Beyond Basic: A Temporal Study of Curriculum Changes in A First-year Communication Course

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Abstract

Communication courses in most institutions are seen as basic courses. Fundamental principles, core competencies and context-based activities, mostly constitute part of introductory or core courses in communication across professional degree colleges in India. Most educators aspire to develop a comprehensive course that is sound in method and outcome, and prepares the learners for their future. Over the years, these courses have undergone gradual changes. The transformations and adoptions in these courses, and what they indicate has however been undervalued. The ecology of education, classroom practices and the needs of these courses have changed. The student learning preferences and teacher-student equation has changed, thus demanding more student-centric practices. The course develops as needs evolve. This paper works on an exploratory study of the first year communication courses offered through twenty years at a premier management institution, to evaluate the changes in the same. The evolution of the course over time, with changes in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, is studied and mapped. Tools like WordStat8 and ATLAS.ti have primarily been used for analysis of qualitative data. The findings of the temporal analysis of course content and important developments are presented to understand the changes the course has undergone.

Keywords

Temporal Study, Curricular Change, Ecology of Education, Student Learning Preferences, Qualitative Study.

1. Introduction

Teaching adults needs a different approach, method and implementation technique when compared to child education. Adults in their classes are generally more critical, active in decision making and reason "how" they learn, "why" they learn and what they will do with they are learning. Knowles' andragogy model, recognizes and gives importance to the "need-to-know", "immediacy of application", "sharing of life experiences" as a knowledge source, independence, self-direction and ownership of learning. These can be used to identify their needs from a learning program. (Knowles, 1980, 1984; Knowles et al., 1998).

Autonomy, self-direction, and fondness for real-life learning have also been mentioned as key characteristics of learners in this group, by theorists in the area (Tough 1977; Brookfield, 1986; Fellenz & Conti, 1989; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The design of the program, instruction methods and classroom environment play an effective role in determining program effectiveness.

Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), in his view of development, saw the intimate involvement of language in the process of learning and development. A student's existing knowledge and capacity to learn determines their potential for learning. Children mediate their actions through the use of language. When faced with any difficulty, a child communicates with an adult, processes the response and this socialized speech is internalized consequentially. So language and communication, being central to learning, have major implications for teaching too.

Learning is a function of the learner's interaction and co-operation with people in and his environment. It is seen that the potential for achievement can be maximized in the presence of a more experienced, skilled or informed adult or peer. This is a departure from the notion of age being the main measure of development.

So, along with age related staged development, demands from the stages of learning are also changing. Approaches to learning have undergone major changes, and so have methods of teaching. Any approach to inquiry is best categorized "not by its method, but by the kinds of questions that it finds worth investigating". (Sprague, "Expanding the Research Agenda," p.4)

Similarly, expectations from the teacher are also different now. In Bruner's words, the teacher functions as a manifestation of his (the learner's) unfulfilled learning goals, as a form of "consciousness" for the learner, till the learner has mastered his own actions. (Bruner, 1985, p. 24). The teacher's role in Freire's perspective is to pose problems about 'codified existential situations in order to help learners arrive at a more critical view of their reality' (Freire, 1971).

Darkenwald (1986) had earlier concluded, somewhat similar to this, in his research synthesis of effective approaches to teaching basic skills. He also confirmed that what made up contemporary practice in adult literacy education, could be put into into three broad models or approaches: competency-based education, tutorial approaches, and community-based approaches. Fingeret (1989) observed, that, "In practice, competency-based programs tend to judge adults' existing skills by a predefined list that reflects the activities deemed most necessary for those whose goal is to live among or be subservient to the middle class and to conduct their lives as the middle class thinks it is correct for them to conduct their lives". Is competency dependant on other demands?

Many management colleges offer courses in Communication and Business Communication as a 'core course'. Gehrke (2018) expands the missions of communication education, *"The civic mission of communication education was grounded in the powerful role speech plays in communal and political life. The professional mission of communication education was grounded in the centrality of effective expression and coordination in economic affairs."* But, the importance given to the course by many colleges and the learners is hardly high and barely extends beyond the first semester or year. Similarly, there is little to no scholarship in research of the same too.

