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A Contemporary Simulation Infused in the Business Communication Curriculum: A Case Study

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Abstract

This research examines students' reactions to a contemporary simulation infused in the business communication curriculum. Results show that students indicated the experience helped them learn how to work better as a team, how to maintain composure, how the business world works, and how to improve their communication. Students also verified the validity of the simulation, stating that it prepared them for the business world by providing them with a challenging yet positive experience to demonstrate learned business communication principles. Details about the pedagogical framework of the business communication simulation and possible explanations and implications behind the findings are discussed.

Keywords

case studies, business communication, collaborative learning, business communication instruction, crisis communication, nonverbal communication, intercultural communication, stakeholder communication, mediated communication, negotiation, interpersonal communication

Finding a way to apply theoretical concepts to real-world situations via an interactive, experiential learning experience for students is a challenge academics face. With business communication having such a practical focus by nature, it is critical for students to apply business communication concepts to effectively learn these skills. For that

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reason, we designed, developed, and implemented a business communication simulation, with a simulation defined as "a sequential decision-making exercise structured around a model of a business operation in which participants assume the role of managing the simulated operation" (Greenlaw, Lowell, & Rawdon, 1962, p. 5).

Previous research suggests that simulations may yield a number of pedagogical benefits including cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic engagement (Crookall & Thorngate, 2009; Hunt, 2003; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Russ, 2007, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). When infused into the business communication curriculum, simulations can provide students with the opportunity to explore how they might manage different organizational communication problems. Simulations allow students to make mistakes without having to live with any real-world consequences. As Hildebrand (1997) notes, "simulations give students a chance to participate actively in their own learning" (p. 96). Research also highlights several ways simulations can be used to teach business communication topics, including helping students learn to communicate: (a) to divergent stakeholders, (b) across cultural boundaries, as well as (c) through synchronous and asynchronous mediated technologies (Hildebrand, 1997; Hugenberg, 1992; Jameson, 1993; Saunders, 1997). Thus, we were compelled to incorporate a simulation into our business communication curriculum.

Although a small body of scholarship (e.g., Ackley & Greer, 1984; Greenlaw et al., 1962; Hildebrand, 1997; Melrose & Melrose, 1987; Stull & Baired, 1993) highlights potential ways to use a business communication simulation (BCS), very little is known about how current college students react to this unconventional instructional methodology. Therefore, this case study serves as a preliminary step in addressing that gap. This article is divided into two parts. Part 1 describes the design and implementation of the contemporary BCS. Part 2 examines the students' responses to the debriefing mechanisms we developed for the contemporary BCS, including students' learning outcomes, anticipated future actions, and perceptions of the validity of the BCS in relation to the realities of the business world. In discussing the results from our analysis of students' responses, we highlight possible explanations and implications. We also provide potential directions for future research.

Part 1: Pedagogical Framework of the BCS

Our BCS (approximately 3 hours in length) was designed as a comprehensive, global day-in-the-life facsimile of a contemporary organization. During the simulation, students stepped into the shoes of senior executives of a *Fortune* 500 company of their choice and faced real-world business challenges requiring them to demonstrate effective communication skills in real time and under substantial time pressure. The simulation was designed as a dynamic and interactive communication "obstacle course" of sorts, challenging students to apply the core academic concepts and theories they learned about business communication. The objective of the BCS was to help students decipher the difference between effective and ineffective communication behaviors as demonstrated in a realistic contemporary organizational setting. By participating in the BCS, we hoped students would obtain a real-time snapshot of how they might perform in a fast-paced and stressful business environment.

Our original intent was not to design a BCS. Instead, we hoped to find an effective, extensively tested off-the-shelf BCS ready for use in our classroom. We conducted a review of previously published BCSs (see Ackley & Greer, 1984; Hugenberg, Owens, & Robinson, 1988; Melrose & Melrose, 1987; Stull & Baired, 1993). After a careful review, we concluded that all existing BCSs were egregiously outdated. The most recent BCS was published almost two decades ago; of course, organizational dynamics and technologies have since changed dramatically. Given this significant limitation, we decided to develop a new, contemporary BCS, one that dramatizes the sophisticated challenges, trends, and technologies that employees in the 21st century organization actually face.

Team Selection Process

Before the BCS, students divided themselves into small teams (approximately six students per team). All teams were selected several weeks before the event. We wanted to model the hierarchal selection process used by most *Fortune* 500 organizations, so we asked the students with the highest grades in the course to serve as team captains. We instructed the captains to decide how they wanted to select their teams. Behind closed doors, the captains opted for a draft selection process where each selected a student from the candidate pool one at a time until the pool was exhausted.

