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ENHANCING THE COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY OF BUSINESS UNDERGRADUATES: A CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Explaining how individuals acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively participate in society is often accomplished through Socialization Theory. We investigate numerous socialization agents and their relationship with the communication competency of university business majors. Communication competency (reading, writing, and verbal) was measured via both a standardized skill test and self-report. Exploratory analysis was conducted upon high and low communication competency groups that were identified via cluster analysis. Our findings generally indicate the most important socialization agents are via personal interactions whereas the least important socialization agents are influencing via primarily electronic or media-based methods.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although universities endeavor to prepare their students for careers in the workforce, many potential employers criticize the educational system for its failure to provide graduates with adequate verbal and written communication skills for the workplace (Du-Babcock 2006). Communication courses have been consistently ranked as crucial to advancement and promotion (Reave 2004) and have been frequently associated with career success (Goris 2007; Johlke 2006). Other studies show that higher salaries are available to those who have strong writing skills (Grensing-Pophal 2003; Radcliff 2007).

A substantial body of research focuses on remediation of communication inadequacies through classroom pedagogy (Schneider 2005). Various skills related to reading and writing are vital components to business communication classes (Stowers and Barker 2002) and continue to be components of communication that are evaluated by standardized testing. Besides considering basic skill components, research has also

examined how by creatively integrating communication throughout the curriculum, communication competency can be enhanced (Young and Murphy 2003).

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Overlooked in the communication research has been the manner in which a love of reading and writing can be instilled among students and how this can affect communication competency or, put another way, how students are socialized to the communication process. Although a less direct means of intervention than curriculum and pedagogy related to communication, this does not diminish the possibility that a communication-socialization process may have profound impact on the ability to communicate effectively. More effective socialization related to communication may provide a foundation that will allow educators to more effectively leverage pedagogical innovation in the classroom. This exploratory study is designed to begin to understand how the socialization process affects the communication skills among today's business undergraduates in terms of their communication competency and, thus, their potential for success in the workplace.

The study is unique by virtue of the fact that rather than measuring only a surrogate of communication ability such as grades in writing classes, GPA, or self-reported perception of communication competency; rather, actual communication competency was measured by administering a test, based on the formats used in standardized tests, of reading, verbal, and writing skills. A surrogate measure, self-reported perception of communication competency was also measured so that actual and perceived communication competency could be compared.

III. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Socialization Theory

Socialization theory examines the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to participate effectively as members of groups and of the society at-large (Brim 1968). Socialization occurs throughout life as circumstances change and the individual assumes new roles. For instance, studies have examined how the socialization process affects career choice among college students (Goldsberry, Gehrt, Sun, and Shim 1999), adjustment to new jobs among salespeople (Mengue, Han, and Auh 2007), and job performance of new CEOs (Fondas and Wiersema 1997). Besides career related socialization, studies have examined how socialization affects vacationing behavior among retirees (Shim, Gehrt, and Siek 2005), consumerism among adolescents (Lachance, Beaudoin, and Robitaille 2003), and childcare practice of new mothers (Carlson, Grossbart, and Walsh 1990). A major premise of socialization theory is that *socialization agents* influence socialization outcomes (*cognitive* and *behavioral*) (Moschis, Mathur, and Smith 1993). Moschis asserts that various dimensions of the *cognitive* outcome influence the *behavioral* outcome. Adopting this premise, the study proposes that various socialization agents influence communication competency, a cognitive outcome.

Communication Effectiveness

Research has documented the importance of competence in communication for graduates (Reave 2004) and the institutions that hire them (Stevens 2005). Communication

literature cites the many hours managers spend communicating with others (McCleneghan 2006) and the time managers devote to writing correspondence and reports (Strout 2002). The literature also documents how essential organizational processes such as organizational change (Salem 2008) and organizational commitment (Bambacas and Patrickson 2008) are enhanced via communication skills. According to Stevens (2005), many occupational listings rank communication skills as a top priority and leaders of organizations concur that the importance of communication skills can not be overestimated. Further, there is research that substantiates the relationship between communication skills and success in one's career (Linney 2007; Payne 2004; Radcliff 2007). The president of one large company states, "If the choice for a given job comes down to two people, both technically savvy but only one good at communicating and motivating others-that is the indispensable person," (Fisher 2001).

