability to build 'trust' in the course is of critical importance in generating the desired impact of the course. Instructors teaching oral communication and listening skills are encouraged to practice the effective elements used in the Managerial/Leadership Communication course.

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Chong "Joanna" S.K. Lee, a professor of marketing, serves as the Chair of the Department of Marketing and the Director of Graduate Programs in the College of Business and Economics. She teaches courses in strategic marketing, advertising and integrated marketing communications. Her research interests include measurements of service quality and customer satisfaction, the study of promotional effectiveness, and the study of effective business education pedagogy.

Thomas Bagwell, a Lecturer at California State University East Bay, is the Executive Vice President of Peterson Trucks, which is named the top International truck dealer in the United States in 2017 and an All-Star Award winner for financial performance and employee engagement from the Great Game of Business. He holds an MBA from the University of Chicago, Booth School of Business and an Executive Scholar from the Kellogg School of Management in General Management, Marketing and Sales. He is pursuing graduate study in Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Appendix I: Course Syllabus Managerial Communications (Leadership)

This class will encompass the predominant forms of Managerial (Leadership) Communications with intensive feedback:

Materials: 1 white Poster Board minimum 20"x30" for River of Life Exercise

Books/Articles:

Resonate – Nancy Duarte

Leadership Presence – Kathy Lubar (et al)

Art of Possibility – Benjamin Zander

Article: Storytelling that Moves People

<http://web.mit.edu/tibbetts/Public/Storytelling%20That%20Moves%20People.pdf>

Article: Discovering Your Authentic Leadership

<http://www.aawccnatl.org/assets/authentic%20leadership.pdf>

Upon successful completion of this course, a student will be able to:

Understand and apply managerial communication concepts

Write effective managerial communication documents including memos and letters.

Analyze and present complex managerial communication cases within local, national, and international contexts.

Describe and apply oral managerial communication skills.

Describe and apply effective interpersonal communication skills in areas such as listening, teamwork, and interviewing.

Describe and apply effective small group (team) communication strategies in areas such as managing conflicts, and negotiation.

Grading:

Active Participation: 20%. 8% for attending on time, (1/2 point deducted if coming in late – 6:31pm) 8% for active and positive contribution, 4% for participating in Positive Psychology Exercises and filling out surveys before deadline.

Assignments: 30%: 15% for professionalism and grammar, 15% for depth and critical thinking

Final Essay; 50%: 10% for professionalism and grammar, 40% for depth and critical thinking

Course Outline:

Orientation and baseline

Introductions

Class overview & Instructor expectations

The Soul of the Leader

Connection with Self

Connection with Purpose

Connection with our Past

Unconditional positive regard

Fundamental Communication Skills

Theater Skills, Martial Arts, Cross Cultural Anthropology & Positive Psychology

PERMA

HOMEWORK: Soul Portrait: Illustrate (with drawings or magazines picture clippings) a white envelope (approx. 9"x11.5"), that illustrate symbols of your strengths and values. White your name on the inside flap and illustrate on the side with the flap. Also turn in a written 1 page, single space. 1" borders, 11pt font. Answer the following

questions:

This is what I want you to know about me?

My deepest fear?

My Communication Goal for this course is?

What's holding me back?

I'm looking for depth, self-reflection and authenticity in your paper. Superficiality is not interesting and is a waste of your and my time. (10 points)

READ: Leadership Presence & Do Random Acts of Kindness Activity (1 point) – Assignment will be sent after first class.

Personal Communication Skills – the Fundamentals of Communication ***

Jump Start Meeting Jump-Start Meeting

Warm-up

How was our Work Yesterday?

What's our goal for Today?

Appreciations/Acknowledgements/Apologies

Inspirational Story

Interactive activities – 4 Universal Communication Skills

Being Present

Paying attention to what has heart & meaning

Telling the truth without blame or judgment

Being open to outcome, not attached outcome

How to have a difficult conversation – giving feedback

Present your "Soul Portrait:" Envelopes

Giving MYSELF an "A" assignment (10 points) – instructions in class. Due next class meeting

READ: The Art of Possibility - Do Gratitude Letter Exercise (1 point) instructions given after class.

The Fundamentals of Persuasion

Jump Start Meeting Jump-Start Meeting

Influence Principles

Quiz

Video

Electronic Communications

PowerPoint strategies

Homework- Prepare a 5 slide PowerPoint on an idea or topic or cause that you are **passionate** about. Due next class meeting

READ: Resonate & Do Count Your Blessings Assignment (1 point)

Leadership Communications ***

Jump Start Meeting

Business Passion Speech I

Preparation for next class Curtain Up / Curtain Down stories - partner up with a classmate and share a story based on the in-class parameters. Prepare to spend a minimum of ½ hour prior to the next class.

READ: Story Telling that Moves People

Leadership Presence ***

River of Life Introduction

READ: The Story Factor Chapters 6-9

***HOMEWORK: ***

“Curtain Up Curtain Down” presentations

Start RIVER of LIFE - due in 2 weeks

***Homework ***– Watch the Last Lecture (YouTube) - What moved you? What did you take away? 1 page, single space 11pt font, 1” margins. Due next class. (10 Points)

Empathy - The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback

Jump Start Meeting

What Works – What Needs Work

Developing a Positive Mindset Activity

Presentation of your River of Life ***

Jump Start Meeting

River of Life Presentations

HOMEWORK: River of Life DUE

Forgiveness Activity (1 Point)

***Turn in note of appreciation to each student in the class.

***HOMEWORK: *** Why I Got an “A”, 1 page, single space, 11pt font, 1” margins due Nov 14 - “Best Possible Self Activity”

The Dynamic Storyteller: Communicating through Story

Jump Start Meeting

Neuroscience of effectiveness

Continue – Presentation of River of Life

Forgiveness Activity

Final Paper – due finals day – Write a 5-6 page paper. Depth is MUCH MORE important than a mere recounting of the activities we did in class. What I want to read is the 3-4 topics that moved you AND how you’re going to incorporate them into your life. Single space. 11 pt. font, 1” margins - Due finals day via e-mail by 11:59pm

Notes: *Due at START of class. No make-ups, extra credit, or late work. Attendance & active participation are expected. ½ credit for attendance & participation that day if you come in after the start of class (6:31pm). No credit for the day if you are an hour late.