

RELATIONSHIP OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS AND LEADERSHIP CLASSES AT PENSACOLA STATE COLLEGE

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Abstract

167 final writing projects from bachelor level Leadership courses were analyzed to find a correlation of success rates between pre-completed business and professional communication courses. The test statistic was close to an outlier on a one-tail test with a probability of 5.318948%, which meant the outcome of this study was quite close to null hypothesis rejection. The unanticipated result and largest area for further study was the significant number of students who did not end up completing the final paper. Of 167 students observed, only 133 completed the final paper. The completion rate of those having taken the Business and Professional Communication courses was 74 of 88 (84.09%). The completion rate of those having not taken the Business and Professional Communication courses was 59 of 79 (74.68%).

Keywords: business communication, leadership, pedagogy, student learning outcomes

Introduction

In order to teach business curriculum courses effectively, it is imperative for faculty to have a clear understanding of written professional communication skills (Penrod, Tucker, & Hartman, 2017). This is in direct correlation with the vision of Pensacola State College (PSC) which entails “preparing them [students] to succeed within the global community” (Pensacola State College, n.d.-a, para. 3). In an ever-changing and competitive global environment, 80.3% of employers seek written communication skills on a candidate’s resume (NACE, 2018). Therefore, PSC needs to ensure students have appropriate business writing skills.

One of the primary goals of PSC's Business Department is to provide a learning environment that fosters essential pedagogical building blocks that will enhance student learning from one course to another. As a cohesive unit, faculty encourage students to reach beyond the written terminology in their textbooks, applying what they learn to real-world scenarios. Part of this journey entails specific emphasis on both the written and spoken word. Shwom and Snyder (2019) stress, "Students are more than twice as likely as an employer to think that they are well-prepared to think critically, communicate orally and in writing, and work well in teams—skills that employers believe are crucial for job success" (p. 7). In an era where texting jargon is often translated by students into written assignments, an overarching concern is to ensure students are able to differentiate between effective communication in varying contexts. This has proven to be a pressing issue in the business world (Hackman & Johnson, 2009; Thill & Bovee, 2017).

On January 22, 2019, the Pensacola State College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study protocol, specifically to include anonymized final paper scores. A protocol exemption 1 was approved based on the comparison of instructional techniques, curricula or classroom management. Because of the limited sample size, demographics and all additional identifying information were removed from the scores. To maintain an anonymized study, the authors limited demographic aggregation.

The research addressed in this study will explore student learning outcomes from two PSC Business Communication courses while gleaning how students who completed them fared in a departmental leadership course. Did taking the aforementioned courses enhance learning outcomes for those enrolled in the leadership class? This research will explore student learning outcomes in the leadership course, specifically whether there

was an improvement in written communication skills. By comparing student success in preceding or simultaneous communication courses, potential curricula or programmatic changes are identified.

From a writing perspective, the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide is most commonly used to cite sources within the social sciences, according to PSC's writing guide (Pensacola State College, 2018). Fitchburg State University more clearly detail APA as a standard for business in its own writing guide (Fitchburg State University, n.d.). For the purpose of this discussion, Business and Professional Communications are both included in the social science paradigm. While Chicago (Turabian) is also an acceptable format, variable limitation is required for statistical validity. Therefore, APA is the standard set forth in the classes and study.

Literature Review: Applicability to Business Communication and Leadership

The importance of enhancing effective communication skills in leadership positions is of vital importance to any organization (Shaw, 2017). An effective means of doing so is laying the groundwork early, from an educational standpoint (Bucata & Rizescu, 2017; Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016). From secondary to post-secondary settings, scholars have utilized varied approaches to enhance written and verbal communication skills, with hopes positive results could transcend into effective leadership traits. From a medical standpoint, Lyda (2019) explored how prospective surgeons wrote reflective essays about their initial experiences, with an overarching goal of helping them become better doctors. The study, conducted at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, analyzed essays written by thousands of unidentified third-year medical students. The findings concluded that writing about their experiences

provided a means for students to arrive at insights that would otherwise have not been possible. Results also indicated that the essays were not only rewarding for the students, “but also for the administrators privy to them” (Lyda, 2014, p. 466). As a result, faculty and students emerged from the study with a greater appreciation for being able to glean critical information to help them emerge more empathetic while dealing with emotional and ethical dilemmas on a daily basis.