IV. METHODS

Sampling and Data Collection

Responses from a sample of 394 college students attending a large, metropolitan, state university in the western United States was obtained. A pretested survey instrument was administered in introductory level classes in marketing. The sample provided a good cross section of business majors (29 per cent management; 27 per cent marketing; 24 per cent accounting and finance; 20 per cent management information systems) which did not differ significantly from the distribution of majors in the college.

Measures

A validated scale was used to measure socialization agent influence (Goldsberry, Gehrt, Sun, and Shim 1999). Respondents rated the extent to which 18 socialization agents (see Table 1) affected their ability to communicate effectively on a 5-point Likert type scale. The development of items to measure reading comprehension, verbal skills, and writing skills were based on published actual standardized tests. There were 6 passages of reading with 2 items each for a total of 12 items related to the reading comprehension component of communication. There were 11 sentence completion questions (choose correct word) and 11 antonym identification questions (choose correct word) related to the verbal component of communication. There were 6 conjunction selection items (choose correct word) and 6 comma usage items related to the writing component of communication. Each respondent was assigned a reading, verbal, and writing score based on the number of items on which they scored correctly. A surrogate measure of communication competency, self-reported perception of communication competency, was also measured (5-point Likert type scale) so that actual and perceived communication competency of students could be compared.

V. ANALYSIS

Since this study is exploratory in nature, analytical methods were chosen to provide an initial foundation of understanding about student communication competencies and the socialization agents that come into play. To clarify the differences between students with relatively more and less effective communication skills with respect to socialization factors that they perceive to be crucial, the sample was split. Rather than splitting the

sample by a more conventional method such as upper and lower quartiles, this study used cluster analysis. Cluster analysis made it possible to identify high and low competency groups by utilizing each of the communication scores (reading, writing, and verbal) rather than a summated score, the most plausible course for an upper-lower quartile split. Thus, students were clustered simultaneously on reading, writing, and verbal criteria. Following the clustering, independent sample t-tests were conducted to examine the relationship between cluster membership and the various socialization factors. The results were used to identify the socialization factors that positively and negatively affected the communication profile-defined student clusters. These results also helped to determine the optimal cluster solution. Finally, Chi-Square analysis was used to provide a sociodemographic profile of each of the communication clusters.

VI. FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Identifying Communication Skill Clusters

Cluster analysis was used to identify the communication skill clusters. Our intention, ultimately, is to identify groups of individuals who have high communication skills in a particular area and contrast them with those who have low skills in the same skill area. Cluster analysis is a procedure that is appropriate for grouping respondents into groups so that there is intra-group homogeneity and inter-group heterogeneity with respect to the criterion variables (reading, writing, and verbal scores). This results in greater cluster solution stability (Hair *et al.* 1995). Cluster solution validity is enhanced by the fact that non hierarchical algorithms are not affected by outliers to the extent that hierarchical algorithms are (Hair *et al.* 1995). SPSS k-means cluster analysis was used to generate cluster solutions for three, four, and five cluster solutions. For each solution, ANOVA was performed with cluster membership the independent variable and socialization factor importance the dependent variable. The three, four, and five cluster solutions all each evaluated on the basis of the significance of the 18 univariate F-ratios for each of the socialization factors. The three, four, and five cluster solutions had 10, 12, and 8 significant F-ratios, respectively (Table 1). Consequently, the four cluster solution was chosen.

An inspection of cluster centroids for the final cluster solution scores for reading, writing, and verbal skills (Table 2) reveals that large differences exist between clusters 1 and 2. Cluster 1 (High Communication Skill Cluster) has the highest scores for reading, writing, and verbal skills and Cluster 2 (Low Communication Skill Cluster) has the lowest scores for all three measures. Clusters 2 and 3 are very similar to one another, situated in the midrange between Clusters 1 and 2. For this exploratory study, subsequent analysis focuses on Clusters 1 and 2. This is done to more clearly contrast the socialization agents that contribute to communication competency as opposed to those that are mistakenly believed to contribute to communication competency. Subsequent analysis also highlights the sociodemographic differences between the High and Low Communication Skill Clusters.