The reason for the same may be attributed to lack of cohesion among the pedagogy, curriculum and evaluation at multiple levels. The course, not being industry-oriented, also, is a major reason for lack of interest and scholarly investment. There is a discrepancy seen when the theory learnt in the top institutes is not practiced well by the same students joining the industry in their specific area of expertise. *"They were unable to go beyond the book and think of new and novel concepts. Many intelligent students often lack the best presentation skills, are not confident conversing in languages other than their mother tongue, lack initiative, do not display leadership and cannot adapt easily to new surroundings.* "Balakrishnan, S. (2014). The course is required to be dynamic and adaptable.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To track significant themes in the content of the course outline through thematic analysis.
- To check if the course 'syllabus' over years has undergone specific changes.
- To receive inputs from significant stakeholders about required changes, to help the future of the course.

3. Research Methodology

Sources of Data- Primary data was sourced from two sources- documents and participants.

Documents used were course outlines of communication courses from year 2000 (Batch 2000-2002) to 2019 (Batch 2019-2021).

Participants included two sets of respondents which used a list-based sample representative of the students and teachers who have been involved with the learning and administration of the course.

The first set included former students-alumni of our educational institution, who have studied the course in communication, as part of their MBA/ PGDBM course. The second included teachers i.e. professors, who have taught any course in communication in our institute in the last 20 years. They have also been involved in the designing and improvement of the course design and pedagogy.

3.1 Sampling Methods

For sampling, the research used a list-based sampling frame, based on available e-mail addresses of alumni. The list was procured from the students co-ordinators of our institute's Alumni association. To enable ease of filling up, we included a URL embedded questionnaire. **Student-alumni from the years 1990 to 2015 were contacted for their feedback.** These were sent to their secondary email addresses.

3.2 Design and Procedure

The research design of this study was exploratory.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

For data collection from alumni, the research used a structured questionnaire. For inputs from professors, an unstructured interview schedule was used to collect responses.

3.4 Response Rate

We have included valid responses of about 8.5 % from our alumni base across the last 20 years. Inputs from 5 professors of communication (and related subjects) have been recorded.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

For participant responses, Thematic Analysis was used for analysing interviews and questionnaires. "Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns and themes within the data". Braun and Clarke (2006), maintain that a theme should capture something important about the data in relation to your research questions, and represent some level of patterned meaning or response within the dataset. Questionnaire responses were exported to excel and analysed. Thematic analysis was also used for studying faculty interviews.

For the Content Analysis and Text Mining of documents, we used WordStat8. Topic extraction using first order word co-occurrences. Hierarchical clustering and multi-dimensional scaling was done. This helped find major underlying themes, keywords that have multiple occurrences to understand maximum occurring topics. We also used Association (occurrence) to understand which topics and areas of study have maximum dependence across the years and therefore are dependant as areas of study.

4. Review of Literature

Literature has been largely studied for understanding the three factors of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. It then extends to study factors in classroom dynamics.

The method followed is that of an integrated literature review. *An Integrated research review synthesizes "the accumulated state of knowledge on similar or related educational topics, highlighting important issues and trends in that body of scholarship". The reviewer then "shapes a coherent whole within a comprehensive, systematic structure (comparable with primary research) describing how the particular issue is conceptualized within the literature, how research methods and theories have shaped the outcomes, strengths and weaknesses of the literature."* - Dochy, F. (2006). This helped identify the main theories, themes and methods associated with the research objective.

The literature has been researched and integrated along the main themes of pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation, classroom environment and ecology of education. The significant views from literature are presented below.

Curriculum

The curriculum in many communication courses is restricted to English and English language alone. The need for communication training in an undergraduate curriculum has been stressed upon by scholars like Hunt et al., 2001. This can be extended to the postgraduate program as the need is often partially fulfilled. Isa Engleberg (2018) provides a paradigm for curriculum and assessment, while accepting the diversity of courses that emerge at each institution. Nicholas Zoffel extracts a kind of auto-ethnographic argument for critical communication paradigms that gives readers a glimpse into his classroom practices.