Company Selection and Research Process

Approximately 3 weeks before the BCS, each team was instructed to select a company that they would focus on during the simulation. Teams were informed that they could only choose a *Fortune* 500 company because the BCS was strategically designed to relate to the operational structure of a large for-profit company, but was not generic enough to relate to diverse structures used by other organizational types (e.g., nonprofits and service institutions). Sample companies selected by past teams included Coca-Cola, Google, Kellogg, McDonald's, Nike, Proctor & Gamble, and Wal-Mart Stores. About a week before the BCS, teams were instructed to submit a portfolio with the following information: (a) their selected company's mission, vision, values, and objectives; (b) their selected company's industry, customers, products, and size; (c) their selected company's financial performance during the past 10 years; and (d) executive summaries of six recent industry articles about their company. Teams were not allowed to look at their portfolios during the BCS, as we wanted them to have a basic understanding of their selected organizations prior to participating in the simulation.

Format of the BCS

All teams completed the BCS simultaneously in a large conference room; however, each team sat at a different table and completed the experience independently. In terms of personnel required to conduct the simulation, the BCS required a significant investment. A facilitator was assigned to each table (thus, one facilitator for every team of six students). We also found it helpful to have a proctor supervise the groups, which

ensured that no team was running ahead of or behind schedule. Thus, to replicate this BCS, one facilitator is required for every team of five to six students, and one to two proctors are needed to answer student and facilitator questions during the BCS. In total, we had 10 groups of students with 12 additional personnel to facilitate the BCS: 10 facilitators and 2 proctors.

BCS Facilitators. We recruited professionals from the communications industry, faculty members who taught related courses, and administrators from the business school to serve as BCS facilitators. Prior to the BCS, every prospective facilitator completed an extensive train-the-trainer certification program. The certification process involved two steps: (a) prospective facilitators completed the BCS as a participant so they would have a firsthand account of what students might feel during the program; and (b) prospective facilitators practiced facilitating the BCS with a group of "mock" participants while being supervised by the lead certification instructor who provided reinforcing and corrective feedback to each facilitator candidate.

Throughout the simulation, facilitators followed prepared instructions to set up various communication challenges and provide real-time feedback about students' communication strengths and improvement opportunities. Facilitators received criteria for providing this feedback, such as evaluating the team's final solution to a problem, as well as their work processes and communication with one another in reaching that solution. At a few points in the simulation, facilitators also role-played scenarios with the students. Again, facilitators received specific instructions for conducting these role-plays, including specific behaviors they should exhibit and a list of talking points.

BCS Modules. The simulation included a series of eight modules, each designed to test students' business communication acumen under tough circumstances. Students completed all eight modules during the 3-hour BCS. The topics addressed in the modules included interviewing, negotiation, intercultural communication, stakeholder communication, crisis communication, mediated communication, interpersonal communication, and feedback mechanisms. These topics were validated using findings from recent audits of business communication courses. We also solicited input from a sample of instructors currently teaching business communication, seasoned simulation designers, and communication executives to confirm that the topics effectively reflected contemporary business communication issues.

The following provides a high-level description of each module and sample criteria the facilitators used to evaluate the students' performances and provide reinforcing and/or corrective feedback.

- *Module 1—Opening: Impromptu Press Interview*. In this module, students gave impromptu answers to popular press interview questions. Sample questions included the following: "Financially speaking, how is your company doing?" "Who is your company's biggest competitor and why?" Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to each team member about his/her

ability to give succinct and thoughtful responses, exhibit strong business acumen, and demonstrate poise and confidence.

- *Module 2—Negotiation Communication.* During this module, students conducted a negotiation with their company's biggest supplier who threatened to drastically increase prices. Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to the entire team about their collective ability to foster a collaborative approach, clearly articulate needs and goals, and listen actively to opposing viewpoints.
- *Module 3—Intercultural Communication*. In this module, students participated in a competitive group interview designed to select the best candidate to lead the company's international expansion. Students were required to demonstrate cultural sensitivity by displaying behavioral norms associated with a fictitious country. Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to each team member about his/her ability to avoid negative nonverbal and verbal reactions to diverse customs, adapt to diverse cultures with ease, and avoid violating cross-cultural norms.
- *Module 4—Stakeholder Communication*. During this module, students were informed about a fictitious lawsuit being filed against their company. Then, the students worked as a team to conduct a stakeholder analysis by identifying (a) key stakeholder groups who need to know about the pending lawsuit, (b) what each group needs to know about the case, and (c) best methods for communicating with each group. Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to their entire team about their collective ability to identify key stakeholder groups, tailor messages for each group, and address each group's unique needs, concerns, and interests.
- *Module 5—Crisis Communication*. In this module, students participated in a combative interview with a CNN reporter about recent accusations that the company's CEO committed insider trading. Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to each team member about his/her ability to give direct and straightforward answers, exhibit a transparent and trustworthy demeanor, and respond factually versus emotionally.
- *Module 6—Mediated Communication.* During this module, students condensed a series of complex memos to post on the company's Twitter feed. For example, students were instructed to compose Twitter messages to communicate updates about the following challenges: a class action lawsuit is being filed against the company, the company's website was hacked by an unknown source, and the company's CEO was being fired. Using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to their entire team about their collective ability to compose clear and concise messages, analyze readers' perspectives and adapt messages accordingly, as well as preserve the organization's credibility by communicating professionally.
- *Module 7—Interpersonal Communication.* In this module, students conducted an on-the-spot appraisal of one of their teammate's effective and ineffective communication behaviors as displayed during the simulation. Students were

