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Clive Muir
*Stephen F Austin State University, muirc@sfasu.edu*

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READING FOR WORK: REVIVING A NEGLECTED COMMUNICATION SKILL

BY CLIVE MUIR

College instructors often complain that students do not read textbooks and instead prefer to use their own cryptic PowerPoint notes from class for completing assignments and tests. Yet, reading does not seem to get the time and attention that writing and speaking do and reading may be taken for granted. In other words, students write reports and memos, create visual aids, and deliver presentations that are graded; whereas instructors give most reading tasks as homework that are not directly assessed, although they do affect students' success in the course. Compounding the problem, as students experience an "information deluge," they are less inclined to read carefully and critically. For all these reasons, business instructors should integrate critical reading into class activities. This article describes a reading regimen that applies a familiar learning taxonomy to everyday business news.

The reading problems that students experience in high school and college have direct repercussions on their performance in the workplace. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2009) show that, although most 17-year-old U.S. students can understand basic information, less than 10 percent of them can perform advanced, critical-level reading tasks. If they attend college, low-performing readers often arrive or are placed in noncredit, developmental reading classes with the hope of transferring into degree programs. Yet, even higher-performing readers in college often lack the ability to answer more analytical and critical questions about what they read. This predicament has led employers to express concerns about a growing illiteracy problem among their employees and to suggest that this issue could jeopardize their companies' productivity and competitiveness in the global economy. A glaring headline in the business press compared illiteracy with a "time-bomb" (Bernstein, 2002, p. 122) that hinders workers' ability to acquire skills and knowledge and diminishes their sense of achievement and ownership of their job performance and career development (Corus & Ozanne, 2011). For purposes of this article, the author defines reading as using one's cognitive, cultural, and psychological abilities to interpret and analyze textual, graphic, and other symbols. In the school and workplace, readers use a variety of forms of information, including books, reports, periodicals, memos, letters, Web sites, and e-mail.

READING AS A COMMUNICATION SKILL

Despite its clear relevance to the communication process, reading pedagogy receives far less attention than other communication skills. For example, a cursory search of the archives of two leading business communication journals produced far fewer articles focused on reading and literacy skills compared with writing, speaking, technology, and even listening, another neglected communication skill. Some business instructors have expended efforts in the past four decades to increase attention on reading as an important business skill (McKeown, 1974; Sumner, 1979; Horning, 2007; Corus and Ozanne, 2011) and to encourage reading skills across the curriculum similar to initiatives for writing; however, reading pedagogy is stymied by the increasing and extensive use of computers as a teaching tool.
and source of information, which gives students the false notion that close, critical reading is no longer necessary (Horning, 2007). Another problem is that most business instructors are not trained to teach reading, which raises the question of how instructors can best integrate reading skills into business courses. High school business teachers agreed overwhelmingly (89.1%) that their courses should incorporate some reading instruction but were less enthusiastic (41.3%) about being required by institutional assessments to measure reading outcomes (Polkinghorne, 2010). Horning (2007) posited that the practice and development of reading skills should not be relegated to homework assignments but explicitly targeted as a learning outcome.

Bloom’s Learning Taxonomy

Teaching reading does not require specialized training beyond using an acceptable tool; for example, Bloom’s Learning Taxonomy has been used for more than 50 years to develop and measure teaching and learning goals and objectives for many subjects. Psychologist Benjamin Bloom (1956) and his colleagues developed this taxonomy as a then-revolutionary classification of learning into several domains, starting with the ability to recall information and culminating with the ability to evaluate information. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) later revised Bloom’s Taxonomy, as it is known, to also recognize the ability to create new ideas and processes from existing information—skills that are highly valued in contemporary workplaces. In other words, a creative learner will combine information gleaned from diverse sources to form new knowledge. Figure 1 shows the relationship among the domains of the revised learning taxonomy followed by a brief explanation of each domain.

