

# COMMUNICATING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM IN AN UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAM: MANAGEMENT 100—LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION IN GROUPS

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*Educating undergraduate business students in the 21st century requires more than addressing the quantitative side of business; rather, it calls for including the more qualitative “soft skills,” such as speaking and writing. This article examines the design, delivery, and effectiveness of an undergraduate program dedicated to leadership, teamwork, and communication and describes this program within the context of the communication across the curriculum movement.*

**Keywords:** *managerial communication; business communication; undergraduate business communication; teamwork and communication; speaking and writing across the curriculum*

IN THE 1990s, BUSINESS SCHOOLS across the country were challenged to revamp their curricula to meet the changing demands of employers (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Knight, 1999a, 1999b; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Wardrope, 2002; Winsor, Curtis, & Stephens 1996). In more recent years, the trend has been to emphasize leadership and communication skills. For example, the business press, most notably *The Wall Street Journal*, has observed that the most important skill employers seek is oral communication (“How to Get Hired,” 2004; “Playing Well With Others,” 2002; “What’s News,” 1998). The bottom line is that employers have high expectations that their workers will possess strong communication skills

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including writing, speaking, and interpersonal skills (Cappel, 2002; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999; Zhao & Alexander, 2004).

This article examines how one innovative undergraduate program at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, emphasizes the importance of communication skills from the very start of the undergraduate students' career. We examine the specifics of Management 100: Leadership and Communication in Groups, focusing on how the course provides opportunities to enhance leadership, teamwork, and communication skills. We frame our discussion with the communication across the curriculum (CXC) movement, which emphasizes integration of communication skills within courses across the academic disciplines. For the purposes of this article, our emphasis within CXC is primarily on the "speaking" aspect of communicating across the curriculum.

First, we describe three aspects of the CXC movement and how they contribute to a variety of instructional purposes in the academic curriculum. Second, we look at a particular CXC application within Management 100 and examine its curriculum in the context of undergraduate business education. Third, we reflect on the design, delivery, and effectiveness of our own attempt to integrate oral and written communication skills throughout the course. And finally, we provide recommendations for programmatic changes and their implications for other institutions and for follow-up research.

## **HISTORY OF CXC**

The idea of a CXC program was initially borrowed from the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement. The WAC movement began in the 1960s as a literacy movement in London, where researchers sought to study the integration of language across the curriculum and then put into practice ways to help develop language and communication skills. The focus was on students' higher-level critical thinking and problem-solving skills based on the premise that the use of language is critical to learning and, moreover, that writing, as a tool for literacy, should not be taught in a vacuum (Amidon, 2005; Locker, 2003). During the ensuing decades, the movement has flourished in academic disciplines across the world as the acquisition of language and literacy skills through writing has been

promoted and accepted as crucial to the cognitive and social development of all learners (Young, 1994).

Although the WAC movement initially took root in the 1960s (Russell, 1991, 1997), the inception of CXC followed suit later in the 1980s and was a direct result of the reinvention of “standards” and the emphasis on “outcome-based” education (D. L. Rubin & Hampton, 1998). Similar in nature, CXC focused more on oral communication (speaking, listening, and interpersonal communication) than on written communication. CXC initially focused on curricular changes at the elementary and secondary levels and eventually found its way into higher education. In general, this movement sought to address the idea that it is insufficient for students to graduate from high school or college with proficiency in courses such as math, science, history, and literature. This movement also emphasized that students needed to work toward communicative competence; that is, they needed to be able to articulate what they understood about course content (Morreale, Shockley-Zalabak, & Whitney, 1993).

Communicative competence includes the understanding of how to engage in effective communication exchanges with a variety of audiences in terms of *what* is said, *how* it is said, to *whom* it is said, and *why* it is said (Hymes, 1964, 1972). Although *communicative competence* came out of the study of sociolinguistics—that is, how language and culture interact within a society—this term developed a broader usage to include other communication interactions. Such communication interactions include giving speeches, interacting in a group, negotiating conflict, and engaging in interpersonal communication, to name a few.

