

Performing Arts Strategies to Enhance Leadership, Negotiation, Public Speaking and Non-Verbal Skills in Business Communication Courses

Abstract

This paper discusses curricular modifications processes and proposal for the Business Communication courses belonging to the College of Business Administration of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. The new course material to be introduced in Business Communication courses seeks an interdisciplinary approach where performing arts are integrated with business communication topics. Organizations and Companies are emphasizing the importance of having a workforce with strong soft skills. The ability to communicate orally and nonverbally, and to negotiate and have good interpersonal skills is crucial to attain professional success. This interdisciplinary approach of business communication integrated with the performing arts will result in a very innovative and productive approach for business students as well as for other non-business majors. Exercises in the performing arts field aim at raising awareness of the body and the voice. Aspects such as verbal, nonverbal communication, posture, usage of space, articulation, diction, projection, facial and body gestures are practiced through these exercises as well. Improvisation exercises will also be incorporated in the course content as this technique prepares the person to handle the unexpected. All these elements are crucial for the business world since excellent mastery of these skills will likely lead to better persuasive and negotiation strategies as well as much more effective leadership and interpersonal skills. These strategies are aimed at providing students tools to better project their ideas and proposals in front of a diverse groups.

Keywords: interdisciplinary approach, soft skills, performing arts

Introduction

Increasing globalization leads people to develop a wide array of skills coming from different fields. Increasingly, individuals have to come prepared with a set of skills, and they must not only rely on the knowledge they acquire in their specialized areas, they must go beyond their specialized knowledge and explore skills experiencing techniques and understanding from other fields very different from their areas.

Important skills to be developed in all students and professionals are the soft skills. These include key skills that will allow students and professionals to perform efficiently in either the classroom and/or workplace context, for example to provide face to face customer service, to be able to display empathy when meeting potential clients' needs in a marketing campaign, to persuade an audience or another party of the benefits of your services, among others.

Addressing an audience is quite a challenging task, even more if you have to persuade them and influence them in some way in their decision making. Effective delivery skills are essential to attain persuading an audience. Oral expression is crucial for any field or career. Every student, during his/her academic and professional life will have to face an audience with different purposes. When this happens, it is very probable that those facing an audience will suffer from stage fright. It is a well-known fact that the greatest fear of many professionals is not the fear of dying, but the fear of public speaking. Laskowski (1996) cited a study mentioned in the Book of Lists (Wallechinsky and Wallace, 2005) which found that public speaking is listed as the number one fear of professionals. Thus, it is valid to ask: how can students and professionals manage and/or overcome this fear?

The public speaking skill is highly required in the different fields of business, such as Management, Marketing and Advertising areas. The speaker must persuade the audience and influence their decision making process, which is one of the main functions of Management (Nemkova, Souchon, Hughes, and Micevski, 2015). Thus the stage presence and control of the space and the body are very valuable. These are elements that help the speaker project an image of a confident and reliable business person.

Public speaking skill can be practiced and improved through numerous exercises. One of the fields that greatly contributes to enhance this skill is the performing arts, drama and theatre techniques. Interdisciplinary approaches to teaching, learning and career development is increasing at a fast pace. Universities and companies around the globe are using interdisciplinary approaches to develop and enhance specific skills in their students and professionals (Acevedo and Bagshaw, 2013).

In this paper we present a curricular change proposal which involves an interdisciplinary approach to teaching business communication courses in English at the College of Business Administration at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, focusing particularly in oral communication, public speaking and nonverbal skills.

Literature Review

Research on the topic of oral expression (Couto, 2002; Breton, 2004; Mariscal, 2004) reveals that oral and non-verbal communication is becoming increasingly important for professionals in any field. Individuals must not only master their oral skills, but they also must command the transmitted message in itself. A monotonous tone of voice, without rhythm or appropriate gestures can ruin the content of a very important presentation, project or business

transaction. Performing art strategies can enhance these skills and produce better outcomes for any individual, organization or company.

According to Lloyd and Hill (2013), business, governments and organizations are becoming aware of the importance of recruiting a workforce with much more developed creative and innovative skills to be able to successfully meet the 21st century's demands. Oakley, K, (2007) (cited in Lloyd and Hill, 2013), states that recruiters are seeking a workforce with skills such as communication, leadership, entrepreneurship, teamwork, creative skills, cross-cultural awareness and problem solving. Koppett (2013) asserts that more and more business are becoming aware of the importance of encouraging creativity and teamwork. In addition, Oakley, K, (2007) affirms that those skills associated to arts and artistic practice can greatly contribute enhancing innovation in organization and companies. These skills can certainly be well developed with the integration of performing arts techniques.