asked to share the feedback with the entire team. Then, using prepared evaluation criteria, facilitators gave feedback to each team member about his/her ability to give clear, specific, and actionable feedback; frame feedback in a constructive and motivating manner; as well as receive feedback openly and graciously.

- *Module 8—Debrief.* In this module, to help students unpack their learning, we developed a bimodal debriefing process: oral and written. As the last module in the simulation, facilitators conducted an in-depth debriefing discussion with their assigned teams to reflect on the simulation, evaluate what the students learned, and help them develop an action plan for enhancing their communication effectiveness. Sample discussion questions included the following: What was the most/least valuable experience during this simulation? What did you learn during this simulation that you did not know before? How does this simulation differ from traditional school exams and which do you prefer? What will you do differently in the future based on what you learned? Students also wrote written responses to these questions at the end of the BCS.

What makes this module bimodal is that after the simulation, students completed the written debrief where they critically analyzed their performance during the simulation via a written report that answered the following questions in the days following the BCS: (a) What was effective about your performance during the simulation? (b) What was ineffective about your performance during the simulation? (c) What will you do differently if you face the simulation's challenges in the future? (d) In analyzing your communication behaviors during the simulation, what will you start/stop/continue doing to ensure your future success? Following the lead of previous scholars (Lederman, 1984; Petranek, 1992, 2000), we included this written debrief to help students practice and refine their writing skills and also to give them necessary time to process their observations, experiences, and emotions. Our observations confirmed that this additional "think time" allowed students to analyze their learning outcomes much more objectively and from a deeper, critical, and theoretical perspective.

Finally, at the start of most of the modules (except those requiring impromptu responses), students were given a brief amount of time to prepare (e.g., formulate their responses and/or practice their delivery). This preparation time lasted for 5 minutes. After this preparation time, each of the eight modules lasted approximately 15 minutes, followed by a 5-minute debriefing from the facilitator. We enforced very strict time limits since we wanted to foster a sense of urgency and intensity during the BCS. The quick pace of the BCS forced students to demonstrate effective time management skills, analyze communication problems efficiently, make business decisions on the spot, and collaborate strategically and resourcefully.

Part 2: Assessing Students' Reactions to the BCS

Part 2 of our research study sought to assess what students learned by participating in the contemporary BCS, what future actions they would do differently, and their

perceptions of the validity of the BCS and its relation to the actual business world. The following describes the research process we used to capture and analyze students' responses to the BCS.

Participants

The students who helped us pilot the BCS were junior-level business majors ($N = 51$) at a small Northeastern university with an average age of 20 years ($SD = 0.45$). Of the participants, 30 were male and 21 were female. All together, students averaged 3.75 years of work experience ($SD = 1.74$) with a range from 0 to 8 years. Finance ($n = 25$) was listed as the most desirable career, with marketing ($n = 12$) and accounting ($n = 10$) following second and third, respectively. The other four students reported other career plans such as law and real estate.

Data Collection

To assess the learning outcomes resulting from the contemporary BCS, we asked students to complete a series of debriefing mechanisms including an immediate post-simulation questionnaire and a written assignment that prompted students to assess their learning outcomes from the BCS after the simulation occurred. Both debriefing mechanisms were open-ended to afford students the freedom to convey their experiences and views in a detailed and reflective manner (Oppenheim, 1992; Yin, 2003).

To aid analysis of data, all written debrief responses were subsequently transcribed, so that we had typed versions of this data to code using NVivo, software designed to track and code qualitative research. The researchers then proofread and annotated the typed transcriptions. The students' written reports were submitted via MS Word documents attached to an email, so there was no need to transcribe the data that were already typed. These documents were also subsequently annotated by the researchers. We imported both sets of transcripts (e.g., our typed transcript of students' debrief responses and students' typed written reports) and field notes into NVivo for analysis and grouped the data by debrief response versus written report.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on open coding and axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of the participants' written responses in the debriefing and written report. These provided a list of "intellectual bins" or "seed categories" to structure the data collection and the open coding stage of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1999, p. 18). They provided the initial categories for the assessment of student learning outcomes—things they would do differently and their perceptions of how the BCS relates to the business world. Three independent, trained coders unaware of the research purpose coded whether these initial categories were present or absent in the student responses. Two coders were used for determining agreement and Cohen's κ, with the third coder settling disputes between mismatched codes so that a master code was created with all codes matching.

