Using case-based learning to enhance awareness of communication principles: An exploratory study

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and increasing competitiveness at the workplace demand multiple communication competencies, including multi-disciplinary knowledge and multi-cultural awareness, from students today. At the National University of Singapore, our response to this has been to incorporate case-based learning (CBL) in a communication skills course. A case is "an account of events that… include enough intriguing decision points and provocative undercurrents to make a discussion group want to… argue about them" (Barnes et al., 1994). We aim for a discussion-based experiential learning. Thus, "complex and information-rich cases encouraging problem-solving, calling forth collective intelligence and varied perspectives" provide a perfect tool (Hutchings, 1993 as cited in Christudason, 2003). Our exploratory study shows that students value case-based learning for its capability to heighten understanding of effective communication principles such as intercultural and small group communication in contemporary workplace situations, a quality crucial in multi-cultural societies like Singapore.

Introduction

To respond to the increasingly demanding global work world and to stay competitive in it, effective communication skills are clearly value-added assets to university graduates today. The workplace now requires employees with multiple communication competencies: a strong awareness of participation in communication processes, capability in the production of appropriate messages in oral and written transactions, and mental agility in responding to organized messages appropriate to their listeners/readers and communicative contexts. This is the challenge that we face in our communication skills course.

Professional Communication is an elective course offered to second and third year Engineering and Arts students at the National University of Singapore. It is taught over 48 contact hours in 12 weeks. The course is designed not only to teach students the skills of effective writing and speaking in the workplace, but also to create an awareness of the fundamental principles that impact on these skills, such as intercultural communication, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, and verbal/non-verbal communication. In other words, we want our students to be able to choose and deploy the most appropriate and most effective communication strategy possible when they face communi-

cation problems. To achieve this goal, case-based learning (CBL) was incorporated as a teaching/learning strategy in the course. We believe that CBL would be a useful tool to reinforce the learning of fundamental communication principles covered in the course.

It should be noted that while some of our students may be ESL or EFL speakers, all of them are proficient in English who have either cleared or have been exempted from the Basic English and the English for Academic Purposes modules in the Engineering and Arts and Social Sciences Faculties; hence, the focus of the course is on learning communication strategies rather than the English language per se.

What is CBL?

CBL is a student-centered, discussion-based approach to learning which involves the interactive, student-led exploration of realistic and specific situations contained in case studies. It is a pedagogy that links the classroom to the realities of the workplace and engages the students in a practice-oriented, problem-solving instructional mode. The key words in CBL are "practical" and "professional" (Lundberg, 1993).

A case has been defined in various ways. Gragg's (1954, p.6, cited in Lundberg, 1993) classic definition of case studies is as follows:

> A case typically is a record of a business issue which actually has been faced by business executives, together with surrounding facts, opinions, and prejudices upon which executive decisions have to depend. These real and particularized cases are presented to students for considered analyses, open discussion and final discussion as to the type of action which should be taken.

Simply put, a case is a human story that illustrates a difficult situation requiring a decision (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 1994). It is a story that "include[s] enough intriguing decision points and provocative undercurrents to make a discussion group want to think and argue about them" (Barnes et al., 1994). Lawrence (1953) refers to it as "a chunk of reality… grounded upon some stubborn facts [that] must be faced in reality" (Lawrence, 1953, pp. 46-7, cited in Lundberg, 1993) while Rogers and Rymer (1998) define it as a "slice of business life that enables students to enter into the case world and to observe and participate in business communication in context, developing their own purposes and strategies for communicating."

In addition to the above features of a case, in the Professional Communication course, all cases pose communication problems that focus on the principles of communication that have already been lectured on and all situations depicted in the cases are close to the students' interest or experience.

Benefits of CBL

The use of case studies in education is not new. Harvard Business School pioneered this approach in 1908. Throughout the years, CBL has been used in many fields of study, such as business management, the medical and dental professions, science, teacher education, social work, engineering and law. It is, as Christudason (2003, p. 18) says, suitable for any classrooms that "allow learning to take place through discussion-based and experiential learning arising from an exchange of ideas."