Acevedo and Bagshaw (2013) state that the Business field has to yet become aware of the importance the arts have for their success. They mention there is great need of these two fields to complement each other. The academia, through research and publications can help bridge the gap between the arts and business field (Acevedo and Bagshaw, 2013). "The arts permeate every aspect of our contemporary lives: from new forms of consumption...to the art involved in images, advertising and social media.... Moreover, it is possible to say that managers as leaders play their role as in the theatre, aiming to inspire, convince and enthuse followers and collaborators" (Acevedo and Bagshaw, 2013. p. 3). As stated by, Lloyd and Hill (2013, p. 68): "Increasingly, arts-based learning is being called upon to provide organizations with new learning models and tools, and in turn, is emerging as a new pedagogy in management education". The integration of theatre into the classroom provides the professors/teachers the

opportunity to enhance skills through the exploration and implementation of skills, such as facial expressions, verbal communication, body language (gestures). This interdisciplinary approach can help produce an effective response from students (Thambu and Balakrishnan, 2014). “Artistic approaches to teaching such as Forum Theatre help students become more intuitive and adaptive in their learning” (Thambu and Balakrishnan, 2014, p. 54).

An actor that is performing in a stage needs many elements in his/her body to produce an effective and convincing performance to persuade an audience. Actors search for different strategies to persuade the public on the credibility of their performance. In this search actors develop persuasive skills to attain changes in people’s behaviors and attitudes (Prieto, 2007). The expression through performing arts can lead to better oral skills, as the verbal and non-verbal skills are put into practice.

Improvisation is also an area which is becoming progressively much more pertinent to improve, drive and enhance decision-making, innovation and creativity, as it trains the individuals to handle the unexpected. “In improv, there is not time to evaluate. By definition improvisation is creating the moment without the ability to revise” (Koppett, 2013). This is key technique used in performing arts and drama fields. Improvisation uses a set of strategies, theories and exercises that are an excellent basis to learn from them (Koppett, 2013). According to Nemkova et al. (2015), improvisation helps search for novelty in the decision making processes. The creativity element of Improvisation allows the company to provide solutions to challenging customer problems. In addition, by using this technique, the company also guarantees continuity in the customer’s loyalty and satisfaction as they are able to enhance product differentiation (Nemkova et al., 2015). “Improvisation incorporates action orientation, which reflects manager’s ability to maintain an activity and focus their attention on imminent

problems” (Nemkova et al., 2015, pp. 44). According to Johnston (2014), the performance of a person in a particular career, presentation or position not only depends on his/her verbal communication but also with the performance success, and this can be practiced and developed through improvisation.

Objectives

The curricular modifications proposed in this paper seek to empower students with the use of theatre/performing arts techniques to apply it to business communication courses, focusing among other topics, in public speaking skills in English and thus improve these skills. We are also seeking to encourage the discussion of non-traditional and interdisciplinary approaches and strategies to business courses with the aim of having a positive influence in the teaching and learning process.

In order to have a successfully public speaking experience, the speaker must focus on his/her non-verbal, physical, and physiological aspects. The voice, for example, is a tool we use almost daily for most of our affairs. Sometimes we just do not pay enough attention to the importance and effect the spoken voice may have on other; we do not recognize the value it has to produce a positive outcome in delivering speeches. We also need to learn how to control and manage our body language in an effective way to be able to produce successful conference presentations, meetings and speech deliveries. Non-verbal behavior is a key concept that it is many times neglected by academia and professionals. We need to train our students in properly identifying accepted nonverbal behavior according to the country, for example correctly interpreting silence gaps, acceptable in many Asian countries, but not in Western countries.

Thus with these curricular modifications we are seeking to first raise awareness among students of the importance of all these verbal and nonverbal aspects of body and voice to

improve public speaking and oral expression skills; secondly, to provide students with the proper training of exercises to enhance these skills through the use of performing arts/drama techniques and strategies. Through the discussion of theories of oral expression and application of performing art exercises, the students will obtain new possibilities to interact in their academic, professional and social life.

Methodology

The curricular changes are currently taking place in Business Communication courses in English: *Strategic Business Communication* (Introductory course) and *Business Report Writing* (Course focused on a research project). Both these courses are a requirement for all of our Business students at our College. The Business Communication Department has also just started a Minor in Business Communication and it is open to any student of any School or College. The curricular changes are also being implemented to the courses in the Minor. Some of these courses are *Oral Business Communication* (Course focused in Pronunciation and Oral Expression), *Employment Portfolio and Job Seeking Processes* (Course centered in exploring the job market and preparing for it), *Business Writing Techniques*, and *Business Translation*.

