PRACTICE AND MORE PRACTICE: ITS CENTRALITY TO YOUNG PEOPLE COPING WITH THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES OF THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT
Both oral and written communication is influential and prevalent in modern societies. This research study focused on interpersonal communication practices in a business context. The aim was to determine whether youths between 18 and 23 years of age undertaking their six-month period of internship as novice employees were adequately prepared to meet the demands of the workplace. Data were collected from the employers at organisations that employed novice employees. This provided critical perspectives on the competency of young people to cope with the communication demands of the workplace. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were used. Sixty eight (68) employers completed the questionnaires. Interviews were also conducted with six randomly selected employers at the organisations where the young people were undertaking their respective internships. The findings show that workplace communication is complex and that many young people struggle to meet the challenges of communicating adequately in the workplace. Deliberate practice is fundamental to the development of communication skills and expert performance in the workplace. Recommendations are made to better prepare young people to face the challenges and demands of the dynamic workplace.

Keywords: organisational communication, workplace practices, expert performance, deliberate practice, communication practices, novice employees
INTRODUCTION

Communication is powerful and prevalent in modern societies (Russell 1997), and good communication is critical for the daily operation of organisations. Communication is a ‘term often used to describe activities in which people interact, from face-to-face conversations to writing letters or sending e-mails via the internet’ (Hollis-Turner 2008, 12). Research on business writing (Bazerman 1980; Russell 1997; Bazerman and Russell 2003) and business communication has been the ‘subject of study for centuries’ (Grant and Borcherds 2002, 8). The main emphasis of these communications in the workplace, whether local or international, personal or electronic, is ‘the job-related message’ (Grant and Borcherds 2002, 5). Nationally and in a global context, university-level business and technical communications courses have been presented with the purpose of enhancing students’ oral and written communication skills in order to prepare them for academic and workplace writing (Russell 1997). In addition, the boundaries and requirements in the field of business communication skills have been expanded by technological changes.

Communication practices in workplaces include both oral and written communication challenges. In the workplace context, written and oral communication competence is essential. Spitzberg (1988, 68) defines communication competence as ‘the ability to interact well with others’, with the term ‘well referring to accuracy, clarity, comprehensibility, coherence, expertise, effectiveness and appropriateness’. A more complete definition of communication competence describes it as a situational ability to set practical and suitable goals and to maximise their success by applying knowledge of self, of others, the context and of communication theory to produce adaptive communication accomplishments (Friedrich 1994).

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009, 6) argues that the success of young people in the workplace includes ‘using language effectively – writing clearly and in a way appropriate to the context, ordering facts and concepts logically’ and ‘using telephones and other technology to communicate’. The Higher Education South Africa (HESA) report (Griesel and Parker 2009, 9) describes the employability of young people as motivated by skilful practices that comprise communication. However, young people undertaking the internship programme experienced difficulties in coping with the communication challenges of the workplace. The findings of the HESA report reveal that two of the largest gaps between the expectations of employers and the skills of graduates were in oral and written presentation skills (Griesel and Parker 2009, 11).

The research study comprised young people entering an internship programme in the workplace. These young people were regarded as ‘competent’ to enter the workplace as novice employees in an office environment after completing two years of a business communication course at a tertiary institution and were required to undertake six months of work-integrated learning or internship.
The problem being investigated is that theoretically competent office administrators, who were qualified with two years of business studies, experience communication challenges as a result of limited development of communication skills in a practical workplace environment. In order to mitigate the afore-mentioned problem statement, the following research questions were asked:

- What are the communication practices of office administrators in the workplace?
- What are the communication challenges of novice employees entering the workplace?

The contribution of this study is the identification of the communication challenges faced by novice employees entering the workplace in order to better prepare them for the dynamic workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding communication challenges in the workplace

Communication is about conveying information from one party to another, through a particular medium. One medium is verbal communication which is communication by means of the written and spoken word, for example, language. Workplace communication comprises social activities that are reliant on the production of language (Bazerman and Paradis 1991). The Council on Higher Education report (CHE 2013, 176) advocates that ‘the development of writing and other communication skills … should be integrated into as many courses as possible’. Research on the business-writing practices in an office administrator curriculum showed that proficiency in business writing, communication and information technology skills were considered essential for graduates entering the world of work (Hollis-Turner 2008, 108).