Apart from promising an exciting interactive discovery process, research has indicated several other benefits associated with such an approach: students are more likely to develop stronger thinking abilities, better problem solving skills, more effective communication skills, and a stronger sense of personal responsibility (Lieux, 1996 as cited in Major & Palmer, 2001). Besides, useful skills derived by students include process skills, team interaction skills and skills of correlation of previously learned materials. Equally important is that learners are more capable of becoming independent learners afterwards (Rodgers et al., 1997).

Our practical concerns

Besides the many benefits attributed to CBL as a teaching strategy in many fields, three compelling reasons convince us that CBL can effectively help us achieve the goals of our Professional Communication course:

- CBL links communication theories to reality.
- CBL is able to integrate multiple communication issues simultaneously.
- The interest level of cases for students is high.

Link between theory and reality

Our survey of communication skills textbooks in the Singapore market has shown that most of these textbooks are American-based and they aim at a wider international audience. Adopting any of these textbooks would mean imposing on our students the huge task of translating the theories of communication into strategies suitable for the specific Singapore context. Our past experience with this approach in similar courses informs us that it is not satisfactory as students see very little relevance of these theories to their immediate work world and their day-to-day life. On the other hand, we believe that case studies not only "[bridge] the gap between the classroom and workplace," an advantage usually cited by those who use the case method (Dorn, 1999, p. 41), but also bridge the gap between the communication theories in the American-based textbooks and the specific local Singapore reality. Thus, our information-rich cases are based on contextualized and particularized local issues surrounding organizational facts, public opinions, and personal prejudices. They require in-depth analyses, tactful decision making, and open-ended discussions to generate multiple feasible solutions. Through these cases, students have the opportunity to relate, in a more personal manner, to the communication theories such as those on interpersonal

and intercultural communication. When discussing the case, students can bring their culture-specific knowledge into the application of such theories in their immediate context. In our course, therefore, cases act as a vehicle linking theory to highly specific local reality.

Ability to integrate multiple communication issues simultaneously

As mentioned earlier, the course consists of only a total of 48 hours of in-class time. Within this period, written communication like reports and proposals, and oral communication like speeches and presentations have to be covered. Finding time for learning the less tangible but equally (if not more) important fundamental communication principles in the already crowded curriculum is not easy. Going beyond the conventional topical approach is even more challenging. CBL provides an excellent context for bringing together the multiple contradictions and various conflicting beliefs that impact on a communication situation that needs consideration in order to achieve a communication goal. As cases are usually single incidents that exemplify several aspects of organizational practices, societal norms, and communication behaviours of groups and individuals, they present the intermingling nature of communication events. Cases also offer opportunities for communication skills teachers to go beyond the topical approach, which is usually more time consuming, in a more efficient manner as they require students to deal with several issues simultaneously. Besides giving students chances to consider multiple issues at the same time, the rich contextual information of the cases also provides students with numerous opportunities to practise oral as well as written communication.

High interest level for students

CBL provides a more interesting and interactive way of teaching and learning communication principles. As mentioned earlier, the Professional Communication course is an elective credit-bearing course offered to second and third year Engineering and Arts students. This means that the course has to compete with many other required as well as elective courses in the university for students' time, energy, and modular credits. Level of interest, therefore, is important. The discussion-based experiential learning approach integral to CBL offers students many opportunities for voicing their ideas and exchanging opinions with other students. In our experience, these opportunities have a strong appeal to students in general.

