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REINFORCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH INDUSTRIAL ENGAGEMENT  
ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is based on the results of a study that focuses on the significance of business oriented workplace relationships that can contribute to the gradual development of communication skills. Undergraduate students who are exposed to real world situations and industrial work practices may benefit immensely through periodic external visits meant to enhance their skills. In addition, they will be intrinsically motivated to retain information while developing fluency, confidence as well as clarity.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal relationships, communication skills, entrepreneurship, self-presentation skills.

Introduction

Fitzgerald (2009) has implicitly stated that it could be justifiable to teach social diversity. Graduates across the world have realized that interpersonal skills are extremely crucial when they face job interviews. Most employers are obsessed with interpersonal skills and terminate employees who lack essential skills of communicating effectively in English. Due to the all-pervasive aspect of multiculturalism, members of the faculty have a huge responsibility to develop and reinforce English language and communication skills. The research question for this study is mentioned below:

RQ1: Are students able to develop their communication competence through industrial engagement activities?

The hypotheses related to this research question are outlined below.

Null hypothesis 1: There can be no significant difference in communication competence when students are exposed to industrial engagement activities.

Hypothesis 2: There can be a significant development of communication competence and reinforcement of interpersonal skills through industrial engagement activities.

Rationale

Students who enroll for a course on *Communication Skills* generally expect to improve their oral speech skills by the end of the semester. However, this can be a formidable task in contrived class settings with a tightly knit syllabus. While students are encouraged and taught vocabulary related to the workplace, they seldom get an opportunity to use them in real life workplace situations. Therefore, industrial engagement activities were considered as experimental measures to evaluate the differences in terms of student engagement and learning.

## Literature Review

Jacoby (1996) appreciates out of class activities as a form of intentionally designed experiential education where students try to engage in activities which address human as well as community needs.

According to McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss & Fudge (2008), a teaching strategy which integrates instruction as well as reflection to enrich learning and inculcate civic responsibility would be invaluable. (pp. 237).

Byers and Gray (2012) have argued that out of class service learning should be a part of the curriculum as it acts like a bridge for the wide gap that exists between classroom and actual practice. They describe out of class educational practices as experiences which enliven course content while providing opportunities to apply classroom concepts within the community.

Bamber and Pike (2013) feel that students can create a more sustainable society through their involvement at the workplace. Apart from learning a global language, they develop cross cultural awareness. In their study, students described it as a life changing experience. Furthermore, we cannot disregard the fact that students may go through a personal transformation to develop more rounded personalities.

Meanwhile, Gerstenblatt & Gilbert (2014) declare that it is necessary to gain a better understanding of various facets of course content while cultivating a strong sense of civic responsibility. This could be true as it is essential to develop a broader perspective of the subject matter.

Hildenbrand & Schultz (2015) have mentioned that a reciprocal relationship which merges both field experience and sustainable community service can offer different types of learning opportunities. This can benefit the community partner as well as students.

Lovat and Clemet (2016) have argued about sociality that can be considered as an important feature of human growth where social intelligence is seen as a conduit to enhance and nurture empathy.

## Methodology

This research paper is an older study which was carried out during the winter semester on two groups of students who were enrolled in different sections of a course entitled *Communication Skills*.

Based on their sections, students were designated into two categories. The first group was the control group and the second group was considered as the experimental group. Both the groups were informed that they would be a part of a research study. They were asked to do a brief presentation on very simple, independently chosen topics at the beginning of the fall semester. Both the groups exhibited a lot of fear and were apprehensive regarding their performance. They were marked on a rubrics sheet that denoted their level of expertise in relation to self-presentation skills. Students were evaluated based on a scale that recorded their knowledge, clarity, self-confidence and voice quality. This was considered as a pretest.

The control group followed a strictly controlled syllabus along with group activities in the classroom to develop communication skills. This was considered feasible by the researcher as the course was offered in the evening and it was not convenient to take students outdoors on a field trip.

