Getting Active Learning Going: 
Design and Practice Issues

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ABSTRACT
This paper reports on course design and implementation issues arising in the development and teaching of a new unit in professional communication. The program in which the unit is offered is itself new: an undergraduate major in public relations. The paper is based on the outcomes of collaboration between the teaching academic and his educational development advisor. It shows that while there were some glitches, largely at the beginning of teaching, students responded well to active learning opportunities – and particularly well when given the chance to do peer assessment.

INTRODUCTION
LPR100 Professional Communication Practice is a new unit in 2007. It is a fairly gentle introduction to business communication broadly defined – but one that has a larger purpose. As a foundation component of the public relations major, it aims to introduce students to some key PR concepts in preparation for later, more detailed study. Public relations as a form of professional communication is introduced against a backdrop of other business communication activities that may form part of a PR practitioner’s work, such as researching, writing and presenting information. These topics are themes that thread throughout the course. They are discussed both as generic business communication practices and as public relations practices.

The academic responsible (Chris) had worked with the educational development advisor (Debbi) before. It was decided to collaborate on structuring the course, especially the assessable work. The development of a completely new unit was an excellent opportunity to design a curriculum from the ground up, and – it was hoped -- a chance to distinguish the course taught at Swinburne University from similar courses taught at other Australian institutions. Both Chris and Debbi were committed to designing a course that was highly engaging and motivating for students (Chickering & Gamson 1987), with activities and assessment tasks aligned closely with the learning objectives (Biggs, 2003) and with Swinburne’s emphasis on career-oriented learning outcomes.

THE NEW UNIT - PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

The underlying philosophy when designing this unit was to ensure alignment with the Swinburne University focus on career-orientated learning and real world application, by designing activities and assessments that would give students opportunities to develop and practice their professional communication skills.
LPR100 is loosely based on an existing unit (taught by another faculty at our Hawthorn campus), designed to prepare students for professional communication practice, but substantial changes have been made to the content and to the assessment strategies used. The new unit is designed to lead into further studies, particularly in Public Relations (PR), so components specific to the PR discipline have been incorporated as ‘tasters’ of PR concepts.

Development of LPR100 began with writing clear Learning Objectives, not just for the unit as a whole, but also for each of the weekly topics. An example of weekly learning objectives is below:

\[
\text{At the end of the Topic Five, you should be able to}
\]

1. Describe two ways of researching an audience’s existing level of knowledge of a subject, their opinions about it, the ways members receive information and how best to recruit that knowledge to the talk of designing effective professional communication.

2. Discuss how to search for and evaluate information on the Internet and in the library, especially in electronic databases accessed through the library catalogue

3. Explain the three main approaches to considering ethical questions, and their relevance to professional communication

Clearly identifying objectives for each week meant that it was relatively easy to then prepare a lecture and tutorial activities which would help students achieve those objectives. This process also meant that activities and assessment tasks were closely aligned with the overall learning objectives (Biggs, 2003).

The philosophy of fostering active student engagement begins with the lectures. All lectures include examples from youth culture and from topical issues. Lectures include interactive discussions around the weekly topic rather than relying on the traditional didactic approach. They employ a variety of media in the delivery. For example, the lecture is usually based on a PowerPoint presentation, but incorporating liberal use of images (photos, brand logos etc) and video clips to illustrate points and act as triggers for discussions. Students are encouraged by the lecturer to discuss and debate the issues raised.

Tutorial sessions are similarly interactive, and again, use a variety of media. Since students taking LPR100 are mostly in their first year at university, tutorial classes are quite structured, especially early in semester. Students are provided with a printed list of questions or discussion points, some of which are answered individually, some in pairs, and others which require group contributions.

The student handout also includes details of the criteria by which the tutors will assess the students’ participation that week. This allows the teaching staff to convey their expectations of the level of contribution required to gain full marks, and ensures transparency of the marking process. A similar marking strategy was also used with the major assessment items.
All assessment is conducted during the teaching term – there is no final exam for LPR 100. The breakdown of assessment is:

**Table 1: Assessment Breakdown**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentation</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Personal choice of subject matter</td>
<td>Presented weeks 6-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written report</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Professional report on given topic</td>
<td>Due Week 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutorial activities,</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Weekly activities related to lecture topics</td>
<td>3% most weeks, 6% capstone test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including capstone test in week 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The major assessment activities were designed to give students a chance to practice in the key areas of professional communication: oral presentations, report writing, and researching information. For each of these assessment tasks, details of the marking criteria were made available to students prior to handing in their work, again with the intention of conveying the expectations of the standard expected and to ensure students understood how their work would be graded (Moskel, 2000).

For the oral presentations, students were required to deliver a brief talk (on a topic of their choice) to their fellow students. They were also required to provide feedback to their peers, in the form of a constructive critique. This particular activity (both the actual presentation and the critique) was very popular with students.

**EVALUATION**

**Feedback from students**

During the first delivery of LPR100, a small evaluation project was undertaken, in an attempt to get feedback from students on the design of the unit and on how the unit was meeting their needs. Paper-based questionnaires were handed out during scheduled tutorial sessions in Week 11 of the semester. Completion of the questionnaires was voluntary, and completely anonymous. A total of 97 questionnaires were returned, from an enrolment of 197, giving a response rate of 49%.

Students were generally satisfied with the overall unit, rating their satisfaction as 4.13 (on a scale of 1-5), and with 87.6% of students being satisfied or highly satisfied. No student was highly dissatisfied with the unit.