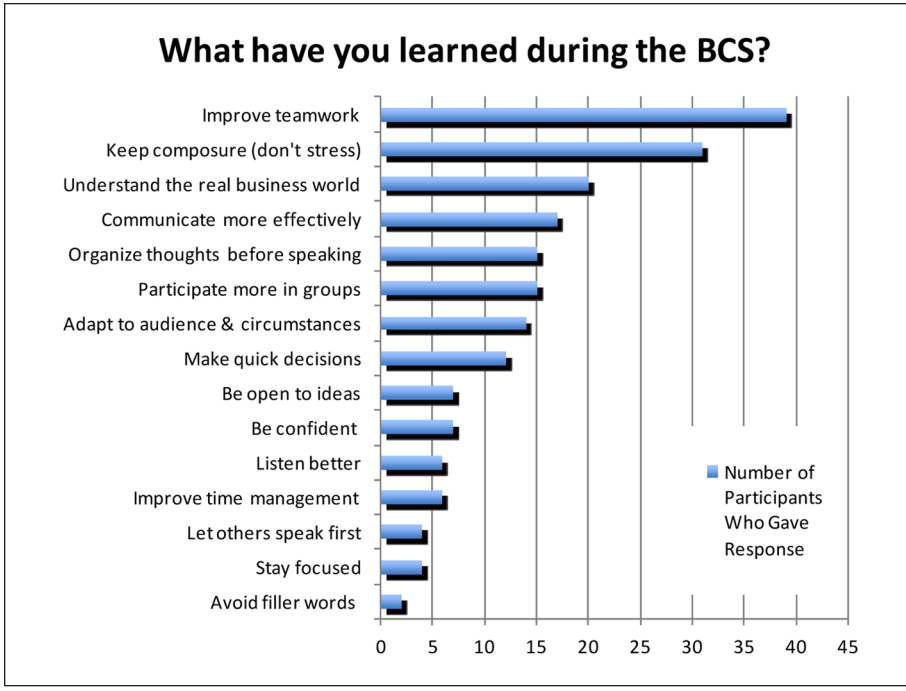

Figure 1. List of items students reported as learning outcomes in the BCS.

The second phase of analysis used axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the data were coded, theoretical questions and code summaries arose. These were documented in analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1999) to aid understanding of the concepts being studied and to refine further data collection. This step of the coding process highlighted the categories of learning outcomes for students, including what they would do differently and their perceptions of how the BCS relates to the business world as a result of participating in the BCS.

Results

Based on the debriefing that students conducted at the end of the simulation and their subsequent written assignment, we ascertained not only student learning outcomes but also the students' anticipated future actions as well as the simulation's validity. The debriefing and written assignment included questions across all three of these items and are described in this section.

Student Learning Outcomes. Students reported a number of learning outcomes from this BCS, which are listed in Figure 1. To assess these outcomes, the BCS debriefing section first asked students to describe their top three learning outcomes from this BCS,

Table 1. Summary of Kappa and Coder Percent Agreement.

Code	Intercoder reliability	Cohen's κ	*p*
Student learning outcomes			
1. How to work better as a team	96%	.92	<.001
2. Importance of maintaining composure	92%	.84	<.001
3. How the real business world works	98%	.96	<.001
4. Improvement of communication skills	91%	.77	<.001
What students will do differently as a result of the BCS			
1. Participate more in a team	96%	.92	<.001
2. Communicate more effectively	90%	.79	<.001
3. Improve their teamwork	93%	.83	<.001
4. Maintain composure more in time pressured, stressful situations	98%	.96	<.001
Relation to the business world			
1. Good preparation for the business world	98%	.96	<.001
2. Was a positive experience	93%	.82	<.001
3. Was a challenging experience	89%	.71	<.001

and the written assignment asked them to describe what was effective and ineffective about their performance during the simulation. From these responses, we created a list of all learning outcomes, the top four of which were those where more than 30% of the participants listed these as learning outcomes resulting from participation in the BCS. We coded these items to ensure accurate portrayal of the data with reported intercoder reliability and Cohen's κ.

The student responses indicated that the top four things they learned from this BCS were (a) how to improve teamwork (intercoder reliability was very strong with 96% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .92$), (b) the importance of maintaining composure (intercoder reliability was very strong with 92% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .84$), (c) a better understanding of how the real business world works (intercoder reliability was very strong with 98% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .96$), and (d) the improvement of communication skills (intercoder reliability was substantially strong with 91% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .77$). These agreements are summarized in Table 1.