In order to develop new literature review for our courses related to this topic, and to develop new teaching strategies and techniques in our business communication courses, we began searching for granting opportunities that would support the planning of a workshop and interviewing professors in recognized Business Schools that employ interdisciplinary approaches to teach skills, such as leadership and negotiating skills, through the use of performing arts.

In June 2015, together with two business communication professors, we applied for a Title V Federal Grant to start working with these interdisciplinary approaches to teaching. We were granted two funding opportunities to work with this initiative.

Firstly, with the first grant, we organized a workshop for business professors from diverse fields (Finance, Accounting, Human Resources, Marketing, and Management, among others). The workshop consisted on improving our verbal and nonverbal communication and public speaking skills through the use of drama techniques. We hired a very qualified drama professor from our university who is also a local actress to offer the workshop. Our professors participated of numerous exercises that worked with the voice awareness such as the projection of the voice, articulation, diction and audibility among others; we also worked with breathing and relaxation and body awareness exercises, among others.

Secondly, with the second grant we travelled to Boston and Cambridge Massachusetts with the purpose of interviewing business professors to explore courses in other universities that combine performing arts and history with oral expression, leadership and negotiating skills, among others. In Harvard we interviewed Dr. Timothy McCarthy who teaches DPI-802M E: The Arts of Communication at the Harvard Kennedy School, John F. Kenney School of Management. In MIT, we interview Dr. Christine Kelly who teaches 15.S03: Enacting Leadership: Shakespeare and Performance, and Daena Giardella who teaches Improvisation and Influence: An Experiential Leadership Lab, both at the MIT Leadership Center, Sloan Management School Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

The courses develop leadership skills though the analysis and acting of recognized literature pieces such as Macbeth from Shakespeare. In addition, the professors use drama and acting roles to develop and strengthen in students the proper body movements, posture and diction. They work with effective feedback, negotiating, collaboration and improvisation skills. They also aim at developing persuasive skills and to learn to react to the unexpected through improvisation exercises and role plays of different situations.

The grant allowed us to interview these three professors of these interdisciplinary courses and a student focal group. In addition, we also took two workshops, one provided by one of MIT's professors (Improvitational Leadership: High Performance Skills for Influence, Adaptability, and Collaborative Communication) and the second one with Improv Assylum (Workshop in the Corporate Training Division) which is a company that provides diverse workshops on interpersonal, leadership and negotiation skills to recognized companies and organizations such as The Boston Celtics, Google, Intel and PWC among many others.

The topics, concepts and theory of oral expression and communication collected in this research allowed us to start developing new ideas, didactical materials, new literature review and strategies to implement them in our courses. These are currently being used in some of the Communication courses in our Department.

Within this curricular change proposal, there are numerous hands-on exercises and activities that are carried in our courses, each one with very specific set of goals. The exercises focus in different areas and are worked in a gradual building process throughout the courses. There are several stages, which can vary in order according to the topic being discussed in the courses.

The exercises belonging to the first stage focus on building up confidence, getting to know the team members and developing trust within the participants. For example, one very popular exercise among students is the *Crazy Cars*. This activity is to be worked in pairs. One person becomes the car and the other driver. The car must travel with his/her eyes closed and the drivers will lead the car without verbal feedback, in absolute silence, and just using the index finger to move the car. The drivers have a very important role since they have to protect their car from crashing with other cars. Then the roles are changes and the driver becomes the leader.

After each exercise, a discussion is carried out to encourage participants to state how they felt in the different roles. This exercise is recommended to build trust among the participants. But it is also used to work with interpersonal and negotiation skills. Participants learn about their personalities in terms on how they relate to their co-workers and even family members, for example, are they the type of people who like to always lead and impose orders, or can they allow themselves to sometime be led by others.

The second stage works with the awareness of our voices. In this phase, the activities focus on working with tone of voice, pitch, sounds, audibility, articulation and projection. Students are made aware of the importance of the anatomical structures that produce sound and allow us to speak. Breathing, stretching and relaxation exercises are carried out to help with all these aspects of voice production and sound. Reading of tongue twisters and songs are employed to help with the rhythm, the articulation and pronunciation.

A third stage works with exercises that focus in body language awareness. Many activities work to improve proper posture, usage of space when delivering presentations, appropriate gestures and body movements in general. Exercises such as *The Mirror* focus in body posture and body language; in this exercise participants in pairs make an effort to replicate body movements of their partners; or observing and then imitating the walking style of other classmates. Then the observations were discussed to make everyone aware of their body language.