Using CBL in the professional communication course

A CBL cycle in the Professional Communication course typically involves several stages: teacher input, student preparation, student discussion, students' presentation of results, and, finally, assessment.
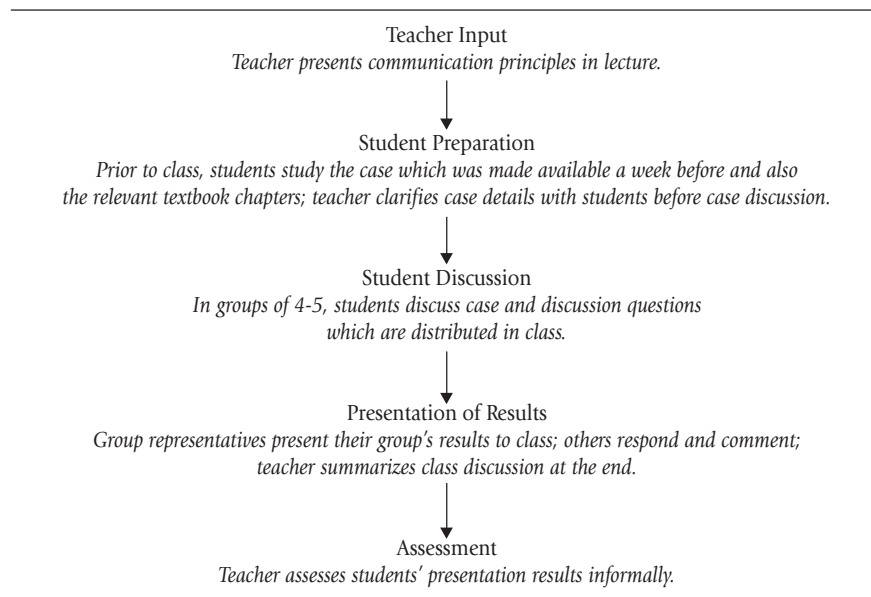
1. The cycle begins with input in the form of a lecture given by the teacher. In other cases, input can also be delivered by students in the form of a student

seminar. In our case, input is also drawn from reading assignments from the reference books. Such input is usually given the week before the case discussion.

2. Student preparation is a two-step process. Firstly, the case is given to the students a week or so before it is discussed and they are instructed to review it carefully prior to coming to class. Secondly, just before the case is discussed in small groups, there is a brief discussion led by the teacher to clarify any details of the case which the students may need.

3. Before case discussion begins, students receive the case-related discussion questions which teachers formulate.

4. The students then go into groups of 4-5 and discuss for about 25-30 minutes. The teacher does not join in the discussion, but merely observes or facilitates it.

5. At the end of the discussion, a member of the group is asked to present the group's decisions to the rest of the class. Other groups respond or comment and the teacher interjects when necessary. When all presentations are finished, the teacher can summarize the class discussion.

6. Finally, assessment may be informal (evaluation of students' presentation of results, quick written exercise) or formal, as in a final examination task or project work that counts for a part of the final grade.

Figure 1 depicts a typical CBL cycle of activities in our Professional Communication course:

Figure 1
CBL Cycle of Activities

Teacher Input
Teacher presents communication principles in lecture.

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Student Preparation
Prior to class, students study the case which was made available a week before and also the relevant textbook chapters; teacher clarifies case details with students before case discussion.

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Student Discussion
In groups of 4-5, students discuss case and discussion questions which are distributed in class.

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Presentation of Results
Group representatives present their group's results to class; others respond and comment; teacher summarizes class discussion at the end.

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Assessment
Teacher assesses students' presentation results informally.

Exploratory study of effectiveness of CBL

We conducted an exploratory study of student response to CBL. In particular, we investigated the students' feedback on the following:
1. Interest level of activities in the CBL cycle
2. Perceived usefulness of activities in CBL cycle
3. Perceived effectiveness of CBL in learning communication principles

The study was undertaken over three time periods: a workshop before the course was offered, and the first two semesters when the course was offered, i.e., Semesters 1 and 2 of Academic Year (AY) 2003-2004.

