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ART AND SCIENCE OF LEARNING COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Abstract:

In this paper we are trying to ascertain whether Business Communication is more of a science or more of an art so that the learning resources can be designed as per that conclusion and variation. We analyze the general premise that while science aspects provides a context and foundation, but operating in it for optimum results is a skill to be honed and almost reaches the state of art. We also discuss the challenges in imparting Business communication skills by teachers and managers, where their target audience can vary in composition, motivations and backgrounds. We also see how these challenges can be turned into an opportunity for better communication learning environment. As we advance, the argument starts weighing in favour of science as we list out the building blocks and variables of the communication skills as a field, and how a concentrated and focused improvement on each or most of these variables can, to a very high degree of certainty, result in enhanced communication skills of the candidate who can be readied to face 90% of foreseeable situations. However for exceptional skills, the art form has to be resorted to.

Key words: communication skills, business communication, art component, science component, learning communication skills

Introduction

Date: November 10, 1799

Place: Paris

Situation: Napoleon, armless and all alone, surrounded by a troop of enemies

Outcome: Napoleon declared monarch

Yes miracles do happen. In the situation cited above, the cause was effective communication.

When Napoleon was caught defenseless by a troop of enemies, he decided to fall back on his effective communication skills and thundered, “Don’t you recognize your monarch”? They did. For such a language only a monarch would have used. (Pushplata 9)

Communication however is not confined to words; it goes beyond, right into realm of thoughts.

As the great thinker and management guru Peter Ducker said, “The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said”. (4) It is said that a professional spends 90 per cent of his time in speaking, reading, writing and listening. Realizing this, practically all colleges and universities have included Learning of communication skills as a mandatory subject in their curricula. The question however arises, that is that investment in terms of time and resources achieving the desired aim. Questions are often asked about the right way of learning the subject and whether to adopt a structured approach (science) or leave it the ingenuity of the teacher (art). The authors however, have no disagreement and firmly believe that learning communication skills needs both science and art.

The science lays down the foundation and provides a context but operating in this context is an art for optimum results. The science will include a well designed syllabi based on the desired objectives, sequencing of the syllabus to effect a progressive and seamless learning, an examination scheme that not only leads to fair evaluation but also reinforces the learning process. But as the teaching fraternity will vouch that the syllabi and other infrastructure can achieve little until applied skillfully. The heterogeneity in terms of class to class and varying learning capacity of each individual adds to the complexities of learning. There are challenges every day, which, have to be maneuvered skillfully to achieve the desired out come. The word teaching in the title of the subject has been replaced by ‘learning’ because it is our considered opinion that ‘communication skills’ cannot be taught in the conventional sense and a teacher/trainer can at best be a facilitator. Also the word conforms to the contemporary trend of keeping focus on ‘learner centric’ methods.

Learning Communication Skills- The science component

When do we call something a Science ... where input of efforts and resources and their interrelationship can determine to a large extent the expected output? When we talk of Business

communication or communication skills, can we determine a particular extent of improvement in the candidate in a given time frame and with a particular amount of resources allocated to her? If yes, then Business communication qualifies as a science. Otherwise dub it as an art. Whatever component in the overall scenario can be determined by these factors, we can call it the science component in it.

Let us run a check list of input elements for improving communication skills. - Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Accent, Grammar, Tenses, Voice Modulation, Listening skills, Writing skills, Identifying central ideas from a lot of talk, Technical writing and speaking, Small talk in social situations, Presentations style in conference rooms where you are trying to sell a concept, or defending a financial decision, speaking to a large audience while introducing a new product to its target audience, Courtesy, Structured letter writing for different situations – say about 20 situations, Business phrases, Body language control, Meetings organizing – guiding, interrupting and summarizing, Notes taking, Motivating your staff, Reprimanding non performers, Crisis management and the list can go on.

Most of these situations can be prepared for by a candidate to a large extent by working on the above elements- say up to 90%. Unforeseen circumstances also can be prepared against.

One mode may develop better than another in certain directions and will therefore have greater potential for meaning- making or impose further limitations. Different modes represent specific roles in the construction of concepts in the classroom. The specialty of any given mode of communication can make it more or less appropriate for communication in the classroom because, as Lemke (1998) shows:

“We can indicate modulation of speed or size, or complex relations of shape or relative position, far better than we can with words, and we can let that gesture leave a trace and become a visual-graphical representation that will sit still and let us re-examine it at our leisure. (3)”.

The science component can be very well imparted by Teachers and Managers.

What happens to the Art component of it?

Learning Communication Skills- The Art component of it

While all the above can be imparted and most of it can be retained, understood and practiced by the candidates, the time a candidate spends in comprehending and organically evolving to reach

higher understanding, beyond the imparted input, besides some intrinsic qualities present in her in terms of intelligence and motivation to excel will determine the Quality of skills achieved over a period of time. Art status is reached then, which is far higher and further in quality than the commonly discussed and imparted inputs to all and sundry in the same class of learners, However, now the Million dollar question is, can the science components be taught, and can the art component be taught or at least facilitated. Yes, but before that there are certain challenges which are faced by teachers of Communication skills and they need to be sorted out.

Challenges Faced During Learning of Communication Skills

Heterogeneous Class Composition

Most of the CS class sections are formed out of the students from different courses to achieve the usually laid down class strength of 60. At times, the composition mismatch makes learning very complex as examples suitable for one stream may not be understood by students studying a totally different course. There are large scale variations in terms of background (rural/urban), the schooling (English/Hindi medium) and so on. The learning of CS by its nature needs an interactive and peer based learning approach, requiring a measured approach from the facilitator at every step of learning.

