

Outcome Assessment of a Writing Skill Improvement Initiative for Management Graduates

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ABSTRACT This study aims to show the effectiveness of a writing skill improvement initiative adopted in a Managerial Communication course. The sample included all students who enrolled in the Master of Business Administration program. Pre-post measurement format was adopted to assess the outcome of the course. The paper also discusses the outline of the course, delivery, assessment and feedback process. The results showed that the initiative was successful in improving the writing skills of the students. The study also offers suggestions to tackle the challenges faced by business schools, faculty, and students with regard to improving the writing skills of business graduates.

INTRODUCTION

“Success in writing is not an inborn talent, nor does it come magically. Writing is a learned skill” - Elena De Vos Binder

Communication skills are essential workplace tools for the 21st century (Locker and Kaczmarek 2001). Several studies have emphasized that communication skills are important requisites for employability (Siegel 2000; Linstead et al. 2004; Shewchuk et al. 2006; Robles 2012; Gayathridevi and Deepa 2015; Hare 2015; Dishman 2016). Within the studies that examine communication skills, the focus was more on written communication skills (Albrecht and Sack 2000; Ashbaugh et al. 2002; Hare 2015). Recent studies to elicit employers’ expectations continue to document the need for excellence in writing (Vice and Carnes 2001; White and Begun 2006; Griffith University 2014; Washington 2014; Hare 2015). Irrespective of the sector, all industries place a high premium on written communication skills and identify it as a job requirement (Krapels and Davis 2003; Hare 2015). Effective writing skills are essential to workplace success and thus a central focus in business programs (Lentz 2013).

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A major source of concern for corporate executives is the lack of effective writing skills of MBA graduates (Pittenger et al. 2006; Butler 2007; Divoky and Rothermel 2009; Middleton 2011; Hare 2015). Dillon (2004) cites a recent survey by the National Commission on Writing, which states that a third of employees in the Nation’s blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as \$3.1 billion annually on remedial training. The survey also stated that the problem occurs not only in e-mails but also in other reports and texts. Lentz (2013) discusses a *Wall Street Journal* paper, which found that forty-five percent of the 430 companies surveyed had implemented remedial grammar training for their employees. Middleton (2011) states that employers frequently complain about the writing skills of MBAs and say that the writing is wordy and pretentious. Despite the criticisms from employers and the media, little has improved with respect to the writing skills of students (Simkin et al. 2012). Jameson (2007) found that the writing scores of students remained stable over the last three decades, resulting in a greater proportion of poor writers in college. Craig and McKinney (2010) mention that universities face strong criticism from the media and community for producing graduates with poor written communication skills. Most business schools have hence incorporated a business communication course into their curricula (Wardrobe 2002). However,

the effectiveness of such courses continues to be questioned (Pfeffer and Fong 2002). Hence it is high time that business schools design an effective curriculum to improve the writing skills of graduates (Martell 2007). The business schools should also ensure that the effectiveness of their Business Communication courses is assessed and improvised.

A review of previous research showed no empirical research or case studies on the assessment and “closing the loop” process related to writing skills of management graduates (May et al. 2012). Furthermore, there is no guidance in developing outcome assessments which are important to measure the effectiveness of writing initiatives (Ashbaugh et al. 2002). This paper aims to address these gaps and suggests a methodology to assess the outcome of a writing skill improvement initiative program.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was done in a Business school in India and the sample consisted of all the 120 MBA students who joined the course in that particular academic year. A majority of the sample (67%) consisted of engineers and the rest (33%) were from arts discipline. The language of all the respondents during the undergraduate course was English. Out of the 120 students, the study considered only 116 students who took both the pre and post audits. The study was done over a period of 4 months. Pre and post assessments are a commonly used tool to evaluate learner outcomes (Barge 2007). This methodology is also recommended by Boston University (2017).

Measures

A personal communication audit developed by O’Hair et al. (2001) was used to assess the written communication skills of the students. This was selected as the research tool because the book written by O’Hair et al. (2001) was used as a reference text for the course and it aligned very well with the syllabus. The audit has 20 statements which are to be rated by respondents on a four-point scale ranging from VSA to VSD, where Very Strongly Agree (VSA) =4; Agree (A)

=3; Disagree (D) =2, and Very Strongly Disagree (VSD) =1). Based on their audit scores, the respondents can be classified into four levels (19 and below – Non-Competent; 20 to 39 – Marginal; 40-59 – Competent; and 60 – 80 – Fully Prepared). An example statement used in the audit is “I recognize the difference between a direct approach and an indirect approach when conveying bad news.” When using self-report measures, researchers might face issues related to response biases and validity problems (Moskowitz 1986). One important concern was whether or not the respondents know enough about themselves to accurately portray what the self-report is attempting to determine (McDonald 2008). However, a great advantage of self-report is that it gives the respondents’ direct views about themselves, and also gives access to phenomenological data. Thus researchers should not abandon this method of data collection, although it is often advisable to supplement self-report data with observational data (Gayathridevi and Deepa 2015). Schiekirka et al. (2013) had found a significant correlation between knowledge gain assessed by a self-audit measure and the final exam score. This shows that self-audits can be supplemented by comparing them with final exam scores. Based on this, the study also aimed to substantiate the self-audits of students by indicating the correlation between students’ self-assessments and their final marks (awarded by the faculty through continuous assessment).