Knowledge production has been enhanced by knowledge-based technologies that have had significant effects on the social, technological, and business contexts where business communication is applied in the workplace. This new advancement has become known as the ‘network society’ (Castells and Cardoso 2005, 4) or the ‘knowledge economy’ (Drucker 1969, 247). Higher education institutions are required to respond to the demands of the network society and knowledge economy in order to prepare graduates for progressively changing contexts (Castells and Cardoso 2005, 8). The higher education communication programmes should provide effective classroom-based interventions that include the practice of habits fostering success in business writing, such as researching, drafting, revising, perseverance (Walters, Hunter and Giddens 2007) and deliberate practice (Kellogg 2008). Kellogg (2008) is of the opinion that it is possible to educate writers so that the planning, generation and reviewing of writing can, to a large extent, become automatic.
Johnstone, Ashbaugh and Warfield (2002) argue that the achievement of superior writing skills is reliant on the degree of repetitive practice to which students are exposed.

Novice employees acquire the genre knowledge required to generate communication in an academic environment, but lack the rhetorical knowledge for the intricate realities of the workplace. This is information about the purpose(s) and the audience who will read a text. They also lack the discourse community knowledge such as the understanding of the needs and expectations of writers and readers. Rhetorical knowledge and discourse community knowledge are needed to modify these formats to the audiences of the world of work (Paretti 2006). When young people enter the workplace, the subject knowledge they bring with them is changed to meet the requirements of, and be understood by, the staff, clients and customers of the companies at which they are employed. As communicators in the workplace, novice employees need to regard their communication as ‘functional information exchanges’ and they need to design their writing in accordance with the needs of multiple audiences (Paretti 2006, 191).

When producing written communication for the workplace, Beaufort (1999, 64) identifies the knowledge-domains required by young people as ‘subject matter knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, discourse community knowledge, genre knowledge and writing process knowledge’. This is relevant not only to written but also oral communication processes and to interpersonal communication in business environments (DeKay 2012). Young people entering the workplace need subject matter knowledge and communication skills. For example, they need the skills to write a variety of memoranda and letters in order to communicate effectively on a particular topic. They also need problem-solving capabilities (Kellogg 2006), critical analysis (Miller, Larsen and Gaitens 1996) and, according to Schneider and André (2005), the capacity for research and analysis of information to cope with the challenges of the workplace. These skills assist novice employees to overcome the communication challenges of the workplace such as dealing with difficult customers or being able to obtain and critically analyse the relevance of documentation in order to resolve a workplace problem. The requirements of expert performance in oral and written communication in the workplace include deliberate practice and the opportunities to improve performance (Kellogg 2008). This will provide opportunities for novice employees to improve their knowledge of the workplace context and their communication knowledge and skills to cope with the communication challenges of the changing workplace.

THE CASE STUDY UNDER INVESTIGATION

In preparation for the workplace, young people between the ages of 18 to 23 years undertake two years of communication studies at a tertiary institution. The two years
of communication studies are included in a three-year Office Management Diploma. The focus of the communication studies is on the oral communication and business writing genres students are required to study and practise in preparation for their entry into the workplace. Young people are also required to become proficient in the use of the electronic communication genres. Computer knowledge and skills, and programme literacy are learned to generate and receive electronic communications and multiple texts. They are also required to undertake six months of work-integrated learning or cooperative education which in the South African context refers to a form of experiential learning in which final-year students undertake internships at relevant work sites (Hollis-Turner 2008, 72).

Young people were placed at a variety of workplace sites in tourism, human resource, medical, insurance, legal, and retail fields as well as at small, medium and large general business organisations. These organisations in Cape Town who employed the youths undertaking their internships, are the cooperative education partners of the tertiary institution at which the young people studied. The internship period exposes young people to the workplace and provides opportunities for them to practise their communication skills. The employers of the youths undertaking the internship were required to mentor them and evaluate their communication competence in the workplace.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Collis and Hussey (2009) argue that the design of any research study may be categorised in terms of its purpose, process, logic and outcome. The research design adopted for this study was as follows:

- **Purpose:** This research study can be described as descriptive as it held relevancy to the explanation of a certain phenomenon.
- **Process:** This research study fell within the positivistic research paradigm and the interpretivistic research paradigm since both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in order to solve a particular research problem.
- **Logic:** This research study can be described as deductive in nature as the perception of the author resulted from consulting existing literature; tested by means of empirical research (i.e. survey research and interviews). It can also be described as inductive as the author has worked with this case study in relation to the communication challenges of novice employees in the workplace.
- **Outcome:** This research study was applied in nature as the author wanted to solve a particular research problem.