Communication Clusters and Socialization Agents

Top Nine Socialization Agents: Among the top nine socialization factors, there is widespread agreement between the High and Low Communication Skill Clusters

Table 1
Socialization Factor Significance For 3, 4, and 5 Cluster Solutions

	<i>3 Cluster Solution</i>	<i>4 Cluster Solution</i>	<i>5 Cluster Solution</i>
Teacher	.027*	.019*	.145
Parent	.158	.130	.057
Friend	.531	.063	.238
Book	.165	.195	.491
Adult Relative	.003**	.006**	.002**
Supervisor	.049*	.293	.109
Newspaper	.932	.722	.851
Peer Relative	.082	.016*	.088
Coworker	.001**	.174	.017*
Email	.252	.033*	.351
TV	.012*	.002**	.057
Internet	.001**	.000**	.014*
Magazine	.173	.018*	.022*
Clergy	.022*	.002**	.008**
Chatroom	.000**	.000**	.000**
Social Network	.004**	.001**	.002**
Comput. Game	.136	.011*	.172
Comic	.000**	.000**	.000**

* Significant at 0.05 **Significant at 0.01

Table 2
Cluster Centroid Scores

	<i>Cluster 1Hi Skill Communication</i>	<i>Cluster 2Lo Skill Communication</i>	<i>Cluster 3</i>	<i>Cluster 4</i>
# of cases	120	76	98	100
Read	10.38	5.63	9.57	7.49
Write	16.33	8.07	10.84	13.28

with six instances in which there is no significant difference between the two clusters (Table 3). The clusters have similarly high ratings for the importance of parents, friends, books, supervisors, newspapers, and coworkers to the development of communication skills. It is also interesting to note that among top nine socialization factors, seven involve people. Of the three significant differences between High and Low Skill Clusters, only one involved a case in which the High Skill Cluster had a higher mean. Teachers, the socialization agent with the highest overall mean (4.33), were considered significantly more important to the High Skill Cluster (4.43) compared to the Low Skill Cluster (4.16). Reading, writing, and verbal scores for the cluster (see Table 3) reveal that they seem to be correct. Thus, the High Skill Cluster sees socialization to communication occurring in a rather conventional manner.

Table 3
Socialization Factor Means For High Skill And Low Skill Clusters

<i>Socialization Factor</i>	<i>High Skill Cluster Mean</i>	<i>Low Skill Cluster Mean</i>	<i>Overall Mean</i>	<i>Significance Level</i>
Teacher	4.43	4.16	4.33	.019*
Parent	4.17	4.39	4.26	.130
Friend	4.03	4.27	4.12	.063
Book	3.86	3.64	3.77	.195
Adult Relative	3.34	3.81	3.52	.006*
Supervisor	3.35	3.53	3.42	.293
Newspaper	3.25	3.31	3.27	.722
Peer Relative	3.08	3.50	3.24	.016*
Coworker	3.12	3.34	3.20	.174
Email	2.92	3.31	3.07	.033*
TV	2.42	2.99	2.63	.002**
Internet	2.29	2.95	2.54	.000**
Magazine	2.37	2.76	2.52	.018*
Clergy	1.81	2.30	1.99	.002**
Chatroom	1.61	2.55	1.97	.000**
Social Network	1.77	2.28	1.96	.001**
Comput. Game	1.48	1.82	1.61	.011*
Comic	1.33	1.97	1.58	.000**

