Course material traditionally used in undergraduate business communication classes often lacks content relevant for MBA students, particularly those students who have had extensive work experience. The challenge for those developing management communication courses for MBA students is to develop credible and useful materials to teach written and oral communication principles to students with a wide range of communication competencies. Effective course materials should meet three criteria. First the topics should deal with practical issues, as perceived by the MBA student. Second, appropriate materials ought to be relevant to the kinds of communication situations entry-level MBAs could be expected to face in their first few years of employment. Third, materials should integrate knowledge and principles of business administration that students are gaining in other areas of their curriculum. The system of content development that is proposed in this paper meets those constraints. The approach includes source materials and content development frameworks for four different germane topic areas: 1) company, industry, and organization data; 2) management theory and organizational design; 3) crisis communication; and, 4) issues management. While the latter three of these topic areas are not traditional sources of content for MBA communication courses, they can serve to integrate management and communication principles. Thus, in a communication course, appropriate content may include structure as well as facts or data.
Specific company and industry data are directly applicable to and often used in traditional business communication writing assignments. However, classroom exercises often rely on hypothetical data, or in some instances textbook authors suggest that students make up facts and figures to fill in missing data gaps. Use of actual company or industry data can often result in greater credibility and relevance of course materials. Further, factual materials provide context for assignments and give students an expanded data base from which to draw for their analyses. As an added benefit, using actual data can help students and faculty become more familiar with locating business source materials.

Though information of not-for-profit organizations usually must be requested from the organization being investigated, company and industry data can either be solicited directly or obtained through many published sources. Professor Carter Daniel of the Graduate School of Business at Rutgers University has compiled a helpful list of library source materials for information on companies and/or industries. His listing includes basic reference works such as Moody's Handbook of Common Stocks, the Dun & Bradstreet Million Dollar Directory, Standard and Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors and Executives, Thomas's Register of American Manufacturers, and Value Line. A number of bibliographic sources reference articles by company (Funk & Scott's Index of Corporations and Industries, Wall Street Journal Index, New York Times Index, and Business Periodicals Index). Finally, annual reports (for larger firms) and SEC 10-K Disclosure Forms, found in most research libraries, provide useful company data.

Information on various industries is also available from a variety of sources. In addition to the newspaper and periodical indices and standard reference works noted above, information on many industries may be found in Department of Commerce reports (including The Census of Manufacturers, The Annual Survey of Manufacturers, and Current Industrial Reports), Predicasts, which notes projections for future growth, Business Statistics and its biennial supplement covering 20 to 30 year time spans, and Public Affairs Information Service, which treats controversial subjects, issues, products, and industries. Lorna Daniells, business bibliographer at the Baker Library at Harvard University, has published a comprehensive guide titled Business
Information Sources. Paul Wasserman's (ed.) Encyclopedia of Business Information Sources also provides information on specific industries.

Management Theory and Organizational Design

Though organizational behavior theorists rarely address skills development directly, they have long recognized communication as a critical management function. Further, writers in this field have detailed the implications of organizational structure and design for effective communication within organizations. Organizational communication researchers have amassed a substantive data base in the past twenty years, which practitioners in the corporate world have used. More recently, business communication writers have begun to discuss the relation of organizational communication to their discipline. As Raymond Lesikar noted in 1981, an integrated concept of business communication is developing that includes interpersonal and organizational theory as well as writing, listening, speaking and non-verbal skills.

As business communication theorists begin to relate management theory and organizational design paradigms to communication effectiveness, they must confront at least three issues. The first issue is the manager-subordinate relationship's effect on communication outcome. Tying communication effects to manager and subordinate self-perceptions and to their perceptions of each other reinforces the importance of audience in the communication equation. Further, when a manager and subordinate do not agree on a mutually acceptable professional relationship, the conflict will inevitably affect communication between the two. Finally, when the relationship is reinforced either positively or negatively by organizational design (such as rigid reporting channels or, conversely, the absence of clearly defined reporting channels) or by physical placement of personnel (such as wide geographical dispersion or desk location in the executive office suite as opposed to on the plant floor), those organizational issues can be expected to influence the nature of the communication problem and the range of acceptable alternatives available.