Hosier and Touma (2019) conducted a study that evaluated inter-professional and leadership skills among Canadian urology residents. Surveys were administered to chief residents and program directors, asking specific questions about their communication and leadership skills. A major catalyst for the research stemmed from the fact that residents are expected to communicate effectively with a wide range of medical professionals, while also leading medical teams. The findings revealed that self-assessment results from urology students did not differ significantly from program directors. A specific goal was for faculty to provide focused feedback, to help elicit more meaningful change in communication and leadership skills among residents.

Carter, Ro, Alcott, and Lattuca (2016) conducted a study that analyzed undergraduate research of engineering students, focusing on how it impacted their communication, teamwork, and leadership skills. Approximately 5,000 students from 31 colleges of engineering participated in the study. The findings revealed that students who engaged in undergraduate research tended to report higher in skill levels. However, when curriculum and classroom experiences were taken into account, there was no specific correlation between undergraduate research on teamwork and leadership skills. In contrast, Carter et al. (2016) gleaned that undergraduate research provided a significant

predictor of communication skills. They also stressed the importance of expanding undergraduate research options, while integrating communication and leadership skills into required coursework for engineering students.

In a study engaging the effectiveness of writing instruction in elementary and secondary schools, McGhee and Lew (2007) explored how principals' knowledge of the curriculum could influence actions or interventions. A survey was administered to 169 teachers, asking them specifically whether their principal was trained in writing as a process. Participants were comprised of elementary and secondary teachers (rural and suburban). Results conveyed that principals who believed in effective writing practices were more willing to help their teachers produce quality work, while also intervening on their behalf for professional development and other educational opportunities.

Methods

It is essential to lay the foundation for this research by starting with the following information that will guide the study. The first null hypothesis is: "there is no difference in the final writing paper of the leadership course scores, excluding scores of zero, between students who took business communication or professional communication courses." The second null hypothesis is: "there is no difference in the final writing paper of the leadership course scores, including scores of zero, between students who took business communication or professional communication courses".

Courses

Business Communications. This course is designed to improve students' skills in all aspects of organizational communication. Systems, practices, and media are incorporated, including some areas of the behavioral sciences. Emphasis is placed on

fostering effective written and oral communication skills. The class also incorporates areas of grammar and mechanics to improve overall student success (Pensacola State College, n.d.-b).

Professional Communications. This course focuses on communication within organizations, placing specific emphasis on organizational theory and structure, systems analysis, and communication networks. The use of analytical thinking skills is crucial. Written and oral communication modes are used cohesively to prepare students for various aspects of decision-making within varying business contexts. Legal and ethical constraints are also explored extensively (Pensacola State College, n.d.-e).

Paper Instructions for Communication Courses. Both courses require written assignments. In addition to classroom instruction the professor provides, students are also encouraged to visit PSC's Writing Lab. It is a free service offered to any student who needs assistance. Face-to-face and virtual hours are provided for the vast array of student learners (Pensacola State College, n.d.-f). Each course has an assigned critical analysis paper that is worth 200 points (point allocations specified in the assignment rubrics). The typed document must be 4-6 pages in length, excluding the cover and reference pages. Times New Roman 12-point font is required (Leary, 2019).

Students must choose a prominent communicator in the business world and analyze a speech the person delivered. Learners must use specific terminology from their textbooks, while also selecting three main thesis items, each of which will have its own body section. A critical analysis section also challenges them to find articles written by those who may have covered the speech, positing them to agree or disagree with what was written, further enhancing their critical thinking skills. Students are given specific

rubrics for each paper, which require adherence to APA 6th edition guidelines (Leary, 2019). Before papers are submitted, students are given an in-class APA “crash course” that provides them with the basic essentials. They are also reminded that the Purdue Owl APA 6th edition link, located in the syllabus, is the standard go-to guide for all things pertaining to this specific style guide.

In addition to a thorough in-class review of all parameters pertaining to their papers, students are also reminded that adherence to proper grammar, punctuation, and APA 6th edition guidelines will be factored into their grades. The professor provides numerous opportunities for students to interact with her in class, after each session, during office hours, and via other modes of communication, such as email and telephone. Learners are also given a “student paper example,” a pre-approved document from a former student who performed well on the assignment. This is a visual representation of the end result. When compared to the assignment rubric, it also serves as a handy, structural checklist to ensure students know exactly what the professor expects. The overarching goal is to provide students with the essentials they need to succeed not only in the course, but also in the real world.