For improving teamwork, students gave the following types of responses as items they learned: "Being engaged and building off of others," "Everything is a team effort," "How to utilize team members to benefit the group," and "Make sure all team members are on the same page." They also stated they learned the "importance of balance and team" when completing complex tasks under extreme time pressure and "how to work in teams during tense situations." Students reported that "using all team members' strengths is important" as is the "involvement of everyone in a meeting." Essentially, they "learned how to work better in a group setting" and that "teamwork is essential to succeeding in any professional business environment."

For the item coded as the importance of maintaining composure, examples of student responses included "I learned how to stay calm," "I must maintain composure," "[We need] to stay calm, cool, and collected" and "Relax!" Students reported that "being composed is essential" and "being able to maintain position under scrutiny is important" in communicating in stressful work settings. They also learned "not to be defensive" and to "take a breath" to "remain poised in difficult situations." They stated these were important things to learn because "working well under pressure will help one thrive in a business setting."

The third highest ranked item students reported learning was a better understanding of how the real business world works. For this code, students commented, "Executives face difficult communication decisions every day." They gained insight into how communication occurs in the workplace as they learned "how to analyze from a company perspective" and "how to interact in a group setting in the business world" to deal with "combative people in the business world." The BCS showed that "business communications can be challenging" as there are "many different situations we will be faced with in the business world." The real world is "tough" and "high stress."

Finally, the improvement of communication skills code was the fourth highest item learned during the BCS. Responses coded in this way included: "Communicate with an open mind" and "All forms of communication are involved in every challenge." Students reported that they learned "how to effectively communicate given different circumstances" and "how to be well-spoken," as well as "the significance of cultural communication in terms of content." One student realized that "people notice my strong nonverbal communication, so use it wisely." Thus, students reported learning how to improve their speaking, intercultural, and nonverbal communication skills.

Anticipated Future Actions. The next result we looked for was how the BCS would change students' future actions regarding business communication in the workplace. To assess this item, the BCS debriefing section asked students to describe the top three things they would do differently based on what they learned from the BCS and the top three actions they would take in the future to apply what they learned from the BCS. Additionally, the written assignment asked them to describe what they would do differently if they faced the simulation's challenges in the future and what they would start/stop/continue doing to ensure their future success. From these responses, we created a list of all future actions. Figure 2 lists all the changes students reported making to their actions as a result of participating in the BCS. Once again, the top four things that students reported they would do differently are those where more than 30% of the participants listed the item. We coded these items to ensure accurate portrayal of the data with reported intercoder reliability and Cohen's κ.

The student responses indicated that the top four things they will do differently from this BCS were the following: (a) participate more on a team (intercoder reliability was very strong with 96% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .92$), (b) communicate more effectively (intercoder reliability was substantially strong with 90% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .79$), (c) improve their teamwork (intercoder reliability was very strong with 93% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .83$), and (d) maintain composure more in

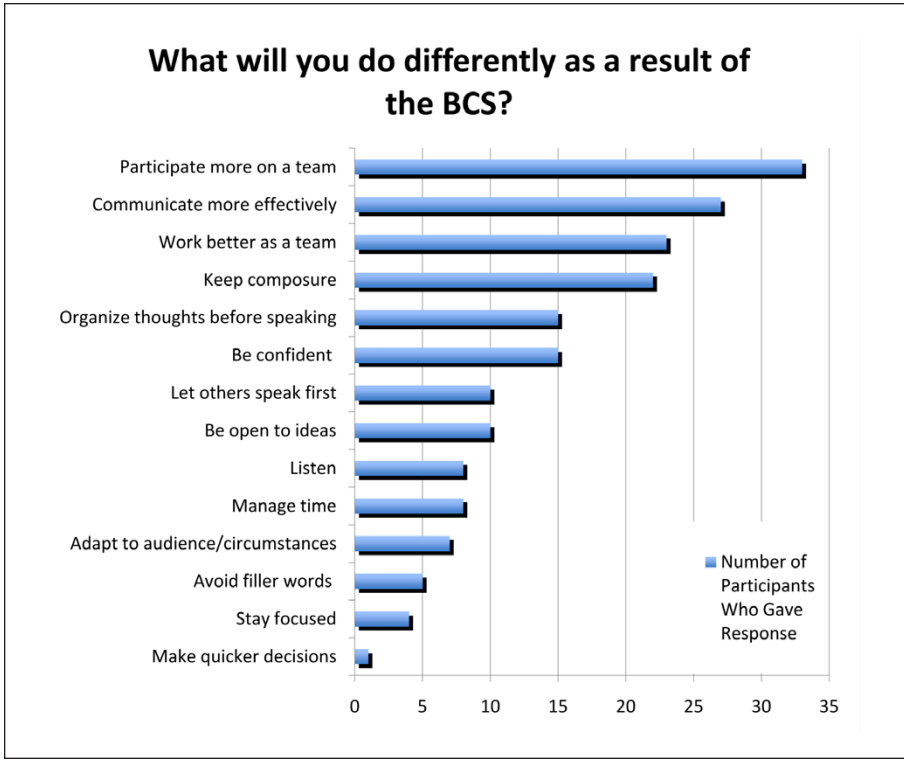

Figure 2. List of items students reported they would do differently as a result of the BCS.

time-pressured, stressful situations (intercoder reliability was very strong with 98% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .96$). These agreements are summarized in Table 1 with examples provided below.