Procedure

The study was conducted with the approval of the Research Committee at the business school. On the first day of the course, the students were informed about the objective of the pre-post audits and were administered the pre-audit. The post-audit was administered on the last day of the course. Since the Business school follows a trimester pattern (12 weeks duration), pre-post audits would suffice. Both pre and post audits were administered in the classroom. On the day of pre-audit, the respondents were informed that they had to take a post-audit on the last day of the course. Paper versions were used for pre-post audits.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The scores of pre-post audits were calculated and fed into SPSS for analysis. The pre-audit results are presented here.

Pre-audit

The students secured an average score of 51 in the pre-audit (SD=6.5). The number of students falling in the four levels is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre-audit levels of students

<i>Level</i>	<i>No. of students</i>	<i>Percent</i>
60-80	9	8
40-59	105	90
20-39	2	2
0-19	0	0
Total	116	100

In the pre-audit, only eight percent of students were in the “Fully Prepared” level. These students were ready to begin writing in professional business situations with very little additional preparation in correspondence. Ninety percent of the students were in the “Competent” level with the scores ranging between 40 and 59, out of a total score of 80. Though these students knew a great deal about correspondence and had the skills required to succeed as a business writer, they needed hands-on experience to move to the “Fully Prepared” level that has scores ranking between 60 and 80. Only two percent of the students were in the “Marginal” level which meant they still have a substantial amount of work to do. In addition to studying the principles and concepts of business correspondence, they required actual practice in audience analysis, message development and drafting business memos and letters.

The pre-audit results showed that the students’ written communication skills have not improved much over the years (Simkin et al. 2012; Jameson 2007). Though many business schools have incorporated business communication courses in their curricula (Wardrope 2002), Pfefer and Fong (2002) question their effectiveness. As most of the students (90%) were only in the “Competent” level and some in the “Marginal” level (2%), instructors decided to fine-tune their course design and delivery, to move these students to the next “Fully Prepared” level. The instructors also devised strategies to improve the written communication of the students in the marginal level (2%). The curriculum, meth-

odology, and assessments will be discussed further.

Course Curriculum

The writing skills improvement initiative revolves around the Managerial Communication course offered at the Business school. The curriculum at the school under study is periodically enhanced based on the feedback sought from industry experts (Wijewardene 2016), alumni groups, recruiters, academicians, and students. The objective of this course is to develop the students’ ability to plan, prepare and present various mediums of written messages required in the corporate world.

The outline for the Managerial Communication course is given in Annexure I. This course is a core course, with three credits, and is offered in the second term. The curriculum of this course includes Fundamental writing techniques, Messages for electronic media, Neutral and positive messages, Negative messages, Persuasive messages, Business meetings, Business reports and proposals, Interviewee skills and Negotiation techniques. The curriculum was carefully designed based on the expectations and needs of all the stakeholders.

Course Delivery and Assessment

The methodology adopted for the Managerial Communication course included class lectures combined with individual and group assignments, case studies, mini-project, tests and forum discussions. The course emphasized more on individual and group writing assignments in order to improve the written communication skills. For example, the first unit of the course deals with fundamental writing techniques, style, and tone in writing and business letters. The learning outcomes of this unit are to plan, collect, think, organize and write a concise message, adopting the right style and tone. Another important section of this unit focuses on basic format and functions of letters. Before discussing this unit, the students were given two assignments. The first assignment was to make them write a page (impromptu) on any topic of their choice and the second was to write a business letter. Frazer et al. (2005) reaffirmed the usefulness of impromptu writing to measure students’ ability to process and respond to com-

plex information. Hence the impromptu assignment was given to assess the planning, organizing and writing ability of students. The written assignment and the business letter were reviewed and discussed in the class, connecting the fundamental writing techniques, format, and functions of a letter. The discussion included the three-step writing process, style, and tone in writing, writing using bias-free, concise and clear language. After the discussions, the students were made to rewrite both on the topic and the letter, incorporating the learning from the discussion. The students were given individual feedback, comparing the two versions and drawing inferences from the course content. The learning outcomes of this unit are reflected in the audit which covers organizing the thinking, professional business letter and its elements and selection of appropriate tone while writing. The two assignments given in this unit contributed to the continuous assessment of the students.

