# Transition to University:
# The role of oral communication in the undergraduate curriculum

*Glenda Crosling*

## Abstract

*This paper investigates transition to university from the perspective of students' oral communication skills development. It is argued that oral communication development should be included systematically in undergraduate curriculum, beginning at the first year level. Not only will this assist students to develop a generic skill in which all students should be proficient on graduation, it will facilitate students' transition and achievement in their studies. Oral communication skills underpin students' abilities to develop social networks, and these are important is assisting students to identify and integrate with their institution. Furthermore, they support the development of informal academic networks. Research has shown that these aspects are positively linked with academic achievement. On the basis of a study undertaken of oral communication assessment in the Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics curriculum and a survey of the oral communication needs and uses of graduate business employees, a suitable approach is suggested for incorporating oral communication development in undergraduate business curriculum, especially at the first year level.*

## Introduction

This article considers transition to university from the perspective of students' oral communication skills. This is an area of transition that has received very little attention and for which students appear to be unprepared. Universities expect that students will be able to express themselves orally, but this aspect of students' development receives very little emphasis in subject assessment. In this paper, we argue that a focus, through policy and curriculum planning, on developing students' oral communication skills in the transitional period of university study has many benefits. Not only will it provide a systematic and developmental approach to one of the generic skills in which students are expected to be proficient, it also has positive repercussions for other areas. Oral communication and interpersonal skills are fundamental to social and informal academic networks, and these are positively linked to successful university transition. They are also integral to students' ability to define, articulate and address personal and study difficulties. Peel (1999a) points out that this preludes early action and prevents major demoralisation and disillusionment, which can lead to students dropping out of university. On the basis of a study undertaken of oral communication assessment in the Monash University Faculty of Business and Economics curriculum and a survey of the workplace oral communication needs and uses of graduate business employees, we explore the possibility of successfully incorporating oral communication development in the undergraduate business curriculum. Indeed, there is congruence between the oral communication needs of commencing university students and graduate employees in the workplace. Thus, both needs can be addressed simultaneously.

## Oral Communication Skills and Commencing Students

We argue that oral communication skill development should be addressed in undergraduate policy and planning procedures, especially at the first year level. One major reason for this is that oral communication skills are specified as an attribute that graduates should possess, and thus named explicitly in university and faculty future plans, for instance, the Monash Learning and Teaching Plan (1999). An aim of the Faculty of Business and Economics Plan (1998) is to ". . .increase assessment of oral . . . skills in subjects and courses". Further emphasising the need for students to be adequately prepared in this area, the recent Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) survey (AC Nielsen Research Services,

1998) of employers' satisfaction with graduate employee skills listed oral communication third out of the seven skills sought by employers. However, the employers surveyed state that it is not public speaking that is required, but rather the ability 'to communicate clearly and concisely' (p 12). As we explain in the section below on communication as a process, intertwined with oral communication skills are interpersonal skills, and these are also seen as desirable in graduates. Employers state that interpersonal skills are concerned with the ability to speak to their superiors, or '... to supervise a factory's night shift' (p 13).

Thus, it is clear that students' future work and life chances are influenced by their ability to express themselves well and to relate in meaningful ways to others. It is therefore only just that there should be a systematic approach to assist them to develop such skills.[1] The necessary skills are complex and cannot be taught in a short period of time. Relating and communicating well to others is premised on many underpinning understandings about communication, as well as a range of experiences where students can apply strategies and gain feedback on their suitability. It involves much more than learning how to give formal presentations in a tutorial situation.

However, the benefits of competent oral communication skills do not relate only to students' lives after leaving university. As we have previously pointed out, development of oral communication skills can contribute to students' success in their studies. It is well documented that the social aspect is a significant part of successful transition to university, and it is clear that oral communication skills are a major facet in interpersonal interactions. Academically, researchers have consistently pointed out that student learning communities or study groups assist transition, and again, that oral communication and interpersonal skills are integral to these. This view is supported by the work of Tinto (1975), and expressed in that of Pascarella and Terenzini (1983: 227) where they point out that the greater the individual student's degree of social and academic integration into the university, the greater their commitment to the institution and to wanting to graduate. In their comprehensive study of the first year university experience, McInnes & James (1999: 47) note again that the 'social nature of the university experience has the potential for contributing positively to academic performance, and more generally should influence the individual's sense of competence'. They also point out that students identifying themselves positively as university students impacts on their academic performance. Thus, it seems important for students to be 'socially connected with the university through friendships' (Mclnnes & James, 1995: 47). Research by Evans & Peel (1999) at Monash University found that problems of transition are exacerbated by '...failure or inability to engage with and become part of student conversation and interaction'. Furthermore, as Mclnnes & James (1995: 48) found, university students whose average scores were below 50 per cent almost never worked with other students on areas of study to discuss problems and subjects. Indirectly, this indicates the value of informal learning communities for students' academic achievement.