Pedagogy

Omar Swartz (1995) opined that, as a discipline, communication studies has significantly undertheorized its pedagogy, especially in relation to the "basic" course. Similarly, Gehrke, P. J. (2018) opines that "How we teach our first-year courses is especially deserving of scholarly attention given the complexity of what we teach. ". The textbook is still seen as a compulsory part of pedagogy. Deanna Fassett critiques the outdated theories and approaches that dominate the textbooks and the narratives that structure our relationship to first-year courses (2018). Similarly, with the evolution of technology and movement to blended learning and hybrid classrooms, the medium of instruction is important. Friere (1970, 2003) said that 'education suffered from "narration sickness". In many areas, especially in India, language becomes a barrier. Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), in his view of development, saw the intimate involvement of language in the process of learning and development. A student's existing knowledge and capacity to learn determines their potential for learning.

Similarly, Luke LeFebvre explains how team-based learning works as a model for courses like public speaking. Given the awareness and evidence that internet, information and technologies are transforming generations, we can safely believe that it will be the defining 'transformative innovation' for higher education in the 21st century. Transformation of learning environments for an increasingly electronic world is critical to ensure that the benefits are fully realized (Williams, 2002).

Evaluation

"Evaluation is the collection of, analysis and interpretation of information about any aspect of a programme of education or training as part of a recognised process of judging its effectiveness, its efficiency and any other outcomes it may have." Mary Thorpe, 1988). Evaluation is both a continuous process and a phased exercise. It serves as an internal monitor in the programme, to review the progress in learning from time to time. It helps to gain valuable insight on the design and implementation of the programme. It also plays an enormous role in understanding the teaching-learning process and helps improve both teaching and learning.

It is easier to plan evaluation based on levels and depth. Romiszowski (1988) differentiates between the scope (Levels of Evaluation) and depth (Levels of Analysis) of an evaluation. He mentions four levels of evaluation.

Classroom environment and ecology of education

A classroom is a behavior setting, so it may be also described as an eco-behavioral unit, composed of segments that surround and regulate behavior (Gump, 1967, 1969). Classroom ecology studies focus on the classroom micro-system, seek to describe and explain the interactions of students' thoughts and behaviors with teachers' management of academic goals and learning tasks (Hastie, P. A., & Siedentop, D., 2006).

Classroom dynamism, task systems and classroom environment emerged as the major focus areas of researchers (Glasser 1993, Groundwater-Smith 1998, Allyn & Bacon, 2001). Along with this, the student- teacher equation and the roles played by the teacher in various stages of management education are of importance.

5. Limitations of the Study

This is a study conducted in one management institute and the results may face problems of generalization.

6. Findings

The areas covered as part of the course have been vast and also show that it adapts to the needs of the batch and the industry.

Language and communication is a major and essential part. Skills like 'persuasion', negotiation, culture (and sensitivity), etiquette, technology (interaction) are major parts too.

The main concentration has been on the "Individual", "Group", "Writing", "Presentation", "Discussion", "Feedback", "Effective(ness)" and "Skills" through the years.

Similarly, Communication skills and Personal have been used in maximum interaction with technical skills like report writing and letters; and presentations individually and in groups (Co-occurrence).