Teacher Student Ratio

A class/section strength of 60 as is often the case, amounts to a teacher student ratio of 1:60 that is not a healthy situation for a subject like ‘communication skills’ as it reduces the opportunities for individual attention and meaningful interaction, the very core of CS learning.

Time Constraints

One hour per week is the norm while allocating time for CS classes. In an 18 week semester this leaves about 15 hours discounting for holidays and other events. This leaves little time for activities like debate and quiz competitions, which should otherwise form an integral part of CS learning.

Student Motivation

In addition to the time constraints, wherein, the student- teacher interaction takes place only once a week, the teacher belonging to a different school/department is initially perceived as an outsider. With only one credit at stake, the impact of performance in CS on the overall grading is minimal. The teacher therefore has to be on the lookout for other motivators.

Teacher Expertise

It is a common sight to see a CS faculty walking from a class room of Engineering students to Management and then to the students of Media or Fashion Designing. However, the students do look forward to their CS faculty for guidance before and after the interview, notwithstanding the complexity of the process that demands at least a minimum understanding of the subject.

Facing the Challenges

Most of the challenges discussed above can not only be managed, but also converted into ‘opportunities’ if handled skillfully. The only requirement being that CS faculty should be on look out for appropriate solutions of the problems. There comes the ‘art’ of learning communication skills. Suggested remedial measures corresponding to the challenges stated above are briefly enumerated below.

Begin with the End in Mind

In the highly acclaimed book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen Covey (Franklin Covey Co.), the author illustrates that everything is created twice, meaning that mental creation precedes physical creation. “To Begin with the End in Mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination”. (98) The destination for a student in a professional course would invariably be clearing the job interview(s) and in some cases getting admission for higher education and that too needs going through an interview process. A well designed syllabi would help in enhancing the ‘Employability Skills’ of students after building strong foundation through learning of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing skills, the four pillars of communication. Since attaining the desired ‘employability’ levels is a long drawn process, it is imperative that a “Mission Statement” is written right at the beginning of a course that provides a direction at every stage. For example, the mission statement for the MBA students of Batch 2017-19 batches reads like this: “To be Corporate Ready by December 31, 2018”. The interpretation of ‘corporate readiness’ is that the students are expected to be fully prepared for the interview by this time and ready to join in case the offer comes. The path to achieve this mission is through the semester wise progressive courses a student is required to study.

Heterogeneous Composition- A well thought of ‘mix’ is an asset rather than a liability. For example a section comprising of MBA (Banking& Finance), MA (Economics) and M.Com will provide the kind of peer learning, unimaginable in a ‘pure’ section. Similarly, students of Marketing combined with International Business can learn from each other. As regards, students at different levels of ‘communication skills’, through small group activities or a ‘buddy’ system, the weak students can be brought up.

Teacher Student Ratio- Big numbers definitely deter interactive sessions as activities are hard to manage. However, the revolutionary developments in IT offer a number of opportunities and a part of learning can take place through technology. Blended learning (also called hybrid learning and mixed-mode learning) is one such example that combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods.

Time Constraints- One hour per week for CS classes as is the norm doesn't permit covering everything in the class a teacher would want to. First step would be to prioritize at every level. In The 7 Habits, the author recommends 'boulders first' approach (rather than pebbles or sand), wherein, the boulder has been used as a metaphor to express more important things. This also corresponds to the 80/20 Rule or The Pareto principle that states that, "80% of the results come out from 20% of the activities". (Covey 156) It is a common rule of thumb in business; e.g., "80% of your sales come from 20% of your clients." In CS focusing on those 20 percent areas will yield greater dividends. To take an example of e-mail writing, it's a common experience that drafting a good subject line is the key to effectiveness. Dr Alex says in this regard "Your email subject heading is one of the first things that your reader will see. Make it count." (103) As regards the extracurricular activities, the aim should be to include one event per semester, which is closest to the course. For example, a Debate will be a natural extension of the 'Presentation Skills' but a book reading club will be a better choice during the study of Reading & Comprehension. Also activities like 'role play' and 'vocabulary quiz' are great motivators.

Student Motivation

Case study method has been found to be effective in generating interest but keeping in mind the time constraints, one can try to achieve the same results through a vignette or even a human story. Continuous evaluation of the students is another good motivator, and it's a good practice to evaluate students at the beginning of the course and regularly monitor their progress towards the mission as discussed earlier.

Teacher Expertise

Although it is not practical for a faculty to have the domain knowledge of each and every subject, yet he/she should try to acquire a basic understanding of the related competencies. The HOD/ Coordinator allocating the classes should keep in mind the interests of the concerned faculty and should endeavor to provide an opportunity for stable relationship by keeping rotation to the bare minimum.

Be Patient

Remember the case of the 'Chinese Bamboo Tree'. After the seed for this amazing tree is planted, you see nothing for four years except for a tiny shoot coming out of a bulb. During those four years, all the growth is underground. But then in the fifth year the Chinese bamboo tree grows up to eighty feet! Attaining the desired level of 'employability skills' is like the Chinese bamboo tree. You work and you invest time and effort, sometimes you don't see improvement in some students. But if you are patient and keep working on improving listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of students, the synergy would work and that "fifth year: will come. Also, as Goethe said, "Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can be, and he will become as he can and should be" (Covey 146).

Once these issues are addressed, under a structured teaching program, most of the candidates and learners can cross a certain desired level of skills, while also throwing up certain geniuses who really up the ante and wow the world with their "Art form status" communication skills.

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