It may be argued that students should be prepared with oral communication skills before they enter university. After all, speaking is an integral part of life in society and why should people need instruction in it? Furthermore, if there is a deficiency, this should have been addressed long before students arrive at university. We do acknowledge that the school also has a role in preparing students for oral communication at university, and it is important that students are self-confident and have had experience in expressing their ideas orally before they arrive at university. However, we are also aware that in entering the new and perhaps daunting environment and culture of a university, students may need to redefine themselves and so may experience a loss of confidence. Both these aspects impact on oral communication skills, which in a broad sense means the ability to relate to other people. In support of this view, Mclnnes and James' (1999) study found that 26% of school leavers in first year university felt uncomfortable in group discussion, reinforcing our view that oral communication skills need to be incorporated in first year curriculum.

## The Current Situation: Oral Communication and Undergraduate Curriculum

---

[1] By systematic, we refer to an approach that incrementally builds on skills previously attained. It addresses such development by providing instruction and opportunities for students to practice the skills, as well as feedback on their achievement.

From our audit of the Faculty of Business and Economics Undergraduate Curriculum at Monash University,[2] which we take as typical of most undergraduate curricula,[3] we found that currently, although some lecturers may be experimenting with quite sophisticated forms of oral presentation skills and assessment such as team projects, group facilitation and critique and debate, attention to oral communication skill development is sporadic and unsystematic. Most likely representing the situation generally in universities, in our survey we found that, in terms of total number of subjects offered, only a minority of subject leaders make use of oral communication assessment. Furthermore, as oral communication is a broad area, ranging from listening, understanding and responding, giving oral presentations, to participation in teams and team leadership, it is an aspect that requires a systematic and developmental approach as students move through their degrees. In our survey we did not find evidence of such an approach.

Again, as typical of most universities, the audit indicated that most emphasis is placed on formal presentation and participation in tutorials (where the teacher is dominant and the students are subordinate). Although experience in these forms of oral communication is useful for students, they are not necessarily the forms that will assist students in their social and informal academic interactions at university, and thus help them to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of integration into the university, nor will they prepare them for the types of oral communication in which they will engage in the workplace. Furthermore, these forms of communication alone do not develop students broadly as good communicators.

While variation across the campuses of the faculty across Monash University is not significant, our audit found that assessment related to oral communication is not spread evenly over the six disciplines that make up the faculty. The departments of Management and Marketing give most weight to oral communication, with 41.2% and 38% of their subjects respectively including oral communication skills in their subject assessment. This was followed by Economics, 29.4% and Accounting and Finance, 28.8%. By contrast, the departments of Econometrics and Business Statistics, and Business Law and Taxation have no subjects where oral communication skills are a part of student assessment. It thus seems that oral communication is linked to the subject matter, and it would be expected that disciplines such as Management and Marketing would be more likely to include oral communication in assessment. However, the finding is interesting, given the important workplace role of oral communication for graduates from all six disciplines. Furthermore, all students can benefit from social and informal academic networks which rely on oral communication skills.

Based on the findings of our investigation into workplace oral communication for graduate employees and of communication as a process, we explain below some salient considerations for policy and planning for oral communication in undergraduate curricula. Indeed, as we point out, we discovered similarity in the types of oral communication required for both settings, and this facilitates a way of incorporating it into the curriculum.

## Oral communication and workplace use

As oral communication skills are a graduate attribute, policy and planning for oral communication cannot ignore the workplace needs and uses of graduate employees. The results of the survey[4] of the employers of business graduate employees undertaken by the authors provide some interesting insights in this area. Surveying company representatives from 24 companies, 16 of which were large, employing more than 200 staff, 5 medium with staff more than 50 but less than 200, and 2 small companies, it emerged that oral communication is integral to the jobs of business graduates in their companies. On a 5 point scale, 38% of respondents stated that oral communication was used at point 5, (constantly), 46% point 4, (often), and 17% at point 3, (sometimes). We also found that most oral communication for such employees occurs with staff in the same department in their company, and with their supervisors; 95% of respondents rated

---

[2] For full discussion, see Crosling and Ward, 1999.