Regarding the code for participating more on a team, student responses included the following: "Be more assertive when I have an idea," "Interact more," "Be more lively and energetic," "Speak up more," and "Make sure my ideas are heard and implemented." Some indicated that they would be sure to provide their inputs in group settings as they said they would "speak my ideas and don't withhold them" and "if I feel strongly about something, [I will] make it known." They would try to "be more vocal" and "outspoken" yet "facilitate conversation with the team." Others stated they would "actively participate in group setting/meetings" and "take control of the group when a decision needs to be made" with "responses that are more structured."

We also coded items for communicating more effectively. As a result of participating in the BCS, students said that in the future they would "be prepared for how an interviewer, client, or supplier may come into a meeting" and would "make sure everyone is well rehearsed and delivers a consistent message." They would "communicate in

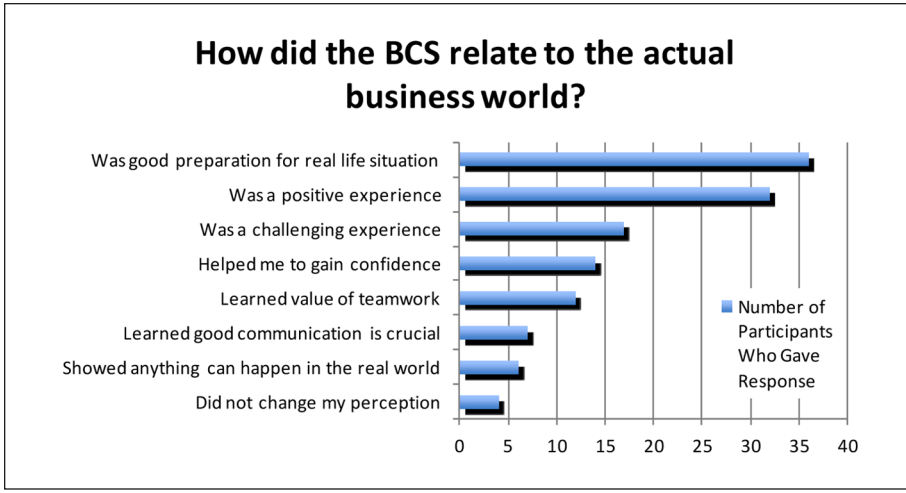

Figure 3. Perception of how the BCS relates to the actual business world.

a negotiation differently" to be more concise yet focused in their communication as they would "communicate more details while maintaining precision" to "make answers clear" and "organize thoughts better" to "speak thoughts in a more structured manner." Nonverbal communication is also something they would approach differently as they would "use nonverbal communication more effectively" and "make better eye contact." Intercultural communication would be improved as they would "think about and make sure I am communicating according to the culture."

We coded improving their teamwork, which was the third highest item they would do differently in the future as a result of the BCS. Students reported they would "get everyone involved" and "help the group to flow more effectively" in the future to "work better as a team." They reported they would now "be more effective in a group" by "understanding the task earlier as a team." Furthermore, students will also "trust other's experience" in order to "use others more on my teams."

The final item coded here relates to dealing with complex situations, as students will maintain composure more in time-pressured, stressful situations. To do this, students will "keep my composure and not allow myself to become overwhelmed," "not be so nervous," "stay calm and relaxed in stressful situations," and "not be as stressed" as they will "keep my focus more amidst any adversity." Students reported they would not "let the stress get to them" by "not worrying that I made a mistake" and being "a little less nervous or cautious in communicating with others."

Simulation Validity. Finally, we examined the validity of the BCS by asking students how well they thought the BCS related to the actual business world. To assess this item, the BCS debriefing section asked students to describe how and why the BCS positively or negatively changed their perceptions of the business world and the written assignment asked them to describe any other perceptions of the BCS. From these responses, we created a list of all responses about the validity of the BCS (see Figure 3).

This time, only the top three perceptions were reported by more than 30% of the students. We coded these items to ensure accurate portrayal of the data with reported intercoder reliability and Cohen's κ.

