Organizing The Environment In The Business Communications Course

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The last fifty years of research suggest that regardless of the subject matter taught, learning is most generalizable and is most likely to prove rewarding beyond the classroom if the teacher organizes the learning environment to foster continuity and interaction (Dewey, 1938).

The content of the Business Communications course lends itself well to continuity or generalizability beyond the classroom if the teacher encourages and demonstrates to the students a critical or problem-solving approach to handling the projects or assignments, whether such assignments require the preparation of a questionnaire, a letter, a memorandum, or some type of a report.

A critical thinking or problem-solving methodology is important because it is the kind of thinking that helps an individual think rationally and logically. This type of thinking helps one exercise the judgment and make the decisions which usually prove most productive in the classroom and beyond. Thus, you have the continuity essential for good education (Dewey, 1938).

Since group interaction activities are increasingly being recognized as an important learning tool, such activities should be incorporated into the curriculum wherever feasible. In this environment, the teacher serves more in the role of resource person or adviser than that of lecturer.

For group interaction, the teacher could arrange for most of the assignments to be accomplished by groups of students.

Several groups could elect to prepare a questionnaire and conduct a survey, using the questionnaire as the survey instrument. The group would then analyze the data gathered and present the findings in an oral and/or written report.

Or, several groups might wish to discuss in a panel some principles of effective communications, using transparencies or other visual aids which they have prepared, to illustrate various components, aspects, or forms of business communications.

This activity offers a splendid opportunity for students to examine and analyze the elements or components of a message which could contribute or interfere with its effectiveness.

Where there is group interaction, the teacher cannot help observing that in addition to the content of learning that occurs, the students learn much about human behavior.

For example, students learn who, in their group, can be depended upon to meet their share of the responsibilities, who are the creative ones, who are the slackers, etc. Through interaction activities, students learn how others feel about them. This also contributes to their maturity.

In fact, the insights gained from peer feedback could, in the long run, prove more beneficial than the content absorbed.

While some students feel threatened by interaction activities, most students respond favorably to them.

As a rule, most students say they find the doing of the tasks more fun even if difficult or challenging because the tasks are shared. How the tasks should be shared and who should accomplish which part of the task also becomes an exercise in problem solving. Apparently, such interaction activities with one's peers is stimulating. It seems to make the process of performing the intermediary tasks as positively reinforcing as the reaching of the predetermined goals. But more importantly, interaction activities simulate the world of work where one is expected in the normal course of activities to interact with one's co-workers and to work cooperatively with others in the daily performance of one's job.

Thus, as do the problem solving activities, the interaction activities also provide the continuity considered essential for worthwhile learning (Dewey, 1938).

The fact there is a lack of direct teaching of critical thinking methodology may indicate that while teachers

theoretically approve of this method, few teachers know how this belief may be applied in their own teaching procedures (Aylesworth, Reagan, 1968).

As identified by John Dewey (Dewey, 1933), the critical thinking approach involves:

(1) Identifyting the problem
(2) Establishing the facts
(3) Formulating the hypothesis
(4) Testing the hypothesis
(5) Evaluating the results

These five steps, not necessarily in the order indicated nor in the language stated, lend themselves well to improving the student's skill in thinking clearly and logically as he prepares and writes his messages.

If the student uses the critical thinking approach in writing his messages, he can become more adept at discerning the facts, learning some concepts, and arriving at principles in the cognitive as well as the affective domain. Therefore, the critical thinking approach should not only improve his technical writing skills but it should also increase the writer's sensitivity as to what effect his words may have on the receiver of his message.

By using the critical thinking approach, the writer can more reasonably predict the reader's response to his message and thereby increase the possibility of responsibly satisfying both himself and the receiver of his message, whether the message is a letter, a memo, a report, or some other form of communication.

To develop his critical thinking or problem solving abilities, the student needs to be given many opportunities in and out of class, in individual and in group assignments to:

(1) Demonstrate an ability to identify the problem
(2) Examine the evidence
(3) Look at the issues and arguments objectively
(4) Decide on a strategy to handle the problem which appears logical and fair; and,
(5) Before proceeding with the assignment, test the strategy among his peers or his instructor for possible modification or change in strategy.

Case problems lend themselves well to problem solving or critical thinking activities.

It should be relatively easy to adapt office or management case problems so that it lends itself to analysis as a forerunner to preparing the appropriate written response. Also, students could, with the teacher's guidance develop or create some problematical business situations requiring the preparation of some form of written response.

In the analysis and in the preparation of the required response, the critical thinking approach (Dewey, 1933) could be utilized as a group or class exercise.

If used as a group exercise, the students could be broken into groups of, preferably, five, to examine the facts involved, discuss the several possible strategies one might use to handle the situation, and obtain a consensus as to what strategy would most likely maximize the possibility of responsibly satisfying both the reader and the writer.

As each group discusses the case and the possible strategies for handling the situation, the teacher is available for feedback, suggestions, and guidance, especially where the group appears to be at an impasse, or is not thinking creatively on the possible ways the situation might be handled.

After a reasonable amount of group or class discussion, each student then uses the balance of the class session preparing his own written respons. A student may choose a strategy from the ones discussed which he feels will effectively handle the situation.

Each student then proceeds to write the required message in response to the situation, using his individual writing style.

Of course, the student needs to bear in mind that the message, to be considered effective, must meet the criteria of a well-written message. That is, the message needs to:

(1) sound clear and logical
(2) cover all points adequately
(3) meet the objective of the message
(4) sound courteous even when refusing a request or lodging a complaint
(5) choose words precisely and in the idiom of today so that the message does not sound old-fashioned or pompous
(6) use an appropriate format or structure in which to frame the message

(7) use correct grammar and spelling, so that the message reflects care in its preparation.

As the student participates in the group or class discussion of a problem or case study, he should demonstrate an ability to zero in on the main problem. To do this, he needs practice in separating fact from fiction as he examines the evidence given in the problem.

Also, as the student examines the problem, as a group or individual activity, he must ask himself what information not given or stated can be reasonably assumed or logically substantiated.

In addition, the student, with practice, should be able to arrive at and choose from several possible strategies the one strategy or solution which, by general consensus, is most likely to maximize the possibility of responsibly satisfying both the writer and the reader of the message.

When the analysis of a problem or case study is a group or an entire class activity, all members of the group or the class should be encouraged to enter into a free and open student-dominated discussion as the evidence is examined and the issues, arguments and possible solutions or strategies are analyzed.

If the entire class is involved in this activity, the teacher merely guides the discussion along, summarizing the ideas formulated by the students at several points along the way, while reinforcing clear and logical thinking as it is evidenced, so that all the students feel secure enough to enter into the discussion.

Once it is apparent that all possibilities have been considered and if there is a general consensus on the strategy or strategies that might be used to responsibly satisfy both the sender and the receiver of the message, the students are asked to individually construct their own message.

The above process may be reversed. For example, the students are first asked to construct a message based on the situation and the facts presented and assumed. Then, the class listens to the messages written and discusses or argues the strategy, content, or structure of the messages written by their peers.

The latter approach may be more effectively used toward the end of the Business Communications course.

While open discussion is important in using the problem-solving approach to writing the message, the student gains a great deal in entering into the evaluation of messages written by his peers.

Therefore, once the message has been written by the students, preferably in class, the papers are collected and distributed, so that each student, as a takehome assignment, writes a written evaluation or critique of a message written by his peer.

By involving the student in the evaluation activities, the student becomes more sensitive to his own as well as the thought processes and writing efforts of his peers.

Also, by involving the student in the evaluation of his peers, the teacher is allowing the student to assume the teaching role. This opportunity to play the role of teacher is considered the key to learning (Bruner, 1972).

As teacher, the student sharpens and accelerates his ability to objectively analyze and criticize the messages written by his peers and to appreciate his peers' assessments of his own papers.

So that the students more objectively evaluate their peers, the students should be provided with a checklist of criteria which serves as guidelines for evaluating the quality or effectiveness of the message.

Criteria which I have developed to help assess the content and structure of the message include clarity, coherence, consistency, completeness, and correctness. These criteria are defined as follows:

1. Clarity

   A. The purpose of message is stated clearly and directly though tactfully.

   B. The information is accurate.

   C. Statements are specific and often include concrete illustrations, examples, factual data, quotations or statements from experts in the field to support or clarify ideas.

2. Coherence

   A. The message makes sense.

   B. The message sounds reasonable.

   C. There is an apparent, logical, sequential development of ideas; or, one idea appears to lead logically to the next idea and to a logical assumption or conclusion.

3. Consistency

   A. There is a tactful, responsible, sincere, natural and appropriate tone throughout the message.

   B. The action and tone are likely to maximize the possibilities of responsibly satisfying both the reader and the writer.

   C. It is written with a sensitivity to the reader's point of view and in a way which will most likely arouse the desired response in the reader.

4. Completeness

   A. The letter or report covers all essential points adequately.

   B. It avoids vagueness by making specific rather than general statements and by making sure that all statements introduced are supported with the necessary explanations or illustrations to avoid any misunderstanding of what is said.

5. Correctness

   A. The structure of the communication is consistent in following the outlines or the table of contents, or the plan for the message presentation.

   B. The format, style, or structure of the message chosen is appropriate.

   C. The communication shows that care has been

   exercised in its preparation.

   D. The communication presents a neat businesslike appearance.

   E. The communication shows that good basic language technicalities have been observed as to spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure.

   F. The communication shows that there is good transition and continuity between sentences and paragraphs, and, that the words have been carefully chosen to sound as natural as in conversation. Also, that words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs have been combined into a unit of writing which sounds human, believable, lively and connected making it something which is easy as well as interesting to read.

When the evaluated messages are returned the messages and their evaluations are reviewed by the class which has been broken up into groups of five students.

Again the peer group expresses its opinion; this time on both the quality of the message and the evaluation. The message and the evaluation is then returned to the writer of the message.

The writer can agree or disagree with his peer's evaluation of the message. In a dispute, the message is brought before the entire class. The message in question can be examined by use of the opaque projector. The darkened room encourages some of the more reticent students to orally express their opinions.

The class usually resolves the argument or discussion. The teacher acts as a resource person and guide and only as a Supreme Court Justice when the dispute or discussion reaches an impasse.

In summary, if the teacher will organize the classroom activities to include open classroom discussion and other types of group activities as well as a critical thinking or problem-solving approach in the preparation of the communication assignments, the continuity and interaction considered essential for worthwhile education will be provided (Dewey, 1938).

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Visiting The Robert Bly's At Odin House, Madison, Minnesota

The big man comes down from upstairs with the gun
and the barrel is smoking furiously.

Alarm. There is real
alarm in us. The wife.
Only the wife can
speak.

"Robert?"

The reply struts out of his mouth.

"A sonneteer. I got another one."

He sits down,
satisfied.

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A Comprehensive Approach To Remedial Reading And Writing Problems

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In The Anatomy of College English Thomas H. Wilcox joined other administrators of English departments in expressing a pessimistic view of remedial English programs. He describes these courses as an assortment of stopgap measures, lacking "intellectual substance." He notes that few English faculty willingly teach such classes. Further, he questions the degree to which the objectives of such classes are realized. A few bleak statistics are cited; for example, less than five per cent of the remedial English students at one state university have ultimately received a degree.[1]

Perhaps students who arrive on campus without the necessary skills for doing academic work are unable to bridge this gap; it may well be that children must develop their verbal skills at certain stages of life if they are ever to develop them fully. In his renowned call for discontinuing traditional freshman English courses, Warner Rice argued, "If good habits of reading, writing, and speaking have not been inculcated before the student is of college age, it is unlikely that he will be greatly benefitted by two semesters of Freshman English."[2]

On the other hand, one might argue that these skills can indeed be acquired in the late teen years or even later and that the high rate of attrition of high-risk students may be an indication of ineffective instruction. This problem is related to the larger question of the effectiveness of instruction in college composition generally. Rice, for example, questioned whether the traditional college composition class could be justified.[3] The late Francis Christensen observed that as teachers of English "we do not really teach our captive charges to