The lower three domains (remember, understand, and apply) are considered the basic levels at which the learner manipulates information to show familiarity and flexibility with the concepts and ideas found in such information:

**Level 1: Remember.** At the lowest level of learning, one recalls or memorizes basic concepts, facts, terms, and answers. This level typically involves the most tasks and asks students factual questions (what, when, where, why, and how). The answers to such questions are explicitly stated in the text. An example of a recall task might be to list three functional areas or divisions in a business organization.

**Level 2: Understand.** At this level, one comprehends or understands the meaning of information and organizes and compares elements of the information. Students will understand some of the concepts based on common knowledge or previous lessons, and they may also have to consult a reference book (dictionary, thesaurus, etc.) for other meanings. An example of a comprehension task might be to explain the difference between the marketing and accounting functions in a business.

**Level 3: Apply.** Here, one applies facts, rules, and techniques contained in a set of information to other familiar situations in order to show relationships (similarities, differences, congruencies, etc.). This inferential task shows the student’s ability to cross-reference the information. An example of an application task might be to describe the functional area of marketing to a job applicant who enjoys meeting people, trying new things, and designing new products.

The upper three domains (analyze, evaluate, and create) require deeper thinking about the information read. The reader must answer questions whose answers are not obvious, make decisions, solve problems, and create new knowledge. A learning activity may culminate with questions or tasks in all or any of the three upper-level domains. Business communication courses, for example, should engage students in learning tasks in the upper domains to prepare them for similar tasks when they enter the workforce.

**Level 4: Analyze.** At this level, one breaks information into separate elements to examine each element and its relationship with other elements. An example of an analytical task might be to compare accounting tasks that require the most computer automation with those that require the least, and then decide how each set of tasks affects the accounting cycle.

**Level 5: Evaluate.** At the evaluation stage, one judges the quality and worth of the elements and relationships using external criteria. An example of an evaluation task might be to justify the proposal to automate customer orders and product deliveries as a cost-effective measure for a business.

**Level 6: Create.** At the creation level, one forms new ideas and processes using findings at the previous levels. An example of a creation task might be to
design an automated system to simplify the process of product demonstration, order taking, product delivery, and customer payment.

Bloom's Taxonomy, intended for use in various teaching and learning situations, has become the dominant model in curriculum and lesson planning. Teachers are expected to define course assignments using measurable action verbs at the different levels of learning through the tasks described above. Figure 2 shows a table of action verbs listed by domain; many more examples of action verbs can be found by keying the terms “action verbs” and “Bloom's Revised Taxonomy” into a Web search engine. Note, however, that some action verbs work well across domains and may appear in several columns of an action verb sheet. Thus, the desired outcome would determine the domain level of a task rather than the use of a particular action verb.

Using Business Articles
Finding appropriate, provocative news articles in business and trade publications is relatively easy, as the Internet allows for easy access to such articles. Business teachers should choose reading material about current events and issues that students find interesting and relevant in articles with fewer than 200 words from publications such as Business Week and The Wall Street Journal. Business teachers may want to require students to read the articles and then participate in small group discussions, write summaries and analytical responses, and even make short presentations on the topics they read. The articles may be used as catalysts for project proposals and research.
reports. Once located, business teachers should print the articles and distribute them to students, especially the first few times they do this type of exercise. This process will allow students to focus more on reading the article and to be less distracted by the clutter of a typical Web page. This approach also enhances quick reading and face-to-face class discussion, especially for the lower-level learning tasks for which students need to focus intently on the meaning of the content of the article to ensure thorough comprehension and application of the concepts. Once students learn to master this first-level reading of business articles, they can move to Web sites layered with rich graphics, videos, reference sites, and interactive tools. Here is an excerpt of a short Business Week ("Ohio Ice-Cream Maker," 2012) article to which the learning taxonomy can be applied:

An Ohio ice cream maker is voluntarily recalling some of its peanut-butter flavored products because of suspected salmonella contamination. Velvet Ice Cream said Thursday that some of the peanut products bought from Sunland Inc. for use in the ice cream flavors could be contaminated. The recalled Velvet products are mostly sold at convenience stores, ice cream parlors and small, independent retailers in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. The possibly affected Velvet brands include Peanut Butter Cup, Supreme Peanut Butter Cup and Buckeye Classic. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it is investigating the presence of salmonella in samples taken from the Sunland Inc. production facility.