Theories of Leadership. This course presents the basic concepts, principles, and techniques of Business Leadership. Emphasis is placed on the student developing a solid leadership foundation while centering them in the real themes, demands, and opportunities of an evolving and dynamic business workplace. It incorporates basic leadership skill development, as it relates to the core aspects of the management practice (Pensacola State College, n.d.-c).

Paper Instructions for Leadership. The instruction set for the final Personal Leadership Reflection (PLRP) paper includes the following parameters: 1. The PLRP paper must be four to six (4-6) typed pages (not including the title page or works cited page), double spaced, one-inch margins, 12-point font, and written in the APA format. 2. It must contain four, clearly labeled sections—Personality Profile; Theory, Concepts and Application; Reflective Observation; and Personal Leadership Skill Development. 3. Grades will be assigned using a zero-based, twenty-five-point (25) system. Scores will be multiplied by 4 in order to establish grades on a 100-point scale. Students start out with zero points, receiving up to five (5) points for each section, according to the degree to which they fulfill the section requirements (20 total points available). An additional five (5) points will be assigned for the integration, synthesis, mechanics, and the general quality of writing; 5 total points available (Payne, 2018).

The statistical method will consist of a two-tailed t-test, comparing two means. This test was chosen, based on having clear performance data to average between two independent groups (Polgar, 2013). The study is a retrospective analysis. A two-tailed t-test is chosen because there is a possibility that scores will be worse on the Leadership paper, following the Communications courses. The scenario is not anticipated, so the scores for both will be included in the analysis.

Scope Limitations

The time period was limited to two sequential years to ensure relevant data. Courses could have been taken concurrently. Because the final paper was not due until the end of the Leadership course, relevant written Communication coursework would have been completed. The professor pool for the classes was limited to a single professor

for the communication courses and a single professor for the leadership courses. This limitation is a double-edged sword. While reducing the potential for outside variation based on teaching style, it makes a potential limitation based on the teaching skills of each given professor.

Since only 5 of 25 possible points were attributed to integration, synthesis, mechanics, and the general quality of writing, only 20% of the final score is directly relevant to this study. Because data aggregation techniques prevent breaking down the data to this subset of writing, the results of the study differences must be taken as whole. Specifically, the ability to communicate the entire intent of the paper is the measurable metric. Indeed, with Business and Professional Communications, it is precisely this holistic view that is imperative.

Findings

Results were calculated with and without withdrawals, incompletes, and zeros. Both results were included, but primary emphasis was placed on those who actually completed the Leadership course, as listed in Table 1. The reasoning for this focus was to remove unrelated confounding variables with adult learners, attendance, or completion challenges.

Calculation Results

In accordance with Table 1, statistical sampling did not definitively determine that taking Business Communication or Professional Communication courses at PSC had positive or negative effects on the final written paper for the Leadership course at PSC. Practical application and scores did not vary significantly. Additionally, while the degrees of freedom (*dfs*) increased significantly with scores of zero included in the

results, a large number of cases (*N*) or expanded study will be required to further support conclusions.

Table 1

Student Exam Scoring With and Without Business Communications

	Business Communications		Zeros Included	
	With	Without	With	Without
Average Score	88.37	87.05	74.31	65
Sample Size	74	59	88	79
Degrees of Freedom	131		165	
Test Statistic	0.65		1.62	

Note: The results were not significant.

Potential Confounding Variables

By limiting the scope to two professors, the varying teaching styles have been reduced to two distinct styles as confounding variables. Specific styles, while subjective in nature, also limit the applicability of results. Since textbooks and teaching websites change approximately every three years, the test was limited to one and a half teaching years. Those limitations allowed for the consistent information to be presented by each of the two professors over the period of the study.

Both professors use omnidirectional teaching philosophies. The Leadership course combines discussion, Cengage Mindtap ©, *The Leadership Experience* (Daft & Lane, 2018). Canvas announcements are also used for online instruction, in addition to any face-to-face instruction. The Communications and Leadership courses both provide eclectic and continuously evolving communication platforms (electronic, business, and traditionally face-to-face interpersonal channels). Real-time teleconferencing, online

self-assessments, video lectures, and discussions boards accompany more traditional classroom instruction.

