

July 1998

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Recommended Citation

Power, Mary R., "Frontismatter" (1998). *Working Through Communication*. Paper 1.
http://epublications.bond.edu.au/working_through_communication/1

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Working through Communication

“Education is not filling a bucket
but lighting a fire.”
(William Butler Yeats)

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WORKING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

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RATIONALE

Working Through Communication is a handbook for creating an active-learning tutorial at tertiary level. It is a multi-purpose book designed for use within a wide range of entry level communication courses in conjunction with more detailed texts. As an adjunct to lectures and texts it provides structured material and related writing and speaking exercises for interactive small-group tutorial sessions. Alternatively it can be used in distance education or flexible delivery courses where the student is provided with individual exercises and tasks to be undertaken at his or her own pace.

Key findings of adult learning suggest that involvement in planning and selection of learning materials motivates adult learners. Generally this is difficult to achieve when courses have to be planned well before the students come to the first class. However, *Working through communication* allows course co-ordinators and tutors to work with students in selecting reading, writing and interactive material to complement what is provided in lectures and textbooks. Students can be involved in planning their own learning, allowing lecturers and tutors to become facilitators in the learning process.

Although a “good” lecturer who can skilfully integrate visual aids, intriguing examples and an enthusiastic tone can often convey a great deal of information in a short time, this is not always the case and students attending lectures are often placed in the role of passive audience members. Greater involvement is possible in interactive and participatory learning settings where students learn best by interacting with one another via structured materials utilising information and ideas they have gained through lectures, through their reading of textbooks and through library research.

Tutorials provide opportunities for such interaction facilitated by academic staff. With this book, students and tutors can participate in planning the semester’s learning experiences and the order in which they will be done (depending on the list of lectures planned in the course, the assessment set, the background and interests of the students and other relevant factors).

Students and tutors can negotiate their program week by week, or they can spend part of the first or second tutorial deciding on a program for the entire semester.

Alternatively students may elect to have their tutors choose activities which best fit the nature of the particular course and its assessment requirements. The timetable at the back of the book allows tutorial work to be set for courses of up to 14 weeks.

EXPERIENTIAL CHOICE BASED LEARNING IN GROUPS

This book is based on the idea that most great teachers, - (from Socrates, Lewin, and A.S. Neill to John Holt) - emphasised that students learn best by interaction with ideas. Sometimes this interaction is by talking and listening, at other times it is by writing to share ideas. At all times it is based on listening to, reading or watching the ideas of others to create messages that can meet learners' needs and interests. Increasingly "lecturers" attempt to allow for some interaction. The idea of students sitting silently passive for one or two hours is under scrutiny. However, the lecture still has its proponents who argue that "you cannot not communicate"—that being passive in a lecture is impossible. Prepared students are adding what the lecturer says to what they know and sorting it out and creating new syntheses of ideas ready for them to write down or talk about later. Even students who are not prepared are analysing the lecturer's style and content and evaluating it, even if only for its entertainment value.

Experiential choice-based learning requires that lecturers allow time for short conversations between students, that lecturers challenge expectations and arouse interest by raising topics that can be discussed later. Perhaps lecturers will seek to present unpopular or new ideas to encourage debate and reflection. Some interaction with students is possible even in lectures. Questions can be raised and answered by students. Students can be encouraged to talk briefly with one another. However, many will choose to reflect in journal entries or air their reflections in smaller, less formal tutorial settings. It is in these settings that, using this book, students can play an active part in choosing the kinds of activities and interactions that will help them develop life-long communication skills in relating productively and peacefully with other people and in speaking and writing to larger, more widespread audiences.

Working through Communication is divided into chapters covering speaking, writing to and relating with others.

For each chapters area activities and exercises for knowledge and skill development are provided.

Each broad content area includes some or all of—

- Quotable quotes
- Introduction: a brief introduction to the area
- Issues: key issues in the area
- Discussion exercises
- Team tasks
- Individual tasks
- Writing tasks
- Speech opportunities
- Journal suggestions
- Sources of further information

TO THE STUDENT: Rationale for tasks in broad content areas

Topic: This is the general content or focus of the week's lectures or interactions.

Preparatory Reading: Each week choose to read a section from your text book or other sources. Books provide you with access to teachers other than those in your own university—writers of textbooks generally base their texts on their own synthesis of the field. Each tertiary course should teach you how to learn in your discipline or how to acquire knowledge generally. There are many excellent texts in the Communication area. Your lecturer may have chosen one which best fits his or her ideas about the course. You may find that another text explains things more clearly or is more interesting or covers the whole course better. Many text-book authors today write in a style directed towards meeting student needs and showing students how material is relevant. You might want access to several texts in the area. In addition, each area of the basic Communication course - speaking, writing and relating - is covered by specialist texts which go beyond basic instruction in the area to provide you with more depth. Your library will give you access to these.