[3] The Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash is representative of the university system overall in that it includes disciplines across the spectrum, from the humanities inclined management and marketing studies, through the social science oriented economics, to the scsience-based econometrics and business statistics.

[4] For full discussion, see Crosling and Ward, 1999.

communication with the former group as occurring constantly and often, while 87% stated that with supervisors it occurred constantly and often.

Given that most communication occurs with similar status staff and supervisors, it is not surprising that we found that other forms of communication are used more frequently than formal oral presentation. With similar status staff, the most frequently used forms of communication are informal work-related discussions (83% rated it as constant and often) and following instructions (rated as constant and often by 66% of respondents). This was followed at 54% by informal social conversation. These results indicate collaborative work environments wherein interchange of ideas and learning from each other occurs. However, within this, there appears to be some degree of hierarchy in that more experienced staff guide newer employees, as indicated in the rating for following instructions.

With supervisors, the highest rating form of communication was following instructions and responding orally (rated constant and often by 66% of respondents). This was followed by informal work-related discussions (65% constant and often), and informal conversation (49% constant and often). Once again, the picture of a collaborative, friendly work environment emerges wherein the supervisors are guiding the graduate employees as they learn to do their jobs competently.

Based on the collaborative nature of the workplace for these employees, we investigated the forms of communication that relate closely to this environment: team work and meetings. For team work, all respondents (100%) indicated that graduates' ability to work successfully in teams was important for job success (that is, doing the job well). The most frequent form of communication was building relations with fellow team members (rated by 70% as occurring constantly and often). This was followed by informal conversation with team members (66%), while negotiating with team members was rated by 37% as constant and often. In meetings, we found that 79% of respondents rated participation in discussion as occurring constantly and often, while giving oral presentations was supported by 36% of respondents as being used constantly and often. Persuading was rated by 31% of respondents at constant and often.

In sum, the picture that emerges of workplace oral communication for these business graduates is one where communication is mostly impromptu rather than planned, and one for which people cannot be explicitly trained through formulaic-type language structures. As we explain below, the somewhat spontaneous nature of the communication requires understandings of communication in a broad sense. When combined with critical thinking and metacognition, this is the backbone of an ability to communicate successfully across a range of contexts; that is, the flexibility to transfer understandings of communication across contexts.

## Broad understandings of communication as a process

General understandings of communication are premised on awareness of the context-dependent nature of communication. Oral communication is not a simple process of sender/message/receiver, but rather, it is embedded in the particular discourse community where it occurs, and these communities have their own value systems (Bizzell, 1989). Thus, communication deemed as appropriate addresses different audiences and differs across settings. In the workplace, an organisation's internal and external environments shape the community and therefore influence suitable forms of communication. The external business environment is competitive and globalised, while the internal consists of the 'tapestry of explicit and implicit power structures' (Carnavale, Gainer & Meltzer, 1990:22) which are governed by the organisations' management structures. It follows that successful oral communication is embedded in awareness of the social and political forces that influence decision-makers, the audience for the communication, and the process for any decision making (Muir, 1996:77).

Graduate employees will be assisted in communicating effectively if they have some appreciation of the nature of organisations, and how different parts of the organisation interrelate (Carnavale *et al*, 1990: 24). Such understandings, however, need to be combined with an ability to 'navigate the complex social waters' (Carnavale *et al*, 1990: 34). In this way, it involves listening as well as speaking (Haas & Arnold, 1995) and as Carnavale *et al* (1990) maintain, should be active, involving eyes as well as ears and considering not only the words, but the way they are spoken. That is, attention needs to be paid to

nonverbal clues and language features such as tone and emphasis, which are clues to the message 'between the lines' (Searle, 1991; Arthur, 1995; Hendricks, 1995). This view is confirmed by the DETYA survey where employers complained that graduates '...do not understand how businesses operate and how the different parts of a business organisation interrelate' (AC Nielsen Research Services, 1998:15).

