Classroom to Workplace: Communication Tools and Technology

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Abstract- This article discusses how collaborations between business faculty and industry representatives focusing on redesigning business communication content and assignments offer fresh approaches to using communication tools and technologies. The objective of this pilot study was to identify where gaps exist in the expected technology skills of business majors as identified by industry representatives. The results offer insight into stakeholders’ perceptions and pedagogical applications.

Index Terms- business communication, business faculty and industry collaboration, pedagogy, workplace technology

I. INTRODUCTION

Emerging communication tools and technologies provide opportunities for developing course content that equips business majors with industry expected skills. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International), an accreditation organization for business programs recommends that business programs use effective pedagogies inclusive of active learning and technology [1]. A major challenge to this recommendation is how to best incorporate emerging educational technology such as a Learning Management System (LMS), into course content and activities. LMS is commonly defined as a software that allows the management and delivery of learning content and resources. Some examples include Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas [2], [3].

A noticeable theme in related literature about the mentioned challenge above suggests there is limited consensus about LMSs among decision-makers at higher education institutions and learning technology companies. There are various issues such as current and future types of LMSs, features, functions and users' satisfaction [4], [2], [5], [3], [6], [7]. One key issue stems from the notion some LMSs have limited functions which might not support a variety of pedagogical approaches used within higher education institutions [8], [9], [5],[3].

To illustrate the issue, in this case business majors might not be able to experience a reality-based common industry practice of communicating with people around the world. Although business majors will likely experience culturally diverse academic settings, an opportunity to collaborate via communication technologies with a global industry team should develop intercultural communication practices [10], [11]. Industry depends on technology companies to facilitate a variety of global connections via communication technologies designed to access internal and external links such as: web conferences, emails, social networking and videoconferences in order to manage daily operational processes. Most LMSs’ have portal based systems with internal features which do not include options for external and/or global collaborations [4], [5], [3], [12].

Accordingly, literature and accreditation recommendations that focus on bridging the gaps between theory and practice suggest disconnects between how business programs prepare students and what industry expects [13],[14],[1],[15],[16],[17],[18],[19],[20],[21],[22], [23]. For example, the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation has highlighted the need for partnerships between employers and academic institutions, pointing to findings that suggest “While 96 percent of chief academic officers at higher-education institutions say they’re effectively preparing students for work, only 11 percent of business leaders strongly agree, the polling company Gallup found. Thereby, concluding the education system is “failing to keep pace with the changing needs of the economy [24].”

In sum, employers posit that higher education is failing in its role to adequately develop needed skills in students. They point to a need for professors to influence students by promoting the skills businesses are seeking in future employees, e. g. communication, technical, collaboration, ethics and social responsibility, etc., and to help students achieve these skills through course activities [25], [26], [27], [28].

Reviews of additional literature identify significant challenges within academic settings, e.g. discipline-based pedagogical differences, changes in technology, disagreement on curricula and others. All of which detract from instructors’ time to integrate feedback from industry about developing employment skills. Similarly, industry settings experience these challenges, although described from different perspectives ranging from global, domestic, demand side to supply side of the marketplace [29], [30], [31], [18],[20],[32],[33],[34]. In general, these challenges show there is a need to explore the perceptions of decision-makers at higher education institutions and learning technology companies on suitable resources for an academic setting which prepares business majors for the global workplace.

It is plausible to suggest these challenges might impede collaborations between academicians and practitioners in terms of addressing the needs and wants of both stakeholders. Taken together these findings might explain perceived academic gaps in developing business majors’ knowledge and skills expected for employment. As a consequence, business majors are more likely
to have limited knowledge about what industry values, such as, the importance of possessing transferable skills [35],[36], [37], [38], [39], [40]. For example, given technology’s profound impact on skills that employers want from business graduates, prior to graduating, business majors should be able to demonstrate an awareness of paradigm shifts brought about by continuous technological changes [41], [42], [1], [43].