For memos, students were given various scenarios and asked to write interdepartmental memos. The feedback exercise was repeated culling out the learning. The learning outcomes with respect to memos are also covered in the audit. The statements in the audit touch upon professional memos, the distribution lists for memos, and functions of memos. A similar teaching methodology was adopted for the other topics in the course.

The course offered five individual assignments, five group assignments, one research report and weekly forum postings, all of which focused on the learning outcomes of the course. The individual assignments were evaluated based on the content, overall structure, style and tone, organization, sentence structure, syntax and message coherence.

Initially, the instructors noted the prevalence of writing apprehension among the students. Writing apprehension is a significant barrier to the development of written communication skills. In spite of being a significant barrier, much attention was not paid to diminish writing apprehension (Matoti and Shumba 2011). Pajares and Valiente (2008) have brought out the significance of feedback in improving the writing confidence and competence. Many studies (Pajares 2003; Pajares and Valiente 2008; Usher and Pajares 2008) have pointed out that instructional practices focused on reducing writing apprehension yield long-term positive effects on the writer.

Having this in mind, the instructors allocated a two-hour one-to-one feedback session every week, in which students received a detailed feedback on their writing skills, which removed their writing apprehension. The feedback sessions were sustained till the end of the course to continuously improve the writing skills of the students. Leibowitz (1999) claims that students will work harder when they know that the faculty will read and respond to their assignments. According to Alsop (2007), a student belonging to Gen Y prefers to get constant feedback and will look for it. The feedback sessions motivated the students to continuously improve their writing skills. The final grades were awarded based on the continuous assessment marks and there was no final examination.

With their improved writing skills and confidence levels, students were able to attempt collaborative writing through group assignments. These group assignments also enhanced their writing skills (Schneider and Andre 2005) and equipped them to complete their research report. During the one-to-one feedback session, students expressed that they are prepared for workplace writing in view of the amount of practice they had in report writing in the Managerial Communication course. The same view was also reported in a study conducted by Schneider and Andre (2005). As Bandura (1997: 10) expressed, the writing confidence was also enhanced because of students' exposure to peer writing through forum discussions. Thus, throughout the course, the faculty ensured that the teaching-learning process happened not only within class hours but also outside the class.

Post-audit

The post-audit was conducted on the last day of the course to determine if there was an overall improvement. The students secured an average score of 65 (SD = 5.8) in the post-audit. The various levels of students' readiness to correspond are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Post-audit levels

<i>Level</i>	<i>No of Students</i>	<i>Percent</i>
60-80	96	83
40-59	20	17
20-39	0	0
0-19	0	0
Total	116	100

In the post-audit, eighty-three percent of students were in the “Fully Prepared” level. Only seventeen of the students fell into the “Competent” level.

As the instructors focused more on impromptu (Frazer et al. 2005) and planned written assignments combined with feedback (Pajores and Valiente 2008) the students were able to improve their writing confidence and competence. Hence a significant number of students (83%) had moved to the “Fully Prepared” level in the post-audit.

Comparison of Pre - Post -Audits

A comparison of the pre-post audits revealed an increase in the mean score of the students from 51 to 65. The comparison is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean score: Pre-post audits

	<i>Pre- Audit</i>	<i>Post-audit</i>
Mean score	51	65
SD	6.5	5.8

The students falling in the various levels before and after the course are shown in Table 4.

During the pre-audit, it was found that majority of the students (90%) were in level 3 (competent) and only eight percent of them were fully prepared. The post-audit results showed that eighty-three percent of the students were fully prepared. A paired-sample t-test showed a significant difference between the pre-post audits ($t = -19.27; p < 0.05$).

At the time of the study, the students took four other courses (Accounting for Decision Making, International Business, Organizational Behavior and Quantitative Techniques). The focus of those courses was mostly technical and conceptual. The Managerial Communication course focused more on developing the written correspondence. Ashbaugh et al. (2002) concluded

that professional writing experiences (example, writing a business memo, report) are more likely to improve students’ writing skills than general writing experiences (example, a term paper). This course was designed specifically to improve the writing skills of students and hence had many written assignments. The course was also well-aligned with the audit. The effectiveness of the course has been explained here.

The pre-audit values of a student for statements 2, 3 and 8 (refer Annexure II) are “Disagree” and the student was placed in the “Competent” level (40-59). The post-audit values of the same student for statements 2 and 3 were “Very strongly agree” and for statement 8 “agree”. The student had moved to the “Fully prepared” level (60-80) in the post-audit (refer Annexure II for the pre and post audits completed by the student). As discussed earlier the course delivery was focused on improving the writing skills of the students, aided by the sustained one-to-one feedback sessions. The learning outcomes of the course were well aligned with the self-audit statements. Hence the improvement in the writing skills of students can be attributed to the effectiveness of the course. The comparison of pre-post audit scores showed the effectiveness of a well-planned and executed Managerial Communication course.