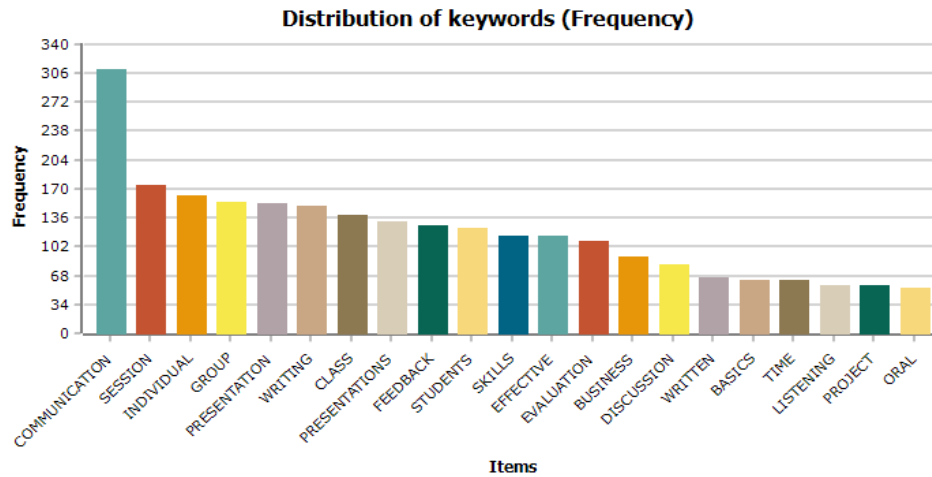## 6.1 Document Analysis Thematic Analysis
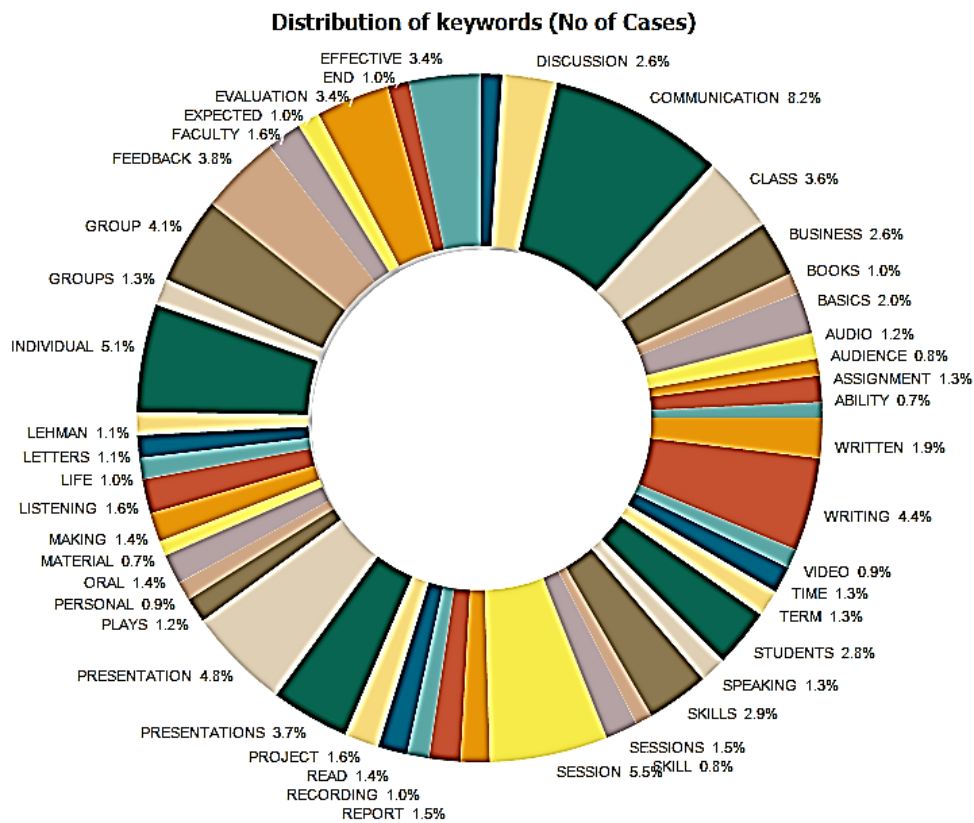
Fig-1 Distribution of Keywords (No of Cases)

The major keywords over the years have been Presentation/s – 8.5 % (combined), Communication-8.2% Individual-6.1%, Group/s-5.4% (combined), Writing/ written-5.3% and Feedback-3.8%.