In fact, specific studies have shown that engaging in persuasion and argumentation exercises actually increases students’ critical thinking skills (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999; Allen, Berkowitz, & Loudon, 1995; Bean, 2001; Colbert, 1995; C. Green & Klug, 1990). When students engage in speaking activities, they need to listen, think quickly by tapping into their knowledge base, respond with cogent arguments, listen to the counterargument, and make further assertions. As such, when communication skills are introduced within a course’s assignments (e.g., a formal presentation or a debate), they become part of the integrated learning process as students talk about the course content. Ultimately, this integration

helps students develop their higher intellectual processes along with critical thinking skills (Morreale et al., 1993).

The purpose of CXC programs is twofold: to encourage faculty across the disciplines to create assignments that are “speaker friendly” and also to help students to develop their communicative competence. Early on (from the 1980s into the 1990s), CXC programs manifested themselves in essentially three different ways based on the needs of the host institution: The first type provided separate instruction in the form of a required introductory communication course, the second integrated training and development through “speaking- and writing-intensive” courses, and the third made use of consultants, whether peer or professional, as an integral part of student learning (Cronin & Glenn, 1991; Cronin & Grice, 1993). The three types of CXC programs play out as follows.

### **Separate Instruction**

First, some colleges and universities require all students to take at least one communication course as part of the core curriculum (Epstein, 1999; Zhao & Alexander, 2004). The course can be a full-semester course on management communication, intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, group dynamics, or rhetoric, to name a few. The course stands alone, with one instructor teaching all aspects of the course. The instructor’s focus is on developing the students’ core competencies in the subject matter. For example, in a rhetoric course, students learn about rhetorical principles and practices. They learn about argumentation, rhetorical strategies, audience analysis, patterns of organization, use of evidence, and control of language. They also practice a variety of skills and learn how to give an effective presentation. They learn basic research skills, practice critical thinking as they brainstorm and focus their topics, hone their organizational skills as they work on introductions and conclusions, and perfect their use of powerful and effective language. Students also learn how to overcome stage fright and to enhance physical delivery (movement, gestures, eye contact) and vocal delivery (inflection, rate, pitch).

### **Integrated Instruction**

The second type of CXC program is integrative. By combining course content with skill building, specifically oral communication skills (Most, 1994; R. B. Rubin & Graham, 1988; R. B. Rubin, Graham, &

Mignerey, 1990; Vangelisti & Daly, 1989), institutions of higher education see the benefits of integrating speaking (and writing) skills within the curriculum (Berko, Morreale, Cooper, & Perry, 1998; D. L. Rubin & Hampton, 1998). The integrative type of CXC program offers courses in a wide variety of subjects—such as economics, finance, management, and marketing—and focuses assignments on speaking and writing about the content matter. In such “speaking and writing about” courses, as they are sometimes called, faculty get training in communication theories and applications to combine communication instruction with course content. Often, communication experts provide training to help faculty incorporate speech theory and skills into the curriculum; therefore, this approach is also known as the “training model” (Cronin & Grice, 1993). This type of teaching focuses on what is called “integrated learning” and fosters an environment in which students work on critical thinking skills as they apply these to higher intellectual processes (Morreale et al., 1993).

For example, a course such as consumer behavior focuses on the factors (both internal and external) that influence people’s behavior in a buying situation. Course objectives are to provide a conceptual understanding of consumer behavior, opportunities to apply buyer behavior concepts to marketing management decisions, and an introduction to behavioral research. In the integrated instruction model, communication skills (e.g., presentation skills) are integrated with marketing concepts and principles. Although the ultimate goal is for the students to understand the factors that influence buying behavior, the additional learning comes from purposefully combining marketing content with communication skills. So in this instance, communication skills are the vehicle for enhancing the students’ understanding of consumer behavior and for demonstrating their understanding of the subject. Assigning a presentation about buying behaviors becomes a learning objective and a learning process: The instructor teaches students about consumer behavior but also spends time coaching them on how to organize a marketing presentation, how to target a specific audience, and, finally, how to effectively present it. Such an integration of content and skills is the aim of CXC.

