

Designing a Simulated Interactive Online Business Environment for Developing Business Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

The challenge in the instructional design of a Business Communication course is that the course should be able to effectively address the performative and experiential nature of the subject matter. The Business Communication course at HKUST faces another challenge, that is the large student population. The project in the present paper attempts to deal with both challenges by designing a simulated interactive online business environment, i.e., a virtual office in the context of a business-simulation scenario. By structuring the entire learning-and-teaching process around the business-simulation scenario, it is hoped that students' development of business communication skills can be more effective.

Keywords

Simulation, role-play, collaborative learning, communication, virtual business environment

BACKGROUND

Business Communication (LANG 201) is an English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course for Second Year Business undergraduates at UST, with the objective of helping them develop the communication skills required in the workplace. In terms of content coverage, relevance and usefulness, LANG 201 has been rated highly by both students and instructors. LANG 201 covers five out of the six business communication concepts rated as moderately and greatly important by the members of the Association of Business Communication (Wardrope & Bayless 1999). These concepts include communication theory, written communication (business letter and report writing), oral communication (oral presentation, both informative and persuasive), employment communication (resume and cover-letter writing, job interviews) and technology (e.g., the use of technology for assignments, use of emails and online discussion).

The challenge of LANG 201, however, comes from the choice of the instructional design. First is the interactive and experiential nature of the subject matter. Business Communication places a very strong emphasis on performance, i.e., training students to

become operationally effective (Ellis and Johnson 1994). Real understanding of the subject matter is performative, as opposed to declarative and propositional. Students should be given opportunities to engage in meaningful work-related communication practice. The second concern is the large student population size. The number of students enrolled in LANG 201 every year is approximately 680. Students come to the course with different learning needs, different entry points in the subject, different interests and study habits. The challenge of the course lies in its capability to effectively address the individual differences in learning needs among students.

A SIMULATED INTERACTIVE ONLINE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT – THE VIRTUAL OFFICE

The present project uses an innovative instructional design to structure the same course content for more effective learning. The project aims to develop a simulated interactive online business environment, i.e., a virtual office in the context of a business-simulation scenario, as a learning platform that addresses the performative nature of the subject matter as well as the differences in learning needs among the students. The new instructional design aims to:

- Situate students in an environment with all the communication complexities in real life and engage students in authentic workplace communicative tasks. Such a set-up is designed to address the performative and experiential nature of the subject matter. During the process of tackling the tasks, students will experience first hand what business communication is all about.
- Organize learning activities in such a way to help students develop not just language and communicative skills, but also relevant cognitive skills such as problem-solving, decision-making and hypothesizing when they deal with authentic communicative tasks. Communication success is more than just the mastery of language skills.
- Foster peer and collaborative learning in an interactive manner to optimize participation within and across classes. In today's business world, most are required to work in teams. Putting students in a simulated office situation and requiring them to work in projects are the best ways of helping them develop relevant leadership, team-building and interpersonal communication skills.
- Empower students with the knowledge, skills and practices that they need to accomplish the authentic communicative tasks. Students can pick and choose the type of knowledge and skills that they think they need. The individual differences in learning needs can be addressed more effectively.

Business-Simulation Scenario

The entire learning-and-teaching process in the course is contextualized in a business-simulation scenario.

Stage 1 – Job Application

Students will access the 'Careers' page of a virtual management training company to obtain career information about a post for which they are going to apply. Their task is to write their resume and covering letter applying for the

post of Assistant Marketing Officer (AMO).

Stage 2 – Client Analysis

Once students join the virtual management training company as the AMO, they will be required to work with two to three other AMO (other students in the same class), led by an experienced manager/trainer (the instructor). Altogether there will be five to six teams in each class. Each team will be randomly given a client profile. The AMO in the same team will be working together to analyze the management problems of the client. This stage will involve the AMO writing an enquiry letter/email to the client to ask for more information about their management problems and the types of service they are looking for. Later, each team will give an informative presentation in class about the client they are dealing with.

Stage 3 – Proposing Solutions

Based on the types of service their company offers, the AMO will propose solutions to the client's problems and give a persuasive (sales) presentation to the client. Before that, they will write a letter/email of confirmation to the client to fix the arrangements for the presentation.

Stage 4 – Accepting/Declining Proposal

Students playing the role of the client will decide whether or not they accept the proposed service package. They will send the presenters a letter of acceptance/rejection to let them know if they will use their services. Also they will write a recommendation report to their own boss about their decision.

Stage 5 – Peer Evaluation in the form of 'Staff Appraisal'

At the end of the project, the AMO will send a short report, via OSSPE, to their manager about their team members' performance and participation in the project. Specific guidelines will be given to them to complete the staff appraisal form.