Another factor which impacts on communication is the relative status of the parties communicating. (Halliday, 1978). Relevant here is the organisation's internal environment; in more hierarchical organisations, status and position impinge strongly on the communication. However, in more participatory organisations operating within a team work environment and where relationships are not based solely on position and status, suitable communication will take a different form. Contemporary organisations represent a diverse range of personnel across gender, generation, national, ethnic and social backgrounds. Successful oral communication is based on awareness of differences in views that can be influenced by such backgrounds and experiences. For example, women may perceive the workplace differently from men, and employees strongly influenced by different cultural patterns may communicate in modes which differ from the western[5] (Kaplan, 1972; Clyne, 1980; Nguyen, 1990; Witherspoon & Wohlert, 1996). In the contemporary workplace where team work is increasingly used as a tool for achieving flexibility and adaptability and thus assisting the organisation to remain competitive, employees need to be able to communicate successfully with colleagues from a range of backgrounds.

Externally, companies are globalised, and in order to remain competitive and retain market share, many large and medium sized organisations are operating across national boundaries and cultures. Thus intercultural understandings and communication skills are desirable (Liu & Beamer, 1997).

## Blending workplace oral communication use with commencing students

Returning to workplace communication needs of graduate business employees vis a vis those of commencing university students, it seems that there is congruence in oral communication suitable for both settings. In the workplace, the emphasis is on informal, work-related and social discussions with both similar level colleagues and supervisors, while for the university, in establishing social and informal academic networks, the same modes of communication are involved. Both settings require listening, while perhaps for the workplace, following instructions is more relevant than for the university setting and the modes of communication we have already mentioned. For all of these, active listening and attention to nonverbal and language features other than the words are relevant. These enable parties to discern the underlying complex social waters and to pick up the value systems of the community on which effective oral communication is based. Understanding of people and their backgrounds and how these impinge on modes of communication are also relevant for both areas.

## Incorporating oral communication skill development in undergraduate curriculum

We have demonstrated the benefits for students' study of attention to oral communication skills, and the fact that such attention could simultaneously address the university and workplace requirement that graduates be proficient in oral communication. It therefore follows that oral communication skills should represent, along with examination and written skills, a significant part of the overall grade — say around 15-25%. While there is a cost in real terms of staff time involved, this cost, in our view, is outweighed by the potential benefits if the program is well designed and implemented. The benefits to the student, both at the university and in their career in the workplace, is clearly demonstrated in research, including the survey we conducted. It is, also, recognised both in the Monash University and Faculty of Business and Economics Plans. Success in the workplace reflects very favourably on the University. However, on the basis of our study, the focus should be more towards oral communication within a group or team environment.

In formulating a program of oral communication, a Faculty should seek to implement a developmental approach. Certain forms of oral communication are more suited to first year where issues of transition from school should be emphasised. Thus, it might be sensible to start with group based programs where

---

[5]  For fuller discussion, see Crosling and Ward, 1999.

students can work together and take turns in explaining to the class the results of their particular project or question. This will not only facilitate the development of their oral skills, but strengthen social interaction and a sense of belonging. In later years: formal individual presentations, critically based group interaction, group debates, and individual debates can be introduced successfully into the assessment program. While Faculties may differ as to the most appropriate way of achieving a developmental approach, clearly attention needs to be given to the sequencing of the different ways of introducing oral communication skills into subject assessment.

Should all subjects include a significant part of the assessment on oral communication? Our view, on the basis of our study, is that such an approach would be costly in time and may very well cause resistance by staff members. This could result in any such recommendation being defeated. A better alternative is for a Faculty to ensure that students are exposed to a developmental approach to oral communication skills in their degree program. There would, of course, be a cost in the monitoring of such a program to ensure that all students are exposed to the varied forms of oral communication.

This then leads to the question of whether certain disciplines are more suited for inclusion of oral communication assessment. If we accept this view, the disciplines of Management and Marketing would clearly be the choice because oral communication is integral to the subject content. However, it should not be concluded from this that some disciplines can be excluded from oral communication assessment. Graduates from all the disciplines require oral communication skills in the workplace and as we have mentioned previously, all students can benefit from the opportunity to develop social and informal learning networks.

In our survey of subject leaders in the Faculty of Business and Economics there was a concern raised about the justice of using oral communication as a form of assessment for students for whom English is not their first language. Such a conclusion, in our view, is based on a misconception. If students lack English language skills then they are unlikely to perform well in other forms of assessment, such as essay writing. If such students are present in our classrooms, then it is a matter for Faculty admissions policy. Where it is not so much an issue of language deficiency but more a question of culture, within the family, the school and in the broader community, there is a case for a Faculty to establish a training program as part of its overall transition strategy. All the students, whatever their background, need good oral communication skills, whether they seek a professional career in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia or Australia.