### **Consultant-Based Instruction**

The third type of CXC program is akin to the second in its reliance on communication experts to support faculty. This type of program,

also known as the “contra” model (Cronin & Grice, 1993), typically provides instruction in communication theory and skills as a sort of “jump start” for interested faculty. The difference between this model and the integrative training model is that the communication expert plays more of a consultant’s role. Not only do communication consultants provide active assistance in planning syllabi, lectures, and activities, they also give students feedback and help faculty deliver theory and skills during certain segments of the actual course. Such close interaction of the consultant might include activities such as assisting the instructor with course development (regarding communication skills and assessment), attending class to lecture on the skills aspects of the course, observing presentations and giving feedback to students, and so on.

If we extend the example of the consumer behavior course above, the course instructor would be responsible for giving students a conceptual understanding of consumer behavior and for working with the consultant, who would, in turn, coach the students on how to develop a strong presentation with solid content and effective delivery. Both consultant and instructor would work side-by-side by combining their areas of expertise. In the consultant-based model, an external expert in the field of communication supports both instructor and students.

Table 1 summarizes our discussion of the various ways in which courses can use these three CXC designs to enhance overall learning. The courses we name under each category are simply examples taken from our experience. For instance, we have seen legal studies faculty use consultants with great success, but they could also take an integrated approach. What makes Management 100 noteworthy is its use of all three approaches. We now turn to our case in point.

### **MANAGEMENT 100: CURRENT CXC CASE IN POINT**

The early 1990s brought about a nationwide revision of curriculum in business schools across the country (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, 1991, 1992; Dulek, 1993; K. C. Green, 1992; “MBA: Is the Traditional,” 1992; Neelankavil, 1994; Wardrope, 2002). When The Wharton School revised its curriculum in 1991, a team of faculty and staff created an experimental course—now known as Management 100—designed to cultivate leadership,

Table 1. Summary of Three Types of CXC Designs in Typical Courses

<i>Separate Course</i>	<i>Integrated</i>	<i>Consultant-Based</i>
<u>Type of course</u> Management communication Interpersonal communication Group dynamics	<u>Type of course</u> Introduction to management Introduction to marketing	<u>Type of course</u> Legal studies Business and public policy
<u>Experience of instructor</u> Instructor is experienced in communication contexts and teaches the course as a subject.	<u>Experience of instructor</u> Instructor is not experienced in communication contexts. Instructor receives support from communication expert and has training before course begins. Then instructor designs and delivers course on his or her own.	<u>Experience of instructor</u> Instructor is not experienced in communication contexts. Instructor receives support from communication expert both before and during course. Communication expert plays more of an ongoing consultant's role.

teamwork, and communication skills through service. Since 1993 (with the pilot program launched in 1992), students have taken Management 100: Leadership and Communication in Groups as a foundation for their standard core requirements (accounting, statistics, finance, marketing, management, and operations and information management). In the year of our study (2005–2006), nine sections of roughly 60 freshmen in each section ran in the fall. Three additional sections for roughly 150 upper level transfer and dual-degree students ran in the spring.

Management 100 builds communication skills by using the CXC models of separate, integrated, and consultant-based designs. Recall that the separate instruction occurs through a standalone course with communication delivered as the main subject of the course (e.g., Fundamentals of Rhetoric), integrated instruction takes place in a course (e.g., Introduction to Marketing) in which skills are incorporated into the

assignments, and consultant-based instruction gives the course instructor full support from a communication consultant. Management 100 provides *separate* instruction both in class and out, *integrated* assignments that require drafting and rehearsing, and peer and professional *consultants* who coach and assess students on their skills. The assessment of communication skills takes into account principles of communicative competence: what is said, how it is said, to whom it is said, and why it is said (Hymes, 1972), with the goal of reinforcing strengths and identifying opportunities for development and improvement. Peer undergraduate team advisors (TAs), instructors, and communication consultants coach students on their ability to think critically, structure an argument, marshal evidence, analyze an audience, and control language or delivery. After completing Management 100, students go on to take communication-intensive courses in such departments as management, marketing, legal studies, and business and public policy. Students can also take standalone, noncredit workshops throughout their 4 years to hone communication skills.