Level 1: Remember
• What company recalled its ice cream due to contamination?
• Where is the company located?
• In which states was the ice cream distributed?
• In what types of stores was the ice cream sold?
• State the name of the suspected contaminant.
• Name the plant source of the contaminant.
• What agency investigated the suspected contamination?

Level 2: Understand
• Explain a voluntary product recall.
• Describe a production facility.
• Define food contamination.
• What is salmonella?
• Explain the difference between a convenience store and an ice cream parlor.
• Identify the geographic location of the states where contaminated ice cream was sold.

Level 3: Apply
• Explain why a company would voluntarily recall its contaminated product.
• Differentiate between a voluntary and an involuntary product recall.
• Describe the information that a company would provide in a product recall.

Level 4: Analyze
• Identify the steps that a company usually takes when it recalls a product.
• Describe the role of retailers in a product recall.
• Describe the role of the media in a product recall.

Level 5: Evaluate
• Debate the advantages and disadvantages of a voluntary product recall.
• Discuss two effective ways to communicate a product recall to customers.
• How might consumers and the media react to a recall announcement?

Level 6: Create
• Develop specific steps that Velvet Ice Cream might use to recall the tainted ice cream.
• Write a "bad news" letter addressed to customers announcing the voluntary recall of the contaminated ice cream. The letter will be published in the major newspapers in the states or areas where the ice cream was sold.

Implementation Issues
The business news reading exercise may be appealing to some students and tedious for others. Some students may be impatient completing tasks at the lower-level domains of the reading exercise, as the questions seem simplistic and obvious to them, but business teachers need to lay a common foundation of understanding for the ideas and issues expressed in the article in order to ensure more effective learning and task completion at the higher domains. Furthermore, concepts that business teachers assume "everyone should know" (as a student might interject) can become barriers to performing more advanced reading tasks; the frustration some students express often reflects a tendency to skim reading material, to be distracted by busy Web pages, or to fail to engage with the ideas expressed in the articles.

When performing the reading activity in class for the first time, business teachers may find that having students focus on each learning domain in succession so that they master answering the particular types of questions and complete such tasks at each level before moving to the next is an effective approach. The types of tasks should be varied to give students a variety of experiences with the method. These activities include worksheets, quizzes, and discussions. Students may locate other articles than those provided on the topic, share experiences and stories that match the situation under discussion, or even make impromptu speeches. As students become more comfortable completing the reading tasks, business teachers may challenge them with more complex, layered reading activities. For example, stories on the Wall Street Journal's Web site often have tabs with labels such as stock quotes, videos, slideshows, interactive graphics, and comments. This Web site widely uses...
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charts and graphs, so students are able to learn to read visuals and cross-referenced data about a variety of topics.

Conclusions

Business instructors do not give as much time and attention to building reading skills as they do for writing and speaking in business communication courses. As information from multiple sources continues to grow, business students entering the workforce must be able to read in careful, strategic ways so they can make effective decisions that will enhance their performance as well as the productivity of their organizations. More than three decades ago Sumner (1979) advised that "the business teacher is in an excellent position to teach and reinforce the learning of reading skills" (p. 22). Thus, teachers have both a challenge and an opportunity to incorporate reading pedagogy in business communication courses so that business students will be better prepared to secure positions that require effective reading and other communication skills.

References


Clive Muir is an associate professor in the Rusche College of Business at Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX. He can be contacted by e-mail at muirc@sfasu.edu.