We conducted a two-hour workshop before finalizing the teaching materials and procedures in order to gauge how engineering students, who usually do not engage in discussion-based classroom interactions because of their discipline, would react to this approach. In the workshop we illustrated how CBL would be used in a communication class. The Professional Communication course was later offered to Arts & Social Sciences and Engineering students in both semesters of AY 2003-2004.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we asked students to respond to self-administered questionnaires after the case discussion sessions in our workshop and in another teacher's class. We also conducted classroom observations of this teacher's class during the first two semesters when the course was taught (Semesters 1 and 2, AY2003-2004). Finally, in consultation with the teacher of the class we observed, we reflected on our experience about the effectiveness of CBL in the Professional Communication course.

Students

Students in the pre-course workshop comprised 15 first year Engineering students who volunteered for the activity. These students came from the Critical Thinking and Writing course, a compulsory module for most Engineering students, taught by one of the researchers. Most of these first year students were Singaporeans or Malaysians who had a fairly good command of English. Those who took the elective Professional Communication course in the Semesters 1 and 2 tutorial groups were slightly different. Most came from the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences; only a few were Engineering students. They were mostly third year students and all had high levels of proficiency in English. The groups in both semesters, while consisting mainly of Singaporeans and Malaysians, were multi-cultural in composition, that is, we had students from other countries such as Germany, Finland and Sweden.

Questionnaire

At the end of the workshop and the case discussions in the course, students were asked to respond to self-administered questionnaires which asked them to rate the usefulness of each activity and answer open-ended questions about the CBL approach and the particular case(s) they discussed (see Appendix 2 for the

questionnaires). In all, 15 workshop participants and 31 students responded to the questionnaires. Though the workshop and the course questionnaires are slightly different because of the different cases used in the sessions, both contain two parts and attempt to answer the research questions we set for this exploratory study: the first part requires respondents to rate the effectiveness, usefulness and the level of interest of each of the six activities in the CBL cycle, while the second part asks open-ended questions about the specific case(s) discussed in the session.

Classroom Observation

Once the course was launched we observed two tutorial sessions devoted to the CBL cycle of activities. This occurred once each in Semesters 1 and 2, AY 2003-2004. We noted down our observations of student behaviour during the sessions independently using an observation form we designed for the purpose.

This form, which was the result of consultation with the teacher of the course, aims at collecting information for our research questions by looking at the physical setting of the classrooms, the verbal and non-verbal discussion behaviour of the students in small groups and students' presentation of discussion results to the whole class.

Teacher reflection

Part of the data considered in this exploratory study was drawn from our reflections on our experiences in designing the CBL-related activities and monitoring student response to these activities.

At this point, it is noteworthy to bring up a similar investigation conducted by Jackson (2002) of a case-based business management course in a Hong Kong university for students who were mainly Chinese EFL speakers. While the focus of Jackson's ethnographic investigation was slightly different from our exploratory study, our methods of investigation generally parallel each other. For instance, like our study, Jackson interviewed the students and the teacher, as well as surveyed their response to CBL with the use of questionnaires. She also investigated the artefacts of the case learning situation like the seating arrangement of students in the class, the handouts and the course syllabus. Finally, she also observed the interactions in the case discussions. Unlike us, however, she also videotaped these interactions and analyzed them. She also analyzed the case readings and discussions more thoroughly.

Jackson's findings differ significantly from ours. Generally, while our students were active participants in the case discussions, those in Jackson's Hong Kong class were reticent. This is understandable, however, given the different circumstances of the situation she observed. Nevertheless, what is interesting is that our findings generally concur with hers in terms of the factors that bring about these differences. These include the cultural background of the cases used and differences in pedagogy. We shall highlight these points again in a later section of this paper.

Case studies used in exploratory study

During the periods of our exploratory study, three case studies which focused on intercultural and small group organizational communication were used for discussion (see below for case summaries). While the workshop participants discussed a slightly simpler case "Why Marry in September?", the students in the communication skills course discussed "The Subordinate University Recruit" and "The Year of the Goat". All three cases drawn from *Culture and Management: A Casebook*, *Singapore* (Putti & Chia, 1990) were updated, adapted and contextualized to relate to the local Singapore context, suit our course objectives and meet our