6.2 Content Analysis

Fig-2 Distribution of Keywords (Frequency)

Similarly, the focus over the years has been highest on the individual and the group, presentations, writing and feedback.

We tried to check which technical skills have the maximum co-occurrence with communication skills (personal) and found that presentations, writing of reports and letters and plays and videos (practice sessions) had maximum co-occurrence.
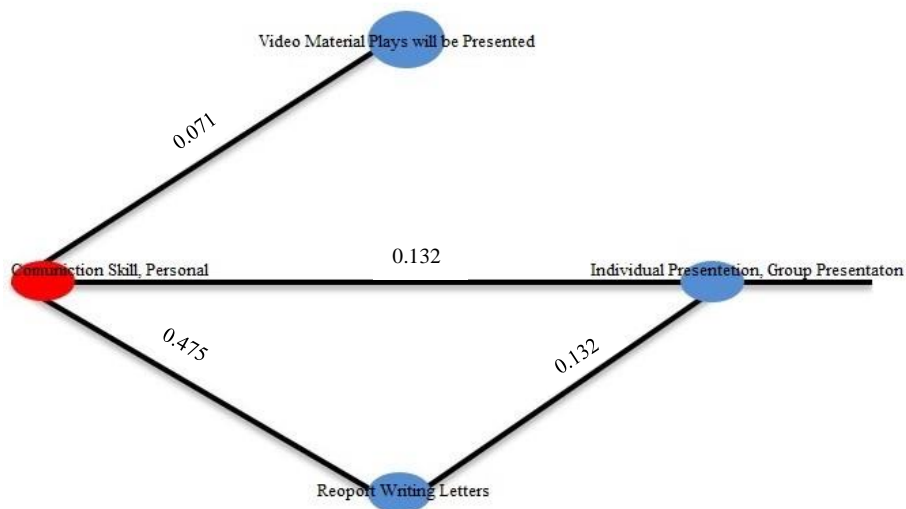
Fig-3 Link Analysis: Co-oppurence with Communication Skill

Evaluation patterns showed a systematic shift with changes from more written work to presentations. The years where there were common patterns, have been clubbed together. The use of more technology, saw the entrance of technical presentations and analytical skills and social media communication through branding. End-terms have remained a constant through the years. Individual presentations and group projects are still a major part of the assessment, encouraging small-group communication.
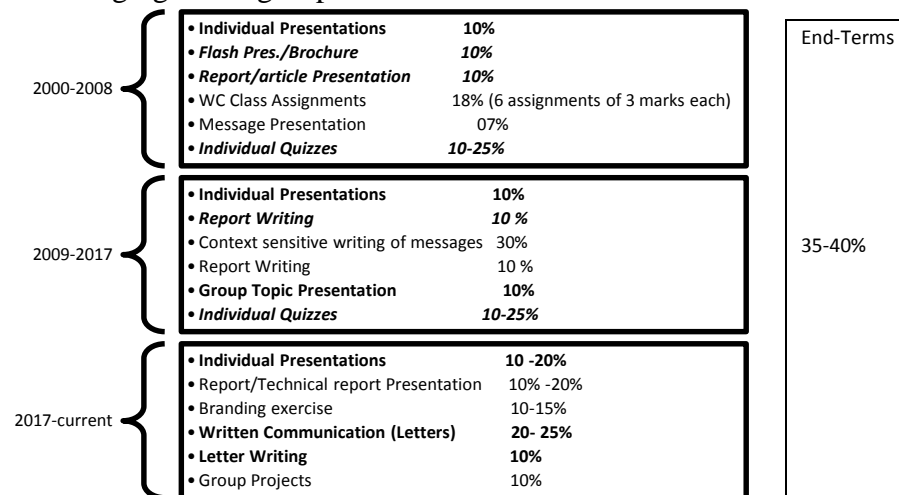
2000-2008	• Individual Presentations	10%	End-Terms
	• *Flash Pres./Brochure*	*10%*	
	• *Report/article Presentation*	*10%*	
	• WC Class Assignments	18% (6 assignments of 3 marks each)	
	• Message Presentation	07%	
	• *Individual Quizzes*	*10-25%*	
2009-2017	• Individual Presentations	10%	35-40%
	• *Report Writing*	*10 %*	
	• Context sensitive writing of messages	30%	
	• Report Writing	10 %	
	• Group Topic Presentation	10%	
	• *Individual Quizzes*	*10-25%*	
2017-current	• Individual Presentations	10 -20%	
	• Report/Technical report Presentation	10% -20%	
	• Branding exercise	10-15%	
	• Written Communication (Letters)	20- 25%	
	• Letter Writing	10%	
	• Group Projects	10%	