* Significant at 0.05 **Significant at 0.01

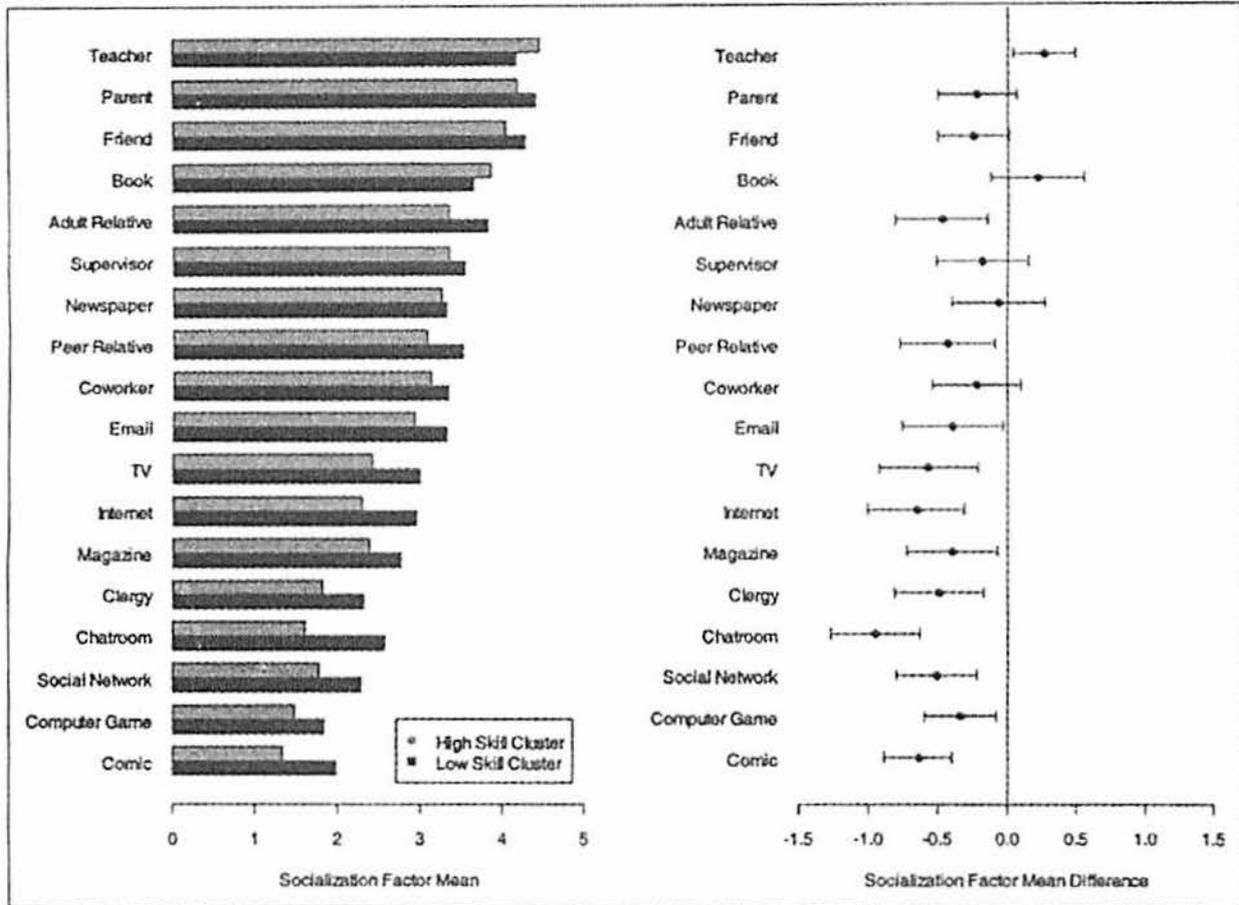
Bottom Nine Socialization Agents: Among the bottom, less important, socialization factors, there is a significant difference between the clusters in every instance (Table 3). And in every instance, the Low Skill Cluster rates the socialization factor more highly. Eight of these nine socialization factors did not involve people. Further, six of the eight factors involved electronic media. Thus, besides peer-relatives, adult-relatives, and clergy, subjects from the Low Skill Cluster feel that many of today's high tech diversions play an important developmental role where communication skills are concerned. Reading, writing, and verbal scores for the cluster (see Table 2) reveal that they may be mistaken. The Low Skill Cluster effectively sees socialization to communication skill acquisition occurring along a less conventional route compared to the High Skill Cluster. The route, however, has not been accompanied by optimal results.

Socialization Factors Overall: It is interesting to note that the results provide more in terms of implications related to what students may be doing wrong in terms of employing socialization agents to positively affect their communication skill. In other words, there are 11 instances in which the results show what Low Skill Cluster subjects rate significantly more highly than the High Skill Cluster. There is less about what students are doing right with only one instance in which the results show what the High Skill Cluster rates significantly higher (teachers).