### **Management 100: Incorporating Three CXC Designs**

Management 100 provides some separate instruction by dedicating class time to communication topics and activities. TAs lead two recitations on public speaking. These 1-hour skill-building sessions give students a chance to practice in front of their team members by doing impromptu presentations or rehearsing status reports for feedback and peer review. During one lecture, TAs also present a sample presentation for class discussion. With Gene Zelazny's *Say It With Presentations* (now in the 2006 version) in hand, the students are well equipped to discuss such fine points as establishing rapport, tone, introductions, transitions, conclusions, concrete and specific examples, nonverbal communication, and the use of visual aids. Zelazny's book is attractive to undergraduate business students because it targets a corporate audience. In addition, the Management 100 instructors spend one lecture on writing processes and products. Typically, they give students instruction on drafting, revising, and editing sample case studies or letters of engagement written by student teams. They also review criteria for evaluation (critical thinking, audience, structure, evidence, and control of language) with *The Business Writer's Handbook*, by Alred, Brusaw, and



Oliu (2006), as a guide. We think this handbook is particularly useful to business students because it is one they can keep on their desks at work, long after graduation.

In addition to incorporating separate instruction, Management 100 is *integrative*; in other words, the class combines course content with skill-building and focuses assignments on writing and speaking about the subjects of leadership, teamwork, and communication. For example, students write reflective writing assignments, called “leadership portfolios,” that are read and critiqued by their TAs. The very first portfolio, due on the first day of class, asks students to consider the essence of leadership and to find or create an image that captures that essence. In response to the students’ short explanatory essays, TAs comment on the content and style, on what the students say about leadership, and on how they say it. In addition, each project team presents a series of status reports, with two or three speakers per round. Each speaker talks for no more than 5 minutes about a topic pertinent to the course (e.g., leading with integrity, negotiating differences, or forming working groups). During required dress rehearsals held outside of class, TAs coach students on content and delivery. The rehearsals and status reports give students an opportunity to enhance their presentation skills, inform class members about their progress, and enrich discussion about course topics. They also build team cohesion and pride.

Finally, Management 100 makes use of *consultant-based instruction* to enhance speaking skills in particular. Professional consultants—freelance writers, editors, and consultants—are recruited through job postings in newspapers, professional associations, and word of mouth. Although communication consultants are paid for their time, in our experience most consultants also appreciate the opportunity to work with students and to work at a university. Consultants hold voluntary 1-hour workshops outside of class for students who want extra coaching before they give their status reports. About 25% of students take advantage of these voluntary sessions. When students give their presentations in class, the communication consultant assigned to the course evaluates each student’s level of competence according to the course criteria (critical thinking, analysis of audience, strategy and structure, use of evidence, and delivery). Students who need or want more instruction have the option of enrolling in noncredit presentation skills seminars (WH-191) led by

consultants or upper-level MBAs who have received training in communication skills instruction. Seminars run for 6 weeks, 90 minutes each week. The first five class meetings focus on one of the core criteria for evaluation: critical thinking and argument, use of evidence, strategy and structure, audience analysis and tone, and delivery. The final session is devoted to individual consultations. Students have the opportunity to see themselves as others see them through videotaped playback and review. Students who attend and participate in each session earn a notation of “satisfactory” on their transcripts.

### **Evaluation of the Use of Three CXC Designs Within Management 100**

The following discussion highlights how Management 100 students assessed the use of these three designs (separate, integrated, and consultant), based on the end-of-semester student evaluation, administered to approximately 650 students at the end of the fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters. Students completed and submitted the form online. The response rate was more than 90% for both fall and spring (92.1% and 95.3%, respectively.) The Management 100 end-of-semester survey has proven instrumental in measuring the course’s effectiveness and paving the way for yearly revisions and improvements.