The student responses indicated that the top three perceptions of the business world as a result of participating in this BCS were that such an activity was (a) good preparation for the business world (intercoder reliability was very strong with 98% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .96$), (b) was a positive experience (intercoder reliability was very strong with 93% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .82$), and (c) was a challenging experience (intercoder reliability was very strong with 89% agreement, Cohen's $\kappa = .71$). These agreements are summarized in Table 1.

Examples of each of these three codes are included here. The first code we identified in this category was that the BCS was good preparation for the business world. Students commented that the BCS "made me aware of the different challenges I will encounter" and "expanded my understanding of the business world." The BCS gave a "'sneak preview' of the real world" and "gave us an understanding of how teamwork and all areas of business integrate [in the real world]." Thinking about the long term, one student commented, "It [the BCS] made me realize how challenging and ultimately enjoyable my career can be."

Additionally, we coded students' responses about the BCS being a positive experience in preparing them for the actual workplace. Comments coded here included statements such as, "The simulation gave me a positive perception of the business world because it made me more aware of the realistic aspect of it" and "This [BCS] positively changed my perception because . . . it was not as bad as I thought it would be-almost enjoyable to do." Students felt the BCS was a positive experience because it did relate so well to the actual workplace: "It was great to participate in real world business situations and decisions . . . at the same time it was fun." After participating in the BCS, students stated, "We can handle uncomfortable, tough situations in the real world because of how well prepared we are." They felt the BCS "was put together quite nicely" as it "allowed for a thought-provoking and interactive learning experience."

The final code we examined in relation to preparation for the actual workplace was that the BCS was a challenging experience. For this item, students stated, "It was a challenge to get through" and "it was a challenge to participate in real world business situations and decisions," although it was the "reality of this experience" that provided students with "a more challenging and comprehensive way for me to become more flexible in group situations and foster a sense of trust" compared with a traditional written exam. They felt prepared for the workplace as "the BCS challenged me, but it was manageable. Now, I know with confidence and preparation I can face similar real life situations." Students also reported a greater "respect for the industry [field of business communication]" because the BCS showed how the field "face[s] difficult challenges (crisis, intercultural, etc.), and we must handle them to a certain caliber."

Discussion

Our initial goal with the BCS was to find an existing BCS to implement in our course to provide our students with a real-world business experience. We wanted to go

beyond the traditional writing and speaking assignments students typically face when learning business communication (Russ, 2009). However, when we realized there was no up-to-date simulation in existence, we designed and implemented a contemporary BCS that provided real-world business communication situations for our students to interact and apply the skills they learned in our business communication course in an experiential environment. We ensured the topics effectively demonstrated contemporary business communication issues such as crisis communication, social media management, and intercultural interviewing by validating these topics from recent audits of business communication courses and input we solicited from a sample of instructors currently teaching business communication, seasoned simulation designers, and communication executives.

The debriefing mechanisms we created served as an exploratory case study to assess the benefits of the BCS for student learning. As a result of students' participation in the BCS and their debriefing messages, we can draw conclusions about students' learning outcomes, students' anticipated future actions they would change, and students' perceptions of the validity of the BCS related to the business world.

First and foremost, we were successful in creating a real-world experience that prepared students for challenges they will face on the job. They learned of the varied communication situations that can occur and how to deal with different types of people on the job to create appropriate and effective messaging given the situation. They found the BCS to be a challenging yet positive experience because it provided a memorable situation. Students felt they would take away more learning outcomes from this type of an assessment compared with a written assignment or exam.

Students reported that they learned how to improve their teamwork skills. They realized the value of working in a team as they faced complex challenges with tight time limits. The BCS was designed specifically so that no one person could complete the challenges alone in the allotted timeframe. Thus, the students had to learn how to interact effectively as a team in order to complete each challenge in the given time. From student responses, we can see they realized the emphasis placed on being a team player in the business world, as many challenges required input from a number of team members to be completed efficiently and successfully. One major learning outcome for students was the importance of facilitating input from everyone while additionally ensuring that all team members were on the same page regarding the decision(s) made based on the various inputs. They realized the detriment of moving forward when a team member is not on board. For example, when the students had to defend their CEO's role in insider trading to a CNN reporter, they realized the importance of having consistent messaging and understanding of the situation. When they did not, the CNN reporter exposed their lack of teamwork by asking blunt questions and creating an awkward moment for the team members when they realized they were not communicating consistent sentiments or details about their CEO's activities.

Students also learned the value of maintaining their composure and staying calm in challenging situations. This helped them negotiate with a supplier more effectively, respond appropriately to the CNN reporter, and handle difficult interview questions. They recognized the importance of thinking before acting and avoiding emotional

impulses. For many, the severe time restrictions for each challenge were difficult, but they reported learning the value of being able to think quickly in short amounts of time, as many business situations demand a quick response with little time to think or review information.