A program of this type will only be successful if academic staff are provided with training in the conduct and assessment of oral communication skills. This, in our view, is the responsibility of the Faculty in conjunction with units focussing on student learning, such as Language and Learning Services at Monash University. Subject teachers may perceive that they are ill-prepared to provide training in oral communication skills which must occur if the approach is to be systematic. It is at this point that student learning support staff can be drawn on, and instruction in oral communication skills by such staff integrated into the mainstream teaching program, either through time set aside in lectures, or in separate seminars running alongside the mainstream teaching program. Clearly, if a significant proportion of the grade is based on oral skills, then both staff and students must feel confident that it is conducted efficiently and fairly.

## Conclusion

We have shown that it is vital for students to be competent orally. Not only is this necessary for a university to fulfil part of its mission and necessary for students' lives after university, it will also enhance their ability to develop a sense of belonging to their university, and to develop social and informal academic networks. These are vital factors in successful transition to university and are all linked to successful academic performance. However, development of oral communication skills to a level where they can be transferred across contexts is a complex process, and therefore warrants a systematic approach. We have suggested a means for incorporating such an approach into curriculum, but emphasise that it seems reasonable to begin in first year with group based projects wherein students communicate and work together and report on their findings to their class. This approach provides the means for students to develop skills which are critical factors in university transition, including those relevant for interpersonal relations with their classmates and widening their social networks. We believe

that this will help to lessen transition difficulties, with benefits for the university overall, the teachers, and most importantly, the students themselves.

## References

AC Nielsen Research Services. *Research on Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills: Interim Report.* Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Canberra. 1998.

Arthur, D. (1995) The importance of body language. *HR Focus,* Vol 72, pp 22-23.

Bizzell, P. (1989) Review of the book 'The Social Construction of Written Communication' in *College Composition and Communication,* Vol 40, pp 483-486.

Carnavale, A.P., Gainer, L. J. & Meltzer, A.S. (1990) *Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Clyne, M. (1980) *Writing, Testing and Culture. The Secondary Teacher.* Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Education. pp 13-16.

Crosling, G. and Ward, I. (1999) *Faculty of Business and Economics Graduates, Workplace oral Communication and Undergraduate Curriculum.* Clayton: Monash University.

Evans, M. and Peel, M. (1999) *Factors and Problems in School to University Transition.* Higher Education Series. 36.

Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University. *Faculty of Business and Economics Faculty Plan 1998-2000: Contributing to 'Leading the Way'.* Monash University. Melbourne. 1998.

Haas, J. & Arnold, C. (1995) An examination of the role of listening in judgements of communication competence in co-workers. *Journal of Business Communication,* Vol 32, pp 123-139.

Halliday, M.K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic.* London: Edward Arnold.

Hendricks, M. (1995) More than words: Brushing up on body language may give you just that competitive edge you need. *Entrepreneur,* Vol 23, pp 54-57.

Kaplan, R. (1972) Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education in Croft, K. (ed.). *Readings in English as a Second Language for Teachers and Teacher Trainees. Cambridge*: Winthrop Publishing Company.

Liu, D. & Beamer, L. (1997) Multimedia as a teaching tool in business communication course delivery. *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol 60 (2), pp 5 1-66.

Mclnnes, C. & James, R. (1995) *First Year On Campus.* Centre for Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Mclnnes, C. & James, R. (1999) Adjustment and Transition School Leavers. *Higher Education Series*. 36. Monash University. 1997. Learning and Teaching Plan, 1999. Monash University. Melbourne.

Muir, C. (1996) Using consulting projects to teach critical-thinking skills in business communication. *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol 59 (4), pp 77-87.

Nguyen, C. (1990) Barriers to communication between Vietnamese and non Vietnamese. Proceedings, *Cross-cultural Communication in the 1990s.* La Trobe University. Melbourne. pp 26-31.

Pascarella, E. and Terenzini, P. (1983) Predicting Voluntary Freshman Year Persistance/Withdrawal Behaviour in a Residential University: A Path Analytic Validation of Tinto's Model. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 75, (2), pp 215-226.

Peel, M. (1999a) Student Progress and Welfare: Initiatives in the Faculty of Arts. Paper presented at the Monash Transition Program 'Struggling Student Summit'.

Searle, J. (1991) Communication at work: An ethnography of checkout operators. *Open Letter*, Vol 2, (1), pp 28-39.

Witherspoon, P. and Wohlert, K. (1996) An approach to developing communication strategies for enhancing organisational diversity. *Journal of Business Communication*, Vol 33 (4), pp 375-399.