When it comes to assessing the effectiveness of *separate instruction*, we do not have evaluations for particular recitations and lectures, but we can gauge student perceptions of TA and instructor effectiveness by looking at their ratings of lectures and recitations as a whole. In the fall, the freshmen found the TA-led recitations slightly more valuable to the learning experience than the instructor’s lectures. On a scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), the freshmen rated recitations 2.90 out of 4.00 and lectures 2.84 out of 4.00. The reverse was true for the upper level transfer and dual-degree students who took the course in the spring. They rated the lectures 2.74 out of 4.00 and the recitations 2.54 out of 4.00 (see Table 2). The freshmen found more value in the recitations led by upper level TAs than did the transfer and dual-degree students, who were more skeptical of what they could learn from fellow students who are the same age or younger. In the spring, the older students looked slightly more favorably on the instructor-led lectures. Overall, the ratings of separate instruction (whether by TA or instructor) were average.

Table 2. CXC Effectiveness: Separate Instruction

<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Student Evaluation</i>	<i>Average Score Fall Freshmen</i>	<i>Average Score Spring Upper Level Transfers and Dual-Degree Students</i>
TA-led	Rate the value of the recitations to learning experience	2.90	2.54
Instructor-led	Rate the value of the lecture to learning experience	2.84	2.74

NOTE: TA = team advisor. Average scores are calculated on a scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

With respect to *integrated instruction*, the freshmen were more positive about the TAs' responses to student writing than were the upper level students who took the course in the spring. The TAs scored an average of 3.46 out of 4.00 when freshmen responded to the statement, "Your TA's responses to your Leadership Portfolios are helpful"; the upper level undergraduates taking the course in the spring, however, were more critical and rated the TA responses 2.93 out of 4.00. Taken as a whole, students found the TAs' coaching more helpful on speaking skills than on writing skills. Whether freshmen or upper level, students agreed that the TAs' feedback on the status report was very helpful: 3.46 out of 4.00 (fall) and 3.29 out of 4.00 (spring). Overall, the ratings of integrated instruction facilitated by the TA were high (see Table 3).

The *consultant-based instruction* was not as well received as the integrated coaching provided by TAs or the separate instruction provided by TAs and instructors. When asked whether "the Communication Consultant provided effective feedback on your Status Report," freshmen and upper level students were in close agreement, rating the feedback 2.47 out of 4.00 and 2.30 out of 4.00. The most expert in the field of communication was rated the lowest—lower than the course instructors and the TAs (see Table 4).

Table 3. CXC Effectiveness: Integrated Instruction

<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Student Evaluation</i>	<i>Average Score Fall Freshmen</i>	<i>Average Score Spring Upper Level Transfers and Dual-Degree Students</i>
TA responds to content and style of written work	Your TA's responses to your Leadership Portfolios are helpful.	3.26	2.93
TA comments on content and delivery of presentation	Your TA's feedback on your Status Report is helpful.	3.46	3.29

NOTE: TA = team advisor. Average scores are calculated on a scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Table 4. CXC Effectiveness: Consultant-Based Instruction

<i>Delivery</i>	<i>Student Evaluation</i>	<i>Average Score Fall Freshmen</i>	<i>Average Score Spring Upper Level Transfers and Dual-Degree Students</i>
Consultant evaluates and responds to student presentations	The communication consultant provided effective feedback on your Status Report.	2.47	2.30

NOTE: Average scores are calculated on a scale of 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the past 10 years, Management 100 has experimented with several types of CXC approaches: separate instruction, integrated instruction, and consultant-based instruction. This article has explored the delivery and effectiveness of our most recent attempt.

The most successful CXC approach in Management 100 is *integrated instruction*. Although the students report that the TAs are more effective coaching speaking than writing, they clearly appreciate the TAs' comments on the content and style of oral and written

assignments over the consultants' feedback on status reports. These results lead us to the observation that the least qualified—the TAs—are the most appreciated, more so than the most qualified—the professional communication consultants. At first glance, the data are perplexing: How is it that those who are the most qualified to teach by virtue of possessing advanced graduate degrees and years of teaching experience, and work experience in the business world, receive the lowest scores in terms of effectiveness? We believe the answer lies in the relationship between the TA and the student.