The experimental group was a morning section of the same course. They had to stick to a strictly planned syllabus akin to the control group. However, they were also exposed to two different activities which were similar to external field trips. As a part of a research study, they were taken on industrial engagement trips to the British council and to a fortune 500 company called XEROX. As a result, students on the experimental group received a lot of attention from workplace professionals. The visit to British Council was very valuable as students had a chance to interact with trainers, coordinators, receptionists and they were able to attend a workshop conducted by the marketing personnel. The researcher observed that students were able to get rid of their inhibitions and asked several questions. Their curiosity to know additional facts urged them to be more interactive. Two weeks elapsed and students from the experimental group were again taken to a fortune 500 company called XEROX located in Dubai. They participated in a very interesting session

that focused on digital communication and technology. The Marketing manager and the Sales manager of the company took the trouble of disseminating some crucial information on how technology can overcome communication barriers. They actually carried out an interactive discussion with competitive students who were determined to understand the intricacies of all the technical equipment and forms of communication in the world of business.

### Findings

In order to culminate the study in a disciplined manner, it was necessary to carry out a posttest. A comparison of the results of the pretest and posttest are given below.

**Results of the Pretest and Posttest - A comparison**

Number of students	Pretest results (Successful presentations)	Post test results (Successful presentations)
Control Group ( n = 25 )	40 %	80%
Experimental Group ( n = 25)	41%	92%

Although students from the control group put in a lot of effort into their presentations, the difference was noticeable. Successful presentations reached up to 80% from the pretest results of 40%. This shows that class activities to improve their communication skills were effective but not adequate. As their presentations were based on secondary sources such as knowledge derived from book sources and internet sources, their presentations were more unstructured in nature. Subject knowledge, confidence, clarity and fluency were compromised to some extent among some of the students in the control group as they had not received any exposure to actual workplace situations.

On the other hand, students in the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of the knowledge they displayed, and their level of self-confidence. There was a huge difference in their presentations on the subject matter. Individual student presentations were more focused and professional in nature. In addition, they were fluent and contained additional details that they had derived through actual discussions in workplace situations.

Furthermore, student presentations by the experimental group displayed a lot of clarity. The post test results revealed a huge improvement in the percentage of successful presentations. The percentage rose from 41% up to 92% in terms of subject knowledge, level of confidence and fluency. This shows that the rate of success rocketed and it was much higher compared to the control group.

### Discussion

The current study was very clear in highlighting the fact that students in higher education can derive a lot of knowledge regarding up to date trends in the market and develop their professionalism through exposure to real workplace circumstances. As the experimental group was given an opportunity to communicate with working professionals on digital marketing, these students were able to develop their speech skills at a phenomenal rate. They developed fluency and self-confidence. In addition, they derived some knowledge regarding digital marketing in a very practical way. On the whole, they were able to perform much better and do excellent presentations at the end of the semester.

Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was proved beyond a doubt as Industrial engagement is a powerful instrument to unearth the hidden potential of undergraduates in higher education. Students who were unaware of their command over language rediscovered their speech skills when they used these skills to communicate in natural workplace situations.

The outcome of the final project was also an eye opener to evaluate the differences in learning effectiveness. Students from both sections of the course were assigned the same topic. It was observed that

students from the experimental group were very enthusiastic and interested while working on their project. In fact, they used the notes from their visits to provide more realistic viewpoints. Their power of expression was more mature and their ideas were well supported by real life examples.

### Conclusion

McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss and Fudge's (2008) have mentioned that students who are exposed to various well-planned service oriented learning activities can enhance their professional confidence, and demonstrate advanced levels of learning when they are confronted by challenging, real work-place issues. (p. 247).

On the whole, it is recommended that members of the faculty in higher education should try to involve students in industrial engagement activities as they can be highly beneficial in reinforcing the communication competence and entrepreneurial skills of learners. These kinds of field trips can provide an invaluable platform for students to improve their fluency and gain some knowledge about current trends in the market. This in turn would prepare them to face the workforce with supreme confidence.

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