Comparison of Post-audit Score and Final Marks

The pre-post audits were self-audits. To strengthen the self-assessments, the study also analyzed the correlation between students’ post-audit scores and their final marks (awarded by faculty through continuous assessment). The continuous assessment components included individual and group assignments, mini project reports and forum discussions. There was a significant correlation ($r = 0.36; p < 0.01$) between the students’ post-audit scores and their final marks. This is similar to the findings of Schiekirka et al. (2013) who had also reported a signifi-

Table 4: Comparison of pre-post audit levels

<i>Levels</i>	<i>Pre-audit</i>		<i>Post-audit</i>		<i>Difference</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
60-80	9	8	96	83	+87	+75
40-59	105	90	20	17	-85	-73
20-39	2	2	0	0	-2	-2
0-19	0	0	0	0	0	0

cant correlation between self-report measures and final exam scores. Hence it is evident that the students' have assessed themselves correctly. The correlation also shows that there was an improvement in the writing skills of the students due to an effective curriculum design and delivery.

CONCLUSION

Business schools are constantly challenged to yield graduates with good writing skills. This study showed that the challenge can be met by designing and implementing an effective course. The study also assessed the outcome of a writing skill improvement initiative for management graduates and found that the initiative was effective. It has important implications for various stakeholders to improve the writing skills of business graduates. Finally, the study calls for constructive collaboration between business schools, faculty, and students in order to cater to the needs of the 21st century employers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has important implications for various stakeholders. The necessity for workplace writing has increased tremendously due to the rapid growth of technology. Today's organizations depend more on information-sharing and effective communication to run their companies successfully. Business graduates with good writing skills are the need of the hour. Hence business schools should consider including writing skills in the admission criteria, thus making the admission process stringent. The study showed that a business communication course designed with inputs from various stakeholders and delivered in a systematic manner with sustained feedback can improve the written communication skills of MBA graduates. So the business schools should take an initiative to include the written communication course as a core course in the MBA syllabi. Business schools should encourage and support faculty to prepare and deliver a curriculum to promote the writing skills of students.

Faculty should set the stage for writing improvement by designing and delivering the course to best suit the millennial. In this study, the instructors ensured that pre and post session writings were reviewed and compared. They also included one-to-one feedback sessions in

their course delivery in which timely and sustained feedback was given to improve the writing skills of students. The students looked forward to such sessions and incorporated the feedback in their subsequent writing assignments, resulting in an improvement in their writing skills. Therefore faculty should ensure immediate and continuous feedback to their students.

Employers consider that students with good writing skills are a great asset for them. The literature review has clearly brought out the importance of writing skills. Hence students should put sincere efforts to improve their writing skills by incorporating feedback from their faculty.

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ANNEXURE I**Course Title: Managerial Communication**

Course Objective: The objective of this course is to develop the student's ability to plan, prepare and present various mediums of written messages required in the corporate world.

<i>Course</i>	<i>Content</i>
1.	Fundamental Writing Techniques: Planning, Writing, and Completing Business Messages, Style, and Tone in Writing, Writing Business Letters, and Memos
2.	Messages for Electronic Media: Choosing the media, Creating messages for Social Media, E-mail, Instant Messaging (IM), Business Blogs, Podcasts
3.	Neutral and Positive Messages: Strategy for positive messages, Routine inquiries, Replying to Routine Messages, Goodwill Messages
4.	Negative Messages: Strategy for Negative Messages, Refusing routine requests, Organizational News, Negative Employment Communication
5.	Persuasive Messages: Strategy for persuasive messages, Persuasive requests and sales messages
6.	Business Meetings: Preparation and follow up for meetings, Solving problems in meetings, Leadership and participant responsibilities in meetings
7.	Business Reports and Proposals: Steps in preparing reports, Short and Long Reports, Short and Long Proposals
8.	Interviewee Skills: Resume Building, Preparing for Group Discussion, Strategies to handle interviews
9.	Negotiation Process: Preparing for Negotiation, Developing Strategy, Getting started, Building understanding, Bargaining, Closing

Note: Duration of the Course - 12 Weeks

ANNEXURE II**Excerpts from pre- and post- audit of a student****Personal Communication Audit**

Please respond to the questions below using the following scale: Very Strongly Agree (VSA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); Very Strongly Disagree (VSD)

<i>S. No.</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>VSA</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>VSD</i>
1.	I understand the distinction between informative and persuasive communication	Post			Pre
2.	I know how to organize my thinking and the content of the documents I am about to write	Post			Pre
3.	I know what a professional business memo looks like	Post			Pre
8	I understand the elements of a business letter format and can explain the functions of each of them			Post	Pre