The students in each class will be representing a virtual management training company. Altogether there are three such companies. The three companies will be competing for the contracts from the same six clients. The teams (from different companies/classes) dealing with the same clients will do the persuasive presentation together and compete with the other teams to win the contract (Figure 1).

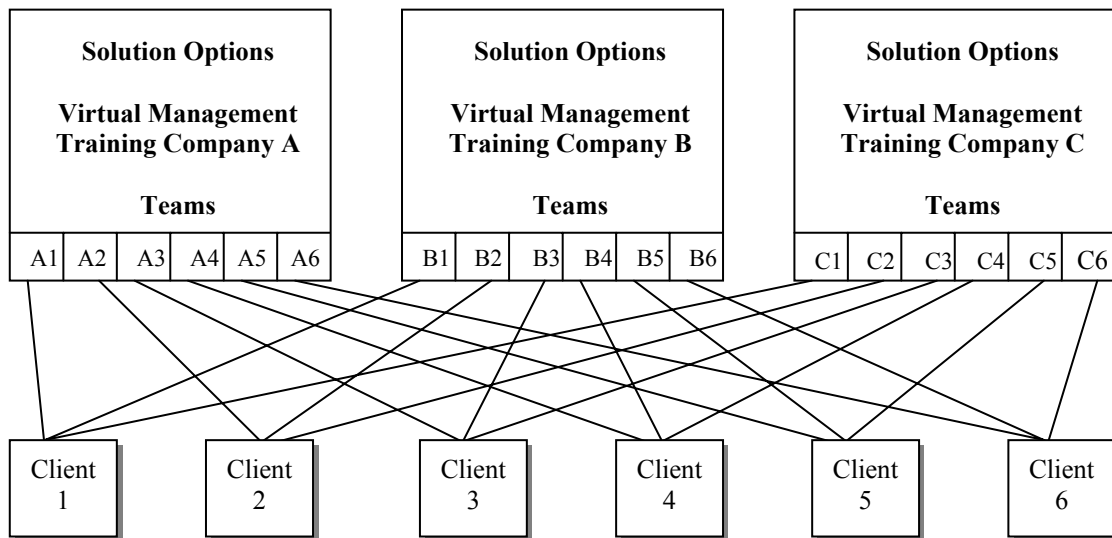


Figure 1. The LANG 201 Business simulation scenario

The Virtual Office

The virtual office mirrors the set-up of a management training company in real life. Their websites contain features such as ‘Mission’, ‘History’, ‘Approach’, ‘Services’, ‘Clients’ and ‘Careers’, which are commonly found in other authentic websites (Figure 2).

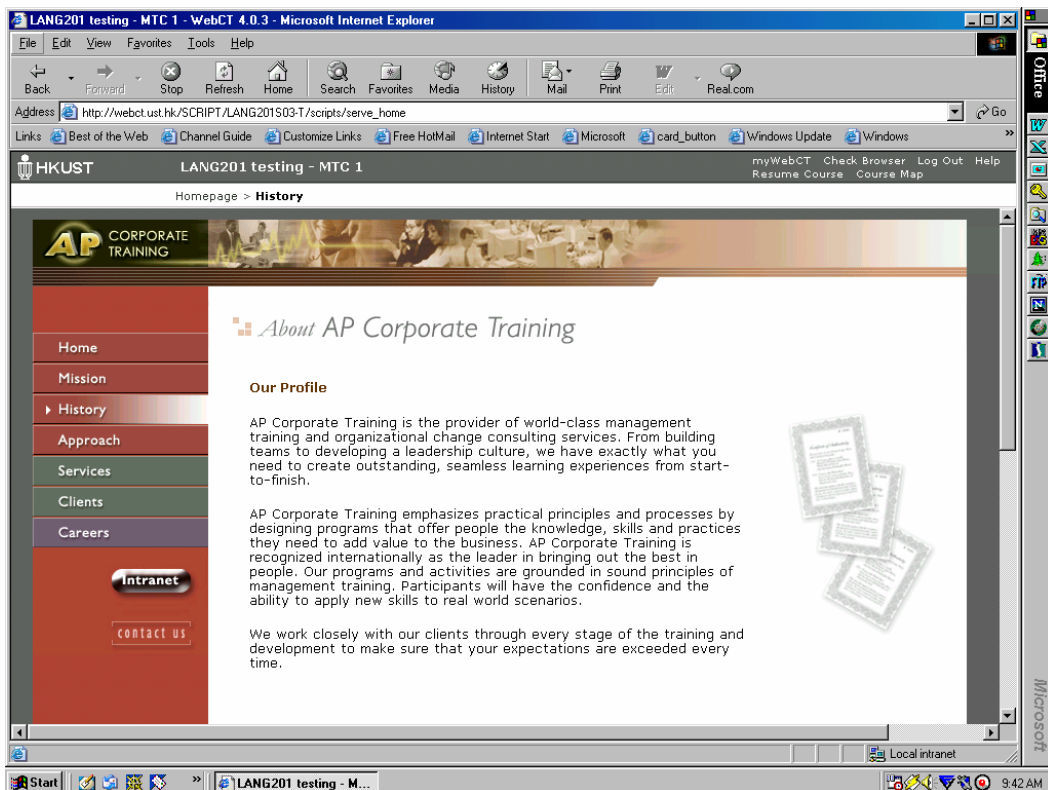


Figure 2. The website of the virtual management training company

Apart from the information about the company, students can go into the 'Intranet' page, where they can find the following (Figure 3):