Communication Clusters and Sociodemographics

There were significant differences for five of the eight sociodemographic variables measured (see Table 4). In terms of race, subjects from the High Skill Cluster tended to be white, Hispanic, or multi-racial. They were also heavily represented by GPAs of 3.00 and higher. There was a fairly even split between the two groups in the 2.50-2.99

Figure 1: Socialization Factors From Table 3 (Left) And Socialization Factor Mean Differences With 95% Confidence Intervals (Right)



range with 100 per cent of those with a GPA below 2.00 in the Low Skill Cluster. Subject's first language was closely related to cluster membership with 81.9 per cent of the High Skill Cluster speaking English as a first language and only 34.1 per cent with a language other than English as a first language. Males were more heavily represented in the High Communication Skill Cluster (72 per cent) than females (53.1 per cent) which may run contrary to gender stereotypes. Finally, the educational level of a respondent's father was significantly related to group membership. The High Skill Cluster tended to have fathers with at least some baccalaureate work or at least some graduate work. Mother's educational level was not significantly related to cluster membership, owing perhaps to the male dominated Hispanic and Asian cultures as well as to lesser but persistent dynamics among whites and other groups. The High and Low Skill Clusters also did not differ in terms of age and amount of time spent working. The nonsignificance of hours worked was somewhat surprising given that the campus from which data was collected enrolled numerous students who worked very substantial numbers of hours. But time on the job may be a potent communication socialization factor just as the formal educational process can be. In fact, Table 4 shows that supervisors are the sixth highest rated socialization factor and fifth highest for the High Skill Cluster.

Table 4
Sociodemographics of High Skill and Low Skill Clusters

	<i>High Skill Cluster</i>	<i>Low Skill Cluster</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Race			.000
White	91.3	08.7	
Black	50.0	50.0	
Asian	40.0	60.0	
Hispanic	68.2	31.8	
Multi-Racial	72.7	27.3	
Age			.350
<25	63.4	36.6	
>25	59.3	40.7	
GPA			.001
<2.00	00.0	100.0	
2.00-2.49	40.0	60.0	
2.50-2.99	51.1	48.9	
3.00-3.49	71.9	28.1	
3.50-4.00	80.0	20.0	
Hours Worked			.163
<10	66.1	33.9	
10-19	77.8	22.2	
>20	58.2	41.8	
First Language			.000
English	81.8	18.2	
Other	34.1	65.9	
Father's Education			.009
At least some HS	46.2	63.8	
At least some College	69.1	30.9	
At least some Grad	66.7	33.3	
Mother's Education			.090
At least some HS	52.9	47.1	
At least some College	68.9	31.1	
At least some Grad	63.2	36.8	
Gender			.006
Male	72.0	28	
Female	53.1	46.9	

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH

This research measures subjects' perceptions of socialization factor efficacy as it relates to acquisition of communication skills. Future research could measure actual or relative time spent with various socializations agents. This might represent a better measure of the extent to which a subject is affected by a socialization agent; the problem, however, is that the measurement task could be rather daunting.

Future research could also examine different subgroups of students. To begin with, business students could be compared with non business students. Certainly, among non business students, distinctions could be made between arts and sciences, liberal studies majors and vocationally oriented majors, and other groups. There are those who believe that vocationally oriented majors such as business majors may not have

focused on development of basic communication skills as much as students attracted to certain other majors. Comparisons between different subgroups could determine whether this is the case.

It would also be interesting to tackle the question of how socialization agents, in a complementary manner, can affect communication competency. Thus, although computer gaming, by itself, may not be enough to fully develop one's communication skills, it could have some favorable incremental effect (Clarke and Duimering 2006) when employed in concert with other communication socialization factors including books and teachers.

Finally, the impact of socialization factors and processes on basic skills beyond communication could be examined. Certainly, computational skills are another major concern today among educators and among those who hire students upon matriculation.

By beginning to build an understanding of how the socialization process affects acquisition of communication skills, a foundation can be built that will allow educators to more effectively leverage pedagogical innovation in the classroom. This study contributes by taking the first step. Its most important contribution is primarily in terms of suggesting how those who are less competent communicators should realign their efforts to become socialized to effective communication. Perhaps more importantly, there are also implications in terms of how educators should make students aware of socialization factors that make a real difference and/or steer them in the direction of effective socialization moderators.

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