The research on which this paper is based was considered as survey research (Leedy and Ormrod 2010) as a sample of participants from a specific population was
approached to collect data by means of a survey. The study also included interviews conducted with six of the employers. Purposive and convenience sampling was utilised to target 100 employers from small, medium and large organisations in Cape Town that are the cooperative education partners of the tertiary institution and that employed the youths undertaking their internship. The main reasons for the sampling methods used were that the employers showed evidence of commitment to the internship programme and the author resided in Cape Town, which made the collection of data more convenient.

This study was conducted over a period of two years as the author wanted to obtain rich data pertaining to a certain case study. At the end of the internship period, 68 employers of the novice employees responded positively to the surveys. The delineation criteria which the employers should have adhered to, before their responses would be regarded as valid, were as follows:

- They had to employ the youths as novice employees for the six months of internship.
- They were all cooperative partners of the tertiary institution and were situated in small, medium and large companies in medical, retail, service, human resource, insurance, tourism and legal fields.
- They all showed evidence of commitment to the youth development programme.
- They had to expose the novice employees to the communication and business activities of the companies and provide mentorship and support during the period of internship.

In addition, relevant ethical considerations were considered for this research study.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The employers of organisations were required to evaluate the competency of the communication skills of the novice employees who were regarded as ‘competent’ to enter the internship period after completing two years of a business communication course at a tertiary institution. The employers rated the young people according to contextual categories and their levels of skill.

Communication practices of office administrators in the workplace

The data in response to this research question will be discussed under the headings of the novice employees as communicators and the audience and purpose of communication.
Novice employees as communicators

The communication practices required of novice employees in the workplace were to participate in the workplace setting where they were placed and to perform the written and oral communication responsibilities assigned to them. In the workplace context, there are very specific communication requirements that demand awareness of multiple audiences with particular needs and knowledge requirements, concise and correct writing skills and advanced analytical skills.

The language of business is English and the novice employees were required to speak and write in English. Where necessary, some of the novice employees responded to customer queries or telephone calls in Afrikaans and Xhosa. A variety of business documents such as business letters and minutes of meetings were produced by novice employees who were required simultaneously to perform a variety of other duties. Some of the novice employees as communicators lacked confidence when they entered the workplace, but this was not the situation at all the sites.

The workplace is a highly computerised setting and the novice employees were required to utilise numerous and varied electronic communication genres, for example, PowerPoint to produce presentations. The focal point of workplace communication practices was the exchange of accurate information and the work of novice employees was regularly reviewed. Novice employees were required to appraise their work and have it held up for examination by colleagues and management. Novice employees were required to adhere to the deadlines for the production of the documentation. Accuracy was also important and the writing produced by the novice employees was checked. An employer reported that ‘while the novice employees produced good business letters and reports, they had difficulty with instruction taking’ (Hollis-Turner 2008, 73) and the taking of minutes as some of the novice employees did not record important information accurately. When novice employees were involved with event planning they did not always carry out instructions and follow up on matters.

To ascertain the competency of the verbal and written communication skills of novice employees, employers were asked to assess the verbal and written communication skills, including the effective interpretation and accomplishment of tasks of novice employees at the end of the six-month period of internship. The employers considered the verbal communication and the written communication skills of most of the novice employees to be highly competent. These ratings are relatively high for English second language communicators and showed that after six months of experience in the workplace, which included expert mentorship from employers and deliberate practice, novice employees did well in the execution of verbal and written communication in the workplace. The ratings of the novice employees’ abilities to interpret and complete tasks successfully were also considered to be exceptionally high, seeing that most of the novice employees were English second language speakers. An employer commented that the novice employees had
progressed after six months in the workplace and that in numerous instances ‘the student did a superb job’.

These findings are in contradiction with the feedback from some of the employers who commented on the competencies of the novice employees when they commenced the internship period in the workplace. For example, one employer reported that the novice employees appeared to have a ‘lot of knowledge when they commenced the internships’, but they ‘cannot put it into practice’. Others reported that some novice employees had trouble with thinking independently and with applying their initiative when they entered the workplace, and did not ‘know how to deal with customer queries’ and ‘did not proofread the writing’ they produced. However, the majority of the employers reported a marked improvement in the oral and written communication skills of novice employees after a significant period of time, and with the benefit of their mentorship and support. One employer stated that at first the taking of minutes was difficult, but now the novice employee has ‘no problems taking minutes after many opportunities to practise’. The employers reported that employees work with data, some of which is confidential, such as data relating to human resource matters. Therefore, most employers assign mentors to young people or put young people through an induction programme during the first week of internship.