Less than 20% of students reported that they attend all lectures, and a disappointing 16.5% of students reported that they attend no lectures at all. Those who did choose to comment on the lectures found them enjoyable, and particularly appreciated the involvement of students in the lecture. Less than half the students accessed any of the Lectopia (online lecture) recordings, but those who did, enjoyed being able to replay these on their iPod. It was interesting to note that those who did access Lectopia claimed that they then downloaded some or all of the recordings.

Students rated the usefulness of the tutorial activities at 4.22 (on a scale of 1-5), with 89.7% rating these as Useful or Highly Useful.

Students enjoyed the tutorial activities, with many students nominating all activities as good, rather than nominating specific favourite exercises. Where specific activities or aspects were
identified, students particularly enjoyed group discussions and the opportunity to interact with their peers, and the oral presentation was surprisingly popular. Students also appreciated the writing skills exercises. When asked to nominate the least useful tutorial activities a third of students responded that all activities were useful, and no activity rated more than 9 responses.

Suggestions for additional tutorial activities included more oral presentations (both more opportunity to practice their own presentations and more experience at critiquing others' presentations), and more group discussion activities. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated the marking rubric supplied with the weekly worksheets, and two thirds of students have consulted these when preparing their work for submission.

Most students felt they had sufficient opportunity and encouragement to explore areas of interest further although some students complained that their tutorial class was too large, and there was not enough time for every individual to participate in class discussion. It was heartening to see that most students recognised the different forms in which they received feedback—many students listed the different feedback they had received. Many also mentioned the quality of the feedback, as being constructive & positive, and helping to motivate them to improve their work. Overwhelmingly, students appreciated the assessment strategies, and loved the fact that there was no exam. The assessment tasks appear to be well spaced out, with plenty of time to complete each task. The only complaint was that the oral presentations took longer than expected, so cut into the preparation time (in class) for the written report.

When asked what they enjoyed most about the unit, students nominated a range of aspects and activities. By far, the most popular aspect was the tutorial activities (either as a whole or specific activities), with group discussions being the activity most singled out. Students enjoyed the interaction with their peers, and the chance to voice their own opinion. As mentioned earlier, the oral presentations were also popular, and students claimed they enjoyed the assignments. Several students remarked on the positive and inviting atmosphere in classes—both in the tutorials and lectures.

When asked for additional suggestions for improving LPR100, most students wanted it left as it is, with many students nominating this as their favourite subject. Changes suggested included improving the organisation (including around the oral presentations) and making attendance compulsory for all students.

Feedback from staff

As part of this evaluation project, a focus group discussion with the teaching team was conducted in July 2007. The purpose was to revisit the original objectives of the unit development, discussing where these objectives were achieved, where we could have done better, and deciding on what actions were needed to improve the unit for the next delivery in 2008.

Tutors stressed that overall, their feedback was very positive. The content of the unit was good, the structure worked well, and they found the unit fun to teach. The lecture notes were comprehensive, including thought provoking questions rather than slabs of information, opening up avenues of enquiry. The notes gave the tutors scope and room to focus on interesting topics, depending on their own experience and on the interest of their students.
The activities in the tutorial sessions were popular, but requiring students to hand in the sheet with their answers each week became problematic. Administration associated with the tutorial sheets fell behind over the course of the semester, mostly due to the time taken to upload marks to the Blackboard site. Additional problems were caused when students handed in worksheets many weeks after the tutorial session (whether or not they attended the class), so the marks did not end up a reflection of ‘attendance & participation’ as claimed.

Also, the requirement for students to write down and submit their responses often disrupted active discussions, and ended up being counter-productive.

The original objective of the tutorial sheets was to create a means of providing feedback to students each week, but tutors are doing this verbally in the class anyway. In future, we will remove the requirement for students to hand their work in each week, and ask tutors to assign the marks immediately and to enter these marks into the BlackBoard site.

Students chose their own topic for their oral presentations, which the staff thought worked well. Selecting a topic meant students could present on something they were familiar with (increasing their confidence), and removed the focus of the assessment away from the content. We should stress more that they are welcome to use different aids in their presentations – not all PowerPoint slides (some students did this brilliantly this year).

The peer-assessment component of the oral presentations appears to have worked particularly well. It forced students in the audience to focus during their colleague’s presentation. Feedback was mostly positive, and was well done by students – they used direct language, but all criticisms were delivered constructively. Tutors noticed that criticisms from students aligned well with feedback from tutors, so the message to the presenter was reinforced, and the overall impression was that students’ critical analysis skills were improved.

The main problem with the oral presentations was that for most tutorial classes, it took three weeks to get through all the presentations, instead of the planned two weeks, which then disrupted the planned activities for the following weeks. This was due to the unexpected large number of students in some tutorials (over 40 in one class). (One tutorial group had many fewer students, so finished in two weeks, which meant that class was then out of sync with the other sessions). We will follow up to ensure that this does not occur next year, and will also attempt to make more timeslots available for the oral presentations.

The assessment rubrics were useful for first-time tutors, but with some experience, it was thought that some key areas were not sufficiently weighted. These will be edited to include several suggestions raised by tutors.

The online capstone test caused some technical problems for some students who were completing the test on older computers at home. If we run online tests again, we will run a practice test beforehand, allowing students time to sort out the technical problems.

The general standard of writing from the students was quite poor, and would not be acceptable in a professional setting. We need to stress this with students.
CONCLUSIONS

The feedback from both students and staff has indicated that both groups appreciate the high level of active learning opportunities in this unit. The tutorial activities and the oral presentation were particularly popular with students, and staff found they enjoyed teaching the unit.

Students and teaching staff both raised some problems with organisation of the unit, mostly around administrative issues, which is not surprising, given that this is a new unit and with a very large number of students enrolled. Several suggestions for improving the organisation and management have been raised, which should improve the situation for next year.

REFERENCES


[Accessed August 2007 http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=3 ]