Motivation is a second issue that may also be reflected in or affected by organizational or workplace design. Motivation
systems or practices employed by individual managers and/or those institutionalized by the organizational structure (Management by Objectives, for example) provide a content framework useful for developing a variety of communication assignments for individual or group work. Assignments would likely focus on: 1) the development of alternative message strategies for different motivational climates and determination of expected audience reaction, 2) the necessity of Writing for the given audience, that is, adapting messages to the motivational realities of the situation, and 3) the need for a communication strategy that reflects the manager's or organization's actual reward system, which is often unstated and/or in conflict with stated policy.

A third idea from management theory and organizational design that can provide content for the MBA communications course is that of communication flow and its relationship to the formal and informal networks within an organization. Three concepts relating to networks are particularly relevant. The first has to do with the type of formal structure institutionalized in the organizational chart. That structure will influence message strategy, communication media, timing, and audience. Organizational barriers to communication (including those relating to status, role, level of trust and knowledge level) will also differ depending on the formal reporting relationships. In addition, individual barriers to communication should be identified, their probable effect on the communication should be assessed, and alternative communication strategies should be devised for responding to or overcoming these barriers—within the given organizational structure.

A second concept relating to networks that has critical implications for written and oral communication in organizations is the notion of "linking pins," a term used for those individuals who hold positions within the organizational structure that tie together the communication network. Because of their position in the organization, these liaison individuals function as gatekeepers and effectively control information flow. As such, they are critical receivers, evaluators, and transmitters of communication, and the messages they receive must take into account the place and role of these individuals. Attention to structure helps students identify secondary as well as primary message receivers who may block or facilitate message flow and interpretation. Only then can they adapt to the exigencies of these multiple receivers.
A third concept relating to structure is the effect of the informal communications network or "grapevine" on whether a message will be transmitted, to whom it will go, the amount of time needed to disseminate information, how a message is likely to be interpreted, and what the probable responses are likely to be. As Professor Keith Davis has so clearly demonstrated, managers cannot subvert or outlaw the corporate grapevine; neither can they afford to ignore it. Rather, managers can use the grapevine to insure more effective communication within their organizations. Not only should students have an opportunity to analyze the informal network in a given organization, they should also learn to structure messages for that network, select channels, and evaluate effectiveness. Such assignments allow them to apply analytical and empirical skills to communication problems and issues.

Advocacy and Crisis Communication

Whereas company and industry data are commonly used as primary content sources for business communication courses, and management theory and organizational design has an obvious relationship to the rhetorical task of adapting messages to the given audience, crisis communication has rarely found its way into the traditional business communication classroom. Often dismissed as a public relations task, and therefore unnecessary—if not inappropriate—for most business students, advocacy is a communication skill increasingly needed by managers called on to respond to crisis situations. Furthermore, as many recent cases have shown, employees at all levels of an organization must be prepared to respond effectively in times of internal or public upheaval. In short, handling crisis communication is not a function to be performed only by public relations personnel or senior management. It is potentially the responsibility of all organizational members and affiliates.

Advocacy and crisis communication is an appealing content source to students and a challenging one to the instructor because it can bring front page business news into the communications classroom as a basis for realistic written and oral communications assignments. It also provides a structure for assessing as well as devising and executing communication strategies through written, oral, and group formats. Examining
crisis situations that have been resolved (for example, Johnson and Johnson's actions subsequent to the Tylenol poisonings, Firestone Tire Company's response to attacks on its radials, or McDonald's actions after the mass murder at its California franchise), can include tracking strategies, media use, messages, and the ultimate success or failure of the corporate or industry communicative effort. By following an on-going crisis, students can plan, strategize, "second guess," and evaluate the organization's response to a particular problem. Further, they give an opportunity to study corporate response as it is adapted to a variety of audiences—employees, stockholders, the media, and the general public. The specific focus may be on defining the rhetorical problem, strategic stance, and message strategy for the specific case.