The TAs' responses are more highly valued than the consultants' feedback because the students form a close, trusting relationship with their TA during the course of the semester. When asked to respond to the statement, "You have been able to develop a sense of trust in your TA," the freshmen respond in a highly positive way (3.62 out of 4.00). The upper level students who take the course in the spring also give a very positive response (3.33 out of 4.00), even though the TA is typically the exact same age or maybe even younger than the students themselves. Having gone through the course themselves, the TAs form a select group of upper level students.

The process of becoming a TA is competitive and rigorous. Each year, roughly 125 students apply for approximately 20 positions. Each applicant submits a résumé and cover letter for review and goes through two rounds of peer interviews. Once selected, new TAs take a special section of Management 240: Group Dynamics and use their simultaneous experience as a Management 100 TA as the fieldwork for the course. The competition and rigor make the TA community one of the strongest student groups on campus. TAs are widely regarded as "the heart" of the undergraduate business school mainly because they help new students make the transition to the business school and university life. Although TAs earn a modest stipend (roughly \$1,000), they often say they would do the job without pay. Moreover, the very process of coaching less experienced students on their communication skills affords a learning experience for TAs (Grice, Bird, & Dalton, 1990). TAs model public speaking for lower level students and also field questions that invariably cause them to reflect on their own strengths and opportunities for improvement as presenters.

Recognizing the importance of relationship building to learning leads us to make several suggestions. First, it makes good sense to

bolster the training for the TAs. As noted above, all first-time TAs must take Group Dynamics. This course enhances the TAs' understanding of their own patterns of participation in groups and helps them improve their skills as facilitators. Future course enhancements might include ways to develop and support the TAs specifically as speaking and writing coaches. Second, additional support for all TAs—whether new or return—might make use of the professional communication consultants; their expertise might be better directed toward coaching the TAs on their responses to spoken and written assignments rather than to composing feedback for students. Third, if communication coaches continue to give feedback to students, then figuring out a way to enhance the relationship between consultant and student would go a long way to reducing the students' fear of evaluation and grading and to increasing receptiveness to learning. Of course, we recognize that these curricular and programmatic recommendations require additional time, resources, and funding; nonetheless, they are worth exploring.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Although CXC programs can be met with enthusiasm by communication educators, and although administrators of such programs proceed with focused determination, there is insufficient empirical data that have objectively and quantitatively measured such programs' success. This is probably because of the very subjective nature of judging outcomes of communication learning (Blinc, Lowe, Meisner, & Nouri, 2003). At best, data take the form of multiple self-report surveys describing student satisfaction and instructor approval. But rather than thinking of subjective evaluation as a limitation, perhaps we can view it as a challenge for management communication practitioners and researchers to find more comprehensive ways to assess the learning outcomes and student performance in an area that is traditionally very subjective in nature. Although it would be most desirable to combine both objective empirical data along with subjective data, we nevertheless believe that it *is* worthwhile to assess some of the strengths and opportunities of particular programs through the kinds of data collected in this study.

## CONCLUSION

The students in our classrooms will be the business leaders who will have to navigate their way through the intricacies of a global marketplace. They will have to use their quantitative skills to put together accounting spreadsheets and financial forecasts; they will also apply their qualitative skills to the task so that they can pose and express complex business problems with clarity and insight. Because the competitive marketplace requires that students demonstrate well-developed quantitative and qualitative skills, we, as management educators, must provide our students with a strong foundation that supports the training and development of expert communicative competence.

As more researchers and practitioners in education, along with professionals in the business world, continue to stress the importance of developing functional skills such as oral and written communication, it is incumbent on those institutions with CXC programs to provide examples of the delivery of individual applications. We need to move from discussions that tout the need for more research to ones that describe both the promises and pitfalls of real CXC programs that are already in place. We anticipate that such curricular research will also need to address how best to measure the effectiveness of using various CXC designs. We hope that this article has provided a useful background regarding the CXC movement in higher education. We also hope that we have provided an illustration of one innovative CXC application in an undergraduate business school that will prove to be an inspiration and example for other programs to follow.

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