Discussion Tasks: Students learn a great deal from one another informally. Discussion brings sharing of knowledge into the classroom and allows young, mature age, and overseas students to learn rules of interaction from one another. However, discussions are ultimately frustrating and a waste of time if they are a mere pooling of ignorance. By preparing material you can bring knowledge to discussions. By attempting to anticipate problems before they come up you can formulate plans and use problem solving techniques. The sharing of ideas that comes as a result of a prepared discussion can show you that others in the group will arrive at different conclusions from yours and that you may need to persuade others of your point of view. Alternatively you may see the validity of other perspectives.

Team Tasks: Employers have claimed that universities and colleges, like schools before them, prepare graduates to work as individuals rather than people who can function productively in groups or teams. Tertiary institutions have responded by setting group assignments, often without training you in the communication and relationship building skills necessary for efficient and productive group functioning. Frequent use of team tasks together with some knowledge of group dynamics and how groups function will enable you to gain skills in working with people of different ages, from different cultures and of a different sex.

Individual Tasks: Not all of one's life can be spent in the security of a group. In fact, selection to some groups is dependent on the level of individual skills one has. You need chances to work away from the group—perhaps reporting to it on your individual findings and skill development.

Writing Tasks: Introductory communication courses are frequently set up to ensure that students understand the expectations of tertiary institutions, business and the professions regarding written communication. Accordingly, academic essay writing and report writing and presentation are an essential core of most courses and many focus also on the writing of faxes, memos and e-mail.

Speaking Tasks: Awareness of the need for training in public speaking and self-presentation in interview situations is currently high, perhaps because so few of Australia's academic and business leaders have learnt how to make a presentation or give a structured speech. Those who have are generally hailed as heroes or at least as different from other mortals, when speaking in public ought to be regarded as an everyday activity—as fun, as an opportunity to share ideas with a group of people, through interacting with them, to understand how they, in turn, respond and to influence them towards acceptance of your ideas.

Work Journal Tasks: Reflection and consolidation of what has been introduced into the student's existing store of knowledge and ideas is an essential part of learning. Most tertiary courses are so crowded with content and with new experiences that they cannot include time in class for such reflection. Work Journals are an individual way of sorting and categorising experience. Some students who take longer than others to formulate ideas welcome the chance to revisit the previous tutorial or lecture experience in their journals. Discussion about work journal entries can provide a weekly revision exercise. Work journals like this are somewhat like Captain Cook's log. They tell what has happened and where you have been, but they also provide an opportunity to consider the past and plan or structure future activities. Writing a work journal in itself also provides excellent writing practice.

General Texts:

Texts such as those listed below can be used to provide background reading for tasks from this book:

Adler, R.B. & Rodman, C. (1997). *Understanding human communication* (6th ed.). Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.

Beisler, F., Scheeres, H. & Pinner, D. (1993). *Communication skills*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

Bové, C. & Thill, J. (1995). *Business communication today* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Daniels, T. & Spiker, B.K. (1994). *Perspectives on organisational communication*. Madison: Brown & Benchmark.

DeVito, J. (1991). *Human Communication* (5th ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

Kaye, M. (1994). *Communication management*. Sydney: Prentice Hall.

Lewis, G. & Slade, C. (1994). *Critical communication*. Sydney: Prentice Hall.

Lucas, S. (1995). *The art of public speaking* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

McLaren, M. & Locker, K.O. (1995). *Business and administrative communication*. Sydney: Irwin.

Mohan, T., McGregor, H. & Saunders, S. and Archee, R., Z. (1997). *Communicating! Theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

O'Hair, D., Friedrich, G. & Shaver, L.D. (1995). *Strategic communication in business and the professions*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Putnis, P. & Petelin, R. (1996). *Professional communication: Principles and applications*. Sydney: Prentice Hall.

Tubbs, S.L., & Moss, S. (1994). *Human communication* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Windschuttle, K. & Elliot, E. (1995). *Writing, researching, communicating: Communication skills for the information age* (2nd ed.). Sydney: McGraw-Hill.

Academic & professional writing skills:

Anderson, J., & Poole, M. (1994). *Thesis and assignment writing* (2nd ed.). Brisbane: John Wiley.

Clanchy, J., & Ballard, B. (1994). *Essay writing for students: A practical guide*. Melbourne: Longmans.

Petelin, R., & Durham, M. (1992). *The professional writing guide: Writing well and knowing why*. Melbourne: Longmans.