Fig-4 Thematic Analysis: Evaluation

6.3 Input from Participants

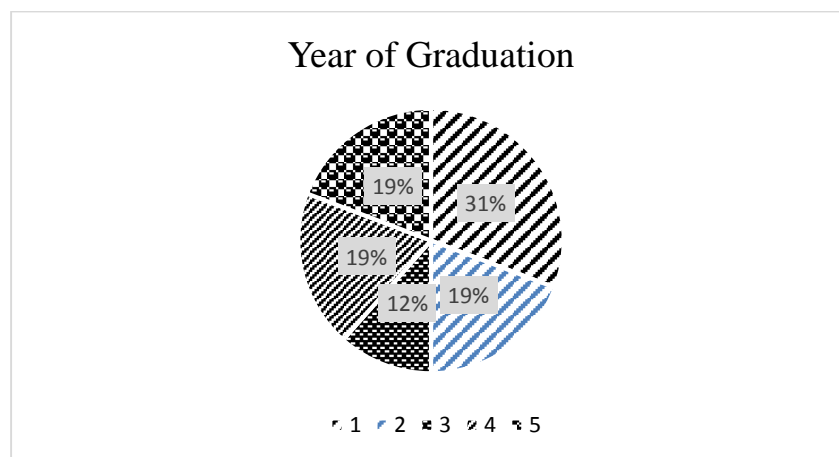**Alumni**

Participant Profile

Fig-5 Input from Participants

Nature of Questions

The questions were about:

- Their experience and learning from their communication course.
- The main thing they remembered from the course.
- Whether it was theory/practice oriented or a balanced one.
- Suggestions were invited for content.

6.4 Responses

Table-1 Responses

• **What are the 3 main topics that you remember studying in your Communication course at XIMB?**	• Speaking, Writing, Reading
	• The line – common is the most uncommon thing
	• Giving a speech recorded on video for analysis
	• Writing official letters and importance of dressing right
	• Channels of communication, communication
	• Presentation skills
	• Written correspondence, Letter writhing
	• Body language
• **Suggest any 3 topics that you feel should be part of a communication course**	• 1) Handling difficult conversation 2) Giving feedback 3) Nonviolent communication
	• Non-verbal communication, negotiation skills and efficient use of social media
	• Presentation skills, decoding non-verbal communication, conducting effective meetings
	• Online communication Précis writing marketing communication

■Was the course more theory-oriented, practice-oriented, or a good mix of both?

100%
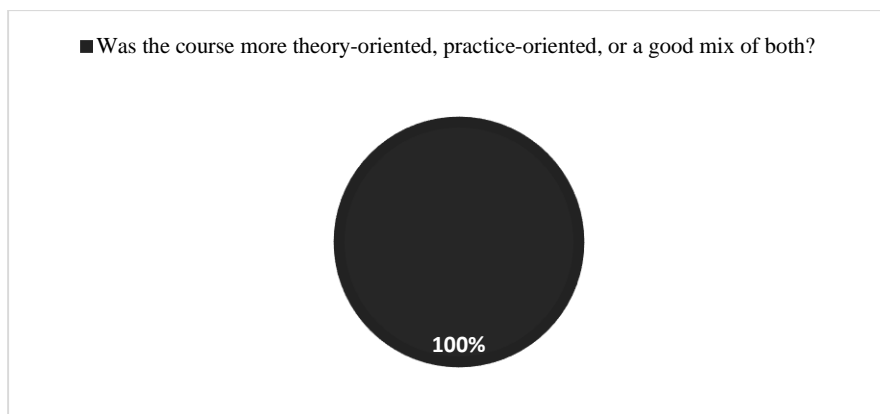
Fig-6 Course Orientation: Theory vs Practice Orientation