Attention in the MBA communications course to defining the rhetorical problem encourages students to apply the various management decision-models to which they have been exposed and to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the models for crisis communication situations. It also allows the instructor to identify a particular model as the basis for a written analysis. For example, John Dewey's problem-solving paradigm, typically used in communication courses, is a useful, simple construct, which emphasizes that clear problem definition and analysis must precede determining an appropriate action.\(^\text{13}\) The Dewey approach also reinforces the notion that the way a problem is defined will affect the number and nature of options available for solving it.

Strategic stance, the central position an organization takes in a situation of controversy, is a second rhetorical issue on which writing and speaking assignments might focus. Crisis communication content allows students to observe and evaluate alternative strategic positions, to develop or assess criteria for making choices about the alternatives, and to analyze the rhetorical implications of an organization's particular stance. In situations of on-going crisis, students have the opportunity to devise an appropriate stance for the organization and, as the crisis unfolds, to compare the recommended course of action to the organization's actual choices.\(^\text{14}\)

Message strategy subsumes an advocate's choices about message appeals (logical reasoning from data, appeals to the audience's emotions and motives, and use of the organization's or spokesperson's credibility to influence belief). It also reflects the advocate's choices about style, particularly "voice" or "tone."
Crisis communication content not only allows students to examine the nature of those choices, but it encourages them to structure appeals appropriate for a variety of different audiences. Particularly relevant questions include: How does the content differ and what stylistic alterations are to be expected between messages to stockholders and to the general public? What accounts for the differences? Are the choices likely to result in the desired audience response?

Issues Management

Whereas crisis communication calls for an immediate response to an unsuspected attack or potentially damaging situation, issues management provides for long-term, proactive communication. The generally accepted issues management process model set out by Howard Chase and Barry Jones is a useful format for developing a communication plan. That model includes identifying issues, analyzing issues, determining strategy ("issue action programming"), implementing strategy, and evaluating the results. Application of the model draws on the management tools and skills students have developed in other courses. This integration of content provides credibility for the communications course as well as allows a broad base of knowledge for analysis.

Conclusion

The steps of the issues management process model can actively function as a framework for developing course content in all the areas described in this paper. As the following discussion suggests, the issues management framework allows integration of traditional content (company and industry data) with content relating to strategy and to structure. Issue identification, for example, the first step of the issues management model, may draw on a number of sophisticated methods for environmental scanning with which business students will likely be familiar; it may, on the other hand, rely on a more random approach to determine trends and forecast developments. Either approach would be realistic, as both are
widely used in corporate issues management programs. When setting priorities about which issues must be managed and the timetable for addressing them, students may choose to follow a matrix analysis, a staple of both MBA programs and issues management programs alike. Issue analysis, the third step in the process, may draw on quantitative procedures as well as such qualitative measures as the corporate risk/opportunity exposure equation. When developing strategy, students may rely on strategic planning models as well as on rhetorical modes, including those relating to crisis communication that were previously described. Implementation of strategy may send students to their marketing texts to find models for researching the market, developing the media message, and choosing and scheduling media. In evaluating issues management programs, students may apply standard empirical assessment techniques. By encouraging students to use current company and industry data as well as management theory and quantitative skills in the MBA communication course, faculty responsible for that course provide a realistic view of management communication's range and importance in the corporate world. By relating theoretical concepts and models to actual communication problems, they also gain credibility for management communication as an academic discipline. Finally, linking data, theory, and skills development to crisis communication and issues management structures provides an integrated pedagogical model for teaching management communication to professional students.

Georgetown University
Washington, District of Columbia

Notes


2Carter A. Daniel, Short Business Reports, 2nd ed. (Published by author at Rutgers Graduate School of Management, 1981).


14For a review of rhetorical stances corporations use most often in crisis situations, see "Public Relations and Corporate Advocacy," op. cit.