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|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| News: | Weekly reminders of work scheme in the form calendar, which will be presented as company announcements. |
| Discussion Board/
Email: | Students will be able to discuss issues with team members as well as the manager/instructor |
| Client's Profiles: | Documents about the clients will be put in this site for students to access. |
| Development: | A 14-week online staff development program, covering the topics such as letter- and report-writing, client analysis, presentation skills. In each module, students can to select the tasks for self-improvement based on their learning needs. |
| Appraisal: | Guidelines on completing the peer appraisal form are given here. There is a link to OSSPE. |

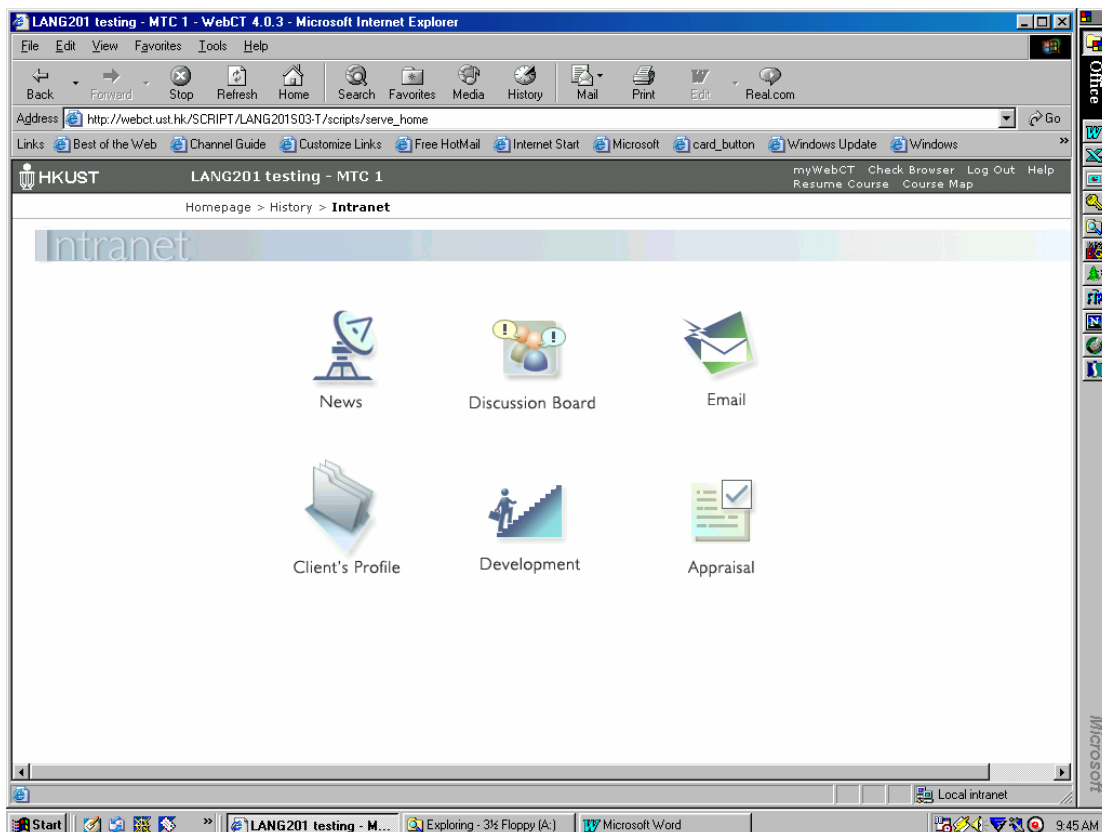


Figure 3. Features of the staff intranet page

CONCLUSION

The instructional design, i.e., a virtual office in the context of a business simulation scenario, outlined in this paper adopts a real-life approach to teaching business communication. Active and meaningful learning describes a process rather than a

product. The design of the virtual office in the context of a business simulation scenario encourages collaboration, autonomy in learning, critical reflection, peer evaluations as well as interactions with peers and instructors. As there is an element of competition (winning the client's contract), the students' motivation will be enhanced. The students' learning becomes much more goal-driven. Instructors assume more of the role of facilitators rather than the one who transfers knowledge. It is hoped that with this instructional design, students' development of business communication skills will be much more effective.

REFERENCES

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