6.5 Faculty Response

Faculty of the area who have taught or are teaching the course were interviewed about their experiences with the course curriculum and in the classroom, 2 of the 5 faculty are not teaching core courses currently, but are currently Deans of schools, so their inputs were very valuable. The faculty are in the capacities of Dean(s) of schools, Dean-Career Advisory Services, Professor and Associate Professor. The 1st column asked them about their experience in the past, while the next analyses incorporation currently and the last looks at future directions for the course.

Table-2

Suggestions in the past	Incorporated	Suggestions for the future
How to handle difficult situations and conversations	A module A special course is offered that has a special focus on aspects	How to handle crisis
Formal writing, technicalities of writing	Is a major part of both parts of the basic course(s)	
Attitude, emotions and lack of confidence	A significant portion is concentrated on personality & personal development	Individual concentration and other elements to help emotional strength are being considered
Technically equipped presentations	A special module has been added. It has been a major up gradation in the last 2 years	
Technical Reports	Report writing and analysis	Summarizing and paraphrasing
Selection of content for presentations	Part of technical presentations	How to frame logical arguments

7. Summary

The paper analyses and puts into perspective the three pillars of many courses taught at higher education institutions, in India. The three pillars are curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. For a course to be effective and impactful in its delivery, it also needs to be dynamic.

Gradual change was required to make the course industry driven. The curriculum was initially teaching communication concepts with little or no focus on solving business-related problems. Students were not able to take the concepts to the field, and lacked clarity about how to apply them. So, the course gradually changed to include 'true-to-life' and 'real-life' situations. Learning needs in terms of concepts, skills, competencies and needs have been arranged in a hierarchy, to make it a robust two-level course that it operates as currently.

Earlier, pedagogy centred on teaching and memorization of concepts. They were presented through slides or reading assignments from books and articles. Participation was more from the faculty. Sessions were either theory-centric or faculty-centric. Presentations by students, were assessed more for style. Now, the focus has shifted to the student. The faculty essentially plays the role of the facilitator, who helps the students to learn by doing. Peer learning is also actively encouraged.

Since, the focus was earlier on theory and concepts, heavy weightage was given to evaluation of the same. Some presentations-individually and in groups, and some written assignments, as part mid-term evaluations, were part of evaluations earlier. Presently, students are evaluated throughout the year on their understanding of interpretative situations that are real-life or true-to-life. They are evaluated on how well they are able to adapt theory and implement their learnings.

The course is student-centric, suggestions given by senior faculty have been incorporated in part or full. As seen in the views of alumni and faculty alike, it is required to deliver education and training in many vital skills related to personal development and communication. The suggestions of alumni can also be said to be slightly representative of industry needs, and most of them are taken into consideration in designing specific modules.

Over the years, the course has changed by taking into consideration needs and demands of the learning environment and has accommodated the same. It is a student-centric course and needs to be designed accordingly. It can be seen that the areas of major concentration are still recalled by alumni and vital components of evaluation are still steady. These reflect fundamental strength and sustainability of practice. Activities and exercises form a vital part of the course, so, it is not just about the textbook and its contents.

8. Conclusion

Good communication skills are needed for effective and efficient performance in all business situations. The course helps them develop

oral and written skills while performing effectively both as an individual and as a member of groups, which help them to understand teams in business contexts. Theory needs to be guided by application to make it meaningful in the real world. Students need to know where and how to go beyond books to make learning meaningfully applicable. Communication and interactive skills help to accentuate the performance in and delivery of skills learnt in other courses too. The course helps them gauge the needs and adjust to the changing business 'environment too. So, Communication is not just a basic course, but more a 'fundamental' course for any business school student.

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