Prior writing courses beyond Business or Professional Communication have not been included as part of this study. It is possible that students may have had advanced research writing courses beyond the scope of this study. However, those courses are not mandated as part of the current PSC curriculum for Business majors. The sample sizes in this situation, while over 30, tallied at 167 total students. However, the actual courses compared were only five Leadership courses, three Business Communications, and eight Professional Communication courses.

Conclusions

Primary Conclusion

Since $t = 0.65$, $df\ 131$ ($p > 0.05$), we failed to reject the first Null Hypothesis that “there is no difference in the final writing paper of the leadership course scores, excluding scores of zero, between students who took business communication or professional communication courses”. For the second null hypothesis, $t = 1.62$, $df\ 165$ ($p > 0.05$), therefore, we fail to reject that “there is no difference in the final writing paper of the leadership course scores, including scores of zeros between students who took business communication or professional communication courses”. In other words, there is no significant difference between two groups.

Secondary and Tertiary Conclusions

While the Null Hypothesis was not rejected, ample observations and conclusions are supported with this study. Of specific value is the trend line which supports that a greater sample size over an extended period would change the outcome. While the

sample size of 183 would have been adequate to fail to reject the null hypothesis in this case, a continued difference of 9 points (with zeros included) and 1 point (without zeros included) will result in a rejection of the null hypothesis. Of importance, the test statistic, including zeros, was 1.62, with a t Critical one-tail of 1.65. Having the test statistic so close to an outlier on a one-tail test with a probability of 5.31% means the outcome of this study was quite close to null hypothesis rejection.

In addition, a qualitative assessment of student performance indicated the Business and Professional Communication courses helped students perform better on the Leadership writing assignment. Quantitatively, a difference in 9 (mean of 74.31 compared to 65.01) points will likely increase student performance by an entire letter grade. The surprise result was the large number of students who did not end up completing the final paper. Indeed, of 167 students observed in the year-and-a-half time frame, only 133 completed the final paper. This resulted in a shortfall of 34. The incompleteness rate could have resulted from students dropping the course. The completion rate of those having taken the Business and Professional Communication courses was 74 of 88 (84.09%). The completion rate of those having not taken the Business and Professional Communication courses was 59 of 79 (74.68%). Interestingly, those who completed the Business and Professional Communication courses had a 10% greater probability of finishing the Leadership course. This compelling revelation sheds light on the effectiveness of fostering collaborative learning across various curriculums within PSC's Business Department.

Recommendations

An overarching recommendation would be to conduct future studies on both Business and Professional Communication courses, including their impact on student success and graduation rates. The close t-test results and the unanticipated completion rate differences indicate the need to research the underlying cause or correlation between the courses, the professors, and student graduation.

An idea for further research would be to conduct a study that incorporates others who have taught Business and Professional Communication courses, beyond the year-and-a-half time frame evidenced in this study. This would be an effective means of gauging how the correlation of the aforementioned courses impact future Leadership classes over an extended period of time. An effective means to pursue this would be the application of a mixed methods approach, one which incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods (Cresswell & Plano, 2007). A significant difference between these two approaches is that quantitative research proposes a hypothesis, which will either be accepted or rejected. In contrast, the overarching goal of qualitative research is to produce a hypothesis (Cronholm, & Hjalmarsson, 2011). According to Caruth (2013), a mixed methods approach “offers richer insights into the phenomenon being studied and allows the capture of information that might be missed by utilizing only one research design” (p. 112). This is because it handles a wider range of research questions. For example, unlike utilizing a quantitative approach solely, in-depth responses from students could be gleaned via open-ended questions, representative of a qualitative approach. In essence, incorporating a mixed methods approach offers enhanced validity through

triangulation (cross validation), adding insights and comprehension that might be missed when using only a single research design (Cresswell & Plano, 2007).

Another way to broaden this research could be to expand it beyond the scope of the Business Department, analyzing how Business or Professional Communication courses and Leadership course offerings impact student success and graduation rates overall. Did students feel their experiences in the Business Department prepared them effectively for writing assignments in other PSC-related coursework, or was there no difference at all? Collaboration among various PSC departments is something that has been embraced with vigor. A study like this could explore the phenomenon even further.

Lastly, the researchers recommend consideration of Business or Professional Communications as a pre-requisite for upper-level, Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS) coursework. Having shown trends in success rates, the correlation between those two courses and PSC's mission of preparing all students to succeed should be applied and/or measured further. This study is a stepping stone for curriculum and programmatic study/change. Subsequent changes to coursework pathways may add or remove additional variables for consideration.

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