The audience and purpose

The audiences with whom novice employees communicated were the staff, clients and customers of the companies where they were working. Novice employees were required to produce written documentation and to forward these to clients or customers.

All the employers stressed the significance of telephone techniques and telephone etiquette that ‘can win or lose customers or clients through excellent or shoddy telephone etiquette’ (Hollis-Turner 2008, 74). The telephone skills of most of the 68 novice employees were considered to be good. Most of the employers confirmed that, with practice, novice employees’ telephone skills had improved. The multiple audiences of the workplace have specific requirements and an employer reported ‘all work … has to be perfect’ and ‘accurate’ as inaccuracies may have costly consequences.

In order to ascertain the novice employees’ competency with regard to interpersonal relations, the employers were asked to assess the interpersonal communication, listening and assertiveness skills of the novice employees after the six-month internship period. The employers considered the ability of most of the novice employees to develop interpersonal relations to be very good and that they displayed excellent listening skills. The employers felt that most of the novice employers displayed decisiveness to relay opinions in a mature and determined manner. These findings show that the majority of the novice employees’ capabilities
to listen to the opinions of others and their interpersonal communication skills with the multiple audiences of the workplace were good. One employer commented that the novice employee ‘communicated well with clients and staff and she has easily fitted into the management team’. The assertiveness abilities of most of the novice employees were considered to be good and this shows that over a period of time in the workplace, novice employees were able to share their opinions and communicate with their colleagues and management in a responsible and determined manner.

Communication challenges of novice employees entering the workplace

The context of the workplace requires novice employees to acquire knowledge of the discourse community and its needs. Some of the novice employees experienced difficulties when they entered the workplace as they lacked knowledge of the company, the office politics of the departments within the company, and the expectations of the writers, the customers and clients. Novice employees needed to recognise, for example, when writing a business letter whether it was appropriate to address a customer by using a first name, such as ‘Dear John’ and when personalising greetings would be inappropriate. Some of the novice employees in this study lacked maturity and confidence, and were unaware of how to put their knowledge into practice. Novice employees found it challenging to produce minutes of meetings and record accurate messages and instructions. Most employers reported that only over a period of time with regular practice, mentorship and exposure to the communication experiences in the workplace, were there improvements in the work standards of novice employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to provide regular practice, mentorship and exposure to the communication experiences in the workplace, there needs to be additional field work opportunities in the communication courses, such as job-shadowing, voluntary work and site visits. This will provide opportunities for greater exposure to the communication practices required in the workplace that are necessary for novice employees to become proficient in verbal and written communication skills.

In the workplace, novice employees are required to design their writing to respond to the requests of multiple audiences. The higher education communication programmes should provide effective classroom-based interventions that include practice to nurture success in business writing, comprising the planning, generation and reviewing of documentation. Employers need young people to cultivate personal skills to improve their levels of self-confidence. Educators need to employ innovative techniques to simulate workplace practices such as role play, group work
and scenarios in the classroom to prepare young people for entry into the dynamic workplace. The realisation of these recommendations should result in young people being better equipped to cope with the communication demands and challenges of the dynamic workplace.

CONCLUSION

The requirements of the workplace context are such that novice employees found it difficult when entering the workplace to exchange information with clients and colleagues, and they lacked the rhetorical, discourse and conceptual knowledge of the workplace. The performances of some of the novice employees were not of the standard necessary to meet the challenges of the workplace where they were required to produce accurate writing to meet the specific needs of multiple audiences. Novice employees were required to modify their writing to meet workplace-specific requirements such as style and accuracy in response to the needs of the multiple audiences of the workplace context.

A longer duration of time is required in the workplace in order for novice employees to become proficient in verbal and written communication skills. With expert mentorship and deliberate practice, novice employees’ communication skills improved significantly. Research shows that the communication practices of novice employees have been enhanced by opportunities for deliberate practice, particularly when it is done in the context of a professional workplace environment. Thus, deliberate practice is fundamental to the development of communication skills and expert performance in the workplace.

REFERENCES