The final stage usually consists on Improvisations. This exercise develops in participants the skill of handling the unexpected. And this is a very important skill, as many CEO's and/or leaders are often faced with unexpected questions of reporters or journalists in press conferences. Improvisation will give you the tools to react quickly and come up with a quick but honest

response. In the courses, day to day situations involving conflicts are presented so participants can present solutions to the conflicts through improvisation exercises.

As stated above, the order in which these drama techniques and activities are presented can vary according to the topics being discussed in class.

Results

Many of these drama techniques and strategies are already being implemented in most of the Business Communication courses as mentioned at the beginning. The Oral Expression Course applied most of the strategies to provide students with the tools to strengthen these skills. A final reflective essay was given in this class and students overwhelmingly agreed on the effectiveness and positive impact of the drama techniques employed to better their pronunciation and delivery skills. All of the students stated they would definitely be applying many of these exercises in their professional career, for example to improve face to face customer service, advertising and marketing plan delivery presentations, among others.

The modifications are currently being implemented in existing Business Communication courses mentioned previously. There are also several courses which are in a proposal stage to be submitted to the Business Communication Department Curriculum Committee and to the Business Graduate School. One of the courses will be centered in Public Speaking Skills, which aims at providing students the skills to deliver effective presentations. The course will deal with the element of persuasion, a key component to influence the decision making process in many companies and organizations. Verbal and non-verbal elements will be discussed as well, as these are crucial components that aid speakers project a much more confident, reliable, emphatic and critical thinker image; all elements that help persuade an audience and obtain positive outcomes. All of these components will be developed and strengthened using drama techniques.

There is already an existing course created by the professor from the Drama Department who gave the workshop to the business faculty titled Business Communication and Theatre: the subject and the context. This course is a direct result of the initiative funded by the grants previously described in which we, as a Department, are encouraging curricular changes centered in interdisciplinary approaches and collaboration between different schools and departments, such as the alliance between the Drama Department at the College of Humanities and the Business Communication Department at the College of Business Administration.

Discussion

Based on the literature review, university, schools, and college curriculums are increasingly showing the use of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching their subjects. In addition, organizations and companies are also seeking performing art training to enhance important skills in their workforce, once again showing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches.

These interdisciplinary approaches are an increasingly important trend in Business Education. Academia and college education must rely on partnerships between different fields of knowledge to produce the most effective curriculum programs and teaching and learning strategies. New, innovative and creative teaching techniques must be in constant flexible movement to adapt to the 21st century students. These curriculum changes proposed for these courses provide interactive and very dynamic set of exercises and strategies that will be attractive for students making their learning much more enjoyable and pertinent.

The exercises proposed for these courses will introduce an innovative angle to developing soft skills in our business students. As discussed in the literature review and in the methodology, integrating performing arts techniques will help enhance students' public speaking, negotiation and interpersonal skills. Improvisation will certainly be a key element in these courses as it

shows it can help students master the art of handling unexpected situations, so common in the workplace/business settings. The strategies in the courses will also help raise body awareness among students. The exercises will provide a clear idea of the importance of the body language when it comes to negotiating, delivering presentations and sealing business deals. The performing arts techniques invest time and effort to prepare the body for an acting scene; aspects such as posture, diction, articulation, projection, and use of the space are important to deliver a good scene and convince the audience. These aspects are also equally important for professionals, business people and students when it comes to delivering presentations, meeting with colleagues, classmates, and persuading an audience. Effective use of these elements will help individuals project a confident and reliable image, thus having a positive impact in the audience.

Conclusions

With these curricular changes we aim to provide business students a training that will help produce a workforce with much more developed and effective soft skills that will aid them in their future career path. With the interdisciplinary approach of business communication and performing arts proposed for these courses we expect to enhance our students' public speaking/oral communication and nonverbal skills in a much more effective way. The innovation in these courses is also focus in enhancing negotiating skills and handling the unexpected through improvisation exercises. These performing art techniques will also raise awareness among students of their bodies, their voice, their verbal and nonverbal behavior, which are all important elements to observe and master in order for an effective and persuasive performance in their careers.

Curricular innovation should be a constant ongoing process that all Departments and Schools must go through in their universities. Our Business Communication Department will

also seek to expand our collaboration with other Liberal Arts Departments to continue further alliances to guarantee interdisciplinary approaches in our courses and curriculum.

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