Students also reported they learned how to improve their communication skills, including their verbal, nonverbal, and intercultural communication skills. They learned to be more open-minded with ideas and situations, to organize their thoughts more clearly so that their verbal communication was more structured yet succinct, to recognize the significance of nonverbal communication, and to keep their emotions and nonverbal displays in check to avoid miscommunication. Although they learned about intercultural communication concepts in the classroom, most had not experienced interacting with colleagues from other cultures. The challenge when they interviewed with a person from another country taught them the value in learning, understanding, and adapting their communication style depending on the culture with which they were interacting.

Interestingly, the very things students said they would do differently as a result of the BCS related to the learning outcomes they also reported. These were different questions posed to the students, yet the responses for each question related to the other. For example, they reported their top learning as being how to improve their teamwork. Likewise, when asked what they would do differently in the workplace as a result of this BCS, the number one item was to participate more on their teams. They reported they would be more inclined to speak up now, make decisions, and overall be more energetic with their teams. Thus, they translated their learning into actionable steps to implement on their existing teams. They also reported they would improve their teamwork, which differed from their responses about increased participation. For improving their teamwork, they focused on encouraging more team members to be involved in the team. They recognized the value in ensuring the team was on board with tasks and decisions and stated they would now ensure that their team members on existing teams understood these items together as a team. They would rely more on team members, as they had learned to trust other members more in order to accomplish tasks in tight timeframes.

While students reported learning how to communicate more effectively as a result of the BCS, they also reported that one of the things they would do differently would be to communicate more effectively. They reported feeling more prepared for interviews, client meetings, and public relations events. They recognized the value in delivering consistent messaging, stating they would work to ensure their current teams could deliver consistent messages about their project, goals, and progress. They also know how to better prepare concise yet detailed messages with clearer structure and succinct detail. They are more aware of their nonverbal communication and the impact it has, so they also admitted they would be cognizant of these in the real business world and improve their nonverbal communication there to convey more confidence and competence.

Finally, they also indicated they would implement better methods to maintain composure in stressful situations. To do this, they will stay focused on tasks and worry less

about making mistakes. They will also be less nervous about communicating with others in the workplace. Thus, they have developed mechanisms to assist them in combating stress in their workplace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we were successful in developing and implementing an updated, contemporary BCS to prepare students for the 21st-century workplace. Based on our findings, it is evident that students felt this simulation related to the actual workplace, thereby creating an effective environment to safely learn about and prepare for the communication challenges they will face in the workplace. They reported a number of learning outcomes resulting from the BCS, which related to the items they reported they would now do differently as a result of the BCS. Future research would be useful in examining how students apply these learning outcomes in their work environments and what are the direct linkages to this BCS.

Nonetheless, this study exhibits limitations. This research focused on student self-reports of the BCS. Additional research could also include data collection and coding of facilitator responses and proctor observation to triangulate these data with students' responses to enhance the findings beyond self-reports. In this way, we could include discussion about how and why some teams did really well and others did not, as well as address how students actually demonstrate effective speaking and writing skills or apply concepts and theories to analyze real workplace situations. Collecting debriefing feedback from facilitators would provide another dimension to analyzing student learning outcomes from the BCS. However, it might require the use of additional proctors beyond just one or two in order to have enough people recording direct and specific observations of teams.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that it was implemented with a group of students at one university. We encourage other faculty teaching business communication at other universities to replicate this BCS with their own students to broaden the validity of the activity. We believe student bodies at other universities will bear similar results, as it seems logical that students want to engage in realistic workplace situations to prepare them for what they will face in their internships and full-time positions.

A challenge to implementing the BCS is finding appropriately skilled facilitators from industry. We acknowledge the difficulty in replicating the facilitator training, staging, and participation required for the BCS. One thing we suggest is that after faculty implement the BCS once, they then contact students who previously participated in the BCS to act as facilitators because their prior participation gives them an understanding of the flow of the BCS. The downside is that they lack real-world experience, but they would be able to role-play the challenge descriptions and use the prepared evaluation criteria in their responses. Another option is to run multiple smaller sessions of the BCS on one day with fewer groups participating in each session so that the number of group facilitators remains small. The challenge with this is ensuring that facilitators could dedicate a day to running more than one BCS session.

Nevertheless, it was our goal to fill the pedagogical gap of a lack of interactive, experiential learning experiences in business communication where students could practice applying business communication concepts, such as their persuasive and negotiation skills. We believe we accomplished this goal. Creating such a BCS for business communication courses that is up-to-date with relevant challenges, roles, and technology provides a useful assessment mechanism where students can demonstrate their business communication learning outcomes in an interactive, applied, experiential environment. Such an environment provides memorable learning outcomes, which students will implement in the actual workplace.

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Bios

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