Hence, a reasonable strategic plan should be to adopt an LMS which facilitates via features and functions options that allow adjustments to course content and applications consistent with technological changes. For instance, this might consist of non-technical topics which equip students with skills for communicating across cultures, generations, and other group characteristics inclusive of apps (software applications), i.e. computer programs designed to complete specific functions. In doing so, business majors should be able to contextualize applicable knowledge and apply transferable skills when entering the workplace. Thus, the strategic plan must embrace collaborations between academicians and practitioners to lessen the workplace. Therefore, the strategic plan must embrace applicable knowledge and apply transferable skills when entering the workplace. Thus, the strategic plan must embrace collaborations between academicians and practitioners to lessen the workplace.

The following describes a pilot study designed to identify where gaps exist in the expected technology skills of business majors as identified by industry representatives.

II. RESEARCH ELOBORATIONS

Within the context of bridging the gap between theory and practice, the author, a business professor, audited a core course, Business Communication, to identify usable data which might accommodate adjusting the course and/or specific applications related to emerging communication tools and technologies to address industry expectations. The business communication course serves as a required skill based core course for undergraduate business majors across disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, general business, insurance and risk management, international business, management, management information systems, marketing, and supply chain management). After the audit, invitations were sent to twenty-five industry representatives from various organizations to participate in a round-table discussion about expected knowledge and skills related to communication tools and technologies. All twenty-five industry representatives, each matching majors offered by the college, agreed to participate in the discussion. The discussion was guided by data from the audited which focused on topics and assignments related to paradigm shifts brought about by continuous technological changes.

We discussed the use of LMSs in higher education and challenges associated with support instructional strategies and student learning. Threaded in the discussions was literature related to users; satisfaction which included limited features and functions of LMSs. Selected examples of modules (topics and assignments) customized in an LMS were used to show how students are introduced to discipline-based communication technologies. These modules are designed to help students develop knowledge and skills applicable to a variety of workplace settings. The presentation showed some of the LMS’s limitations with respect to external features and functions. This method allowed industry representatives to view the matter from an academic perspective to determine gaps in preparedness and employability skills. Options were presented that encouraged the need for external industry collaborations to develop course contents inclusive of practicing communication technologies via a reality-based specific workplace setting specific to their discipline (majors).

A key outcome from the discussion was an invitation for business majors to visit the various organizations represented. This pilot agreement allowed industry representatives to showcase via their organizational settings workplace technologies in terms of expected performance applicable to each major. To accommodate this invitation, the author selected a business communication course given its diverse pool of business majors, created discipline-based teams and planned a flipped course design, i.e. “that which is traditionally done in class is now done at home, and that which is traditionally done as homework is now done in class [44]”. This course design encourages student to prepare before coming to class in order to facilitate a variety of high impact in-class activities. With this in mind and the pilot study’s objective, to identify where gaps exist in the expected technology skills of business majors as identified by industry representatives; the author developed and administered a pre-class survey using the survey tool Qualtrics. Students enrolled in the selected course were instructed to complete the survey before class and before reading related course material about the topic.

III. RESULTS

Results from the survey supported industry concerns about business majors’ preparedness in terms of technological readiness for the workplace. Although the sample size (n=40) was small only (3) participants indicated (very satisfied) when asked about perceived satisfaction with knowledge and skills related to discipline-based communication tools and technologies. These findings were discussed in-class to highlight the importance of learning first-hand what kind of communication tools and technology are expected for applicable employment prospects. To illustrate the key findings from the survey, a pre-class reading assignment, [35], about college students’ perceptions of preparedness for careers was used to engage and challenge participants. This set the course for a range of individual and team/work activities. Examples include: evaluating the primary needs of employers to improve employment prospects, conducting research to identify perceived gaps between business majors and industry representatives about expected technology skills, evaluating data sources for business research, drafting/revising legal and ethical messages using communication technology, preparing to present effectively in teams.

The flipped class design and activities allowed participants to prepare and meet with industry representatives for discussions about expected industry standards related to communication tools and technologies. Participants representing eight teams: general business, international business, management, management information systems, marketing, supply chain management and accounting (two teams); reported gaining “reality-based knowledge and practice” from the industry visits. In turn, teams prepared written reports and presentations to demonstrate their understanding of paradigm shifts brought about by continuous
technological changes. Activity takeaways were: participants invited their host industry representative to attend the presentations, each team presented findings about primary apps used by their host industry representative and all teams shared and compiled a summary findings of communication tools and technologies utilized at the various workplaces. A brief description of selected examples follow.

Fishbowl Inventory designed for small to mid-sized companies looking for a complete inventory management system without replacing QuickBooks for Accounting. Many companies using a combination of QuickBooks and Excel have said they need a more robust solution but are not ready for an enterprise-level ERP system [45].

Square Up is an easy to use program for any type of business and increases accessibility between users from different generational backgrounds. It is mainly utilized as a portable payment processing system. Square Up can track inventory, send alerts to circumvent low stock, send electronic purchase receipts via email and generates real time analytical reports [46].

Salesforce is a cloud based tool that helps more than one-hundred thousand customers and two million subscribers worldwide to manage people and processes. An easy-to-use application, Salesforce streamlines all steps of the sales process, including lead management, analytics, and forecasting. This application is utilized in industries such as divisions including Financial Services, Manufacturing, Media, Healthcare, Higher Education, Retail, and Non-profit organizations [47].

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The collaborative approach during all phases of this study seemed to enhance engagement by all participants and at all levels. Participants, internal and external, followed instructions, completed agreed activities and met the pilot study’s objective to identify where gaps exist in the expected technology skills of business majors as identified by industry representatives. It is important to be cognizant that this was a pilot study with a small sample size. However, these findings have a number of theoretical and practical implications, such as: using best practices from industry standards to revise business communication content and applications. As clearly articulated in an archived article retrieved from the accreditation organization AACSB, it appears that industry and academia are in agreement that business programs require dramatic changes to the curriculum that are aligned with the needs of the new global workforce. The case for making business programs more desirable has never been so critical. And, business schools need to quickly get on board with deep changes to their curriculums to avoid further declines [48]. Employers expect new graduates to contribute in meaningful and innovative ways once hired, thus, it seems reasonable for academic programs to make adjustments to accommodate that need [49]. In this case, as suggested technological change demands connections between education and employment. These changes will require continuous skill acquisition for professional relevance [50], [51].

Based on this, a reasonable best practice for academics to consider when assessing LMSs and related technologies might be to focus on options which best support collaborations with industry that accommodates development of twenty-first century skills. The author of this articles recommends two key takeaways from a study, [52], about twenty-first century pedagogies which should help with accommodating and equipping students with competencies and skills.

Teachers must become comfortable with managing new forms of classroom dynamics and supporting multiple teams of students working independently, as they explore and gain new understandings and skills to prepare them for twenty-first century life [52], [53].

Real-world experiences merged with sustained engagement and collaboration offer opportunities for learners to construct and organize knowledge; engage in detailed research, enquiry, writing and analysis; and communicate effectively to audiences [52], [54].

The challenges related to changing communication tools and technology cited above suggest a need to address expected technology skills between academic and industry settings. Results from this pilot study contribute to pedagogies strategies in terms of options for developing and implementing “innovative” business programs, course content and applications. Business majors should be able to transfer meaning from their academic (theory) experiences into professional (practical) experiences required in the workplace. This article underscores the importance of selecting an LMS with options that facilitate reality-based experiences in order to provide business majors with experiences they might encounter in the workplace. Thus, this pilot study was a useful career development activity. Overall, it was mutually beneficial for all participants in providing insight about bridging the gaps between academicians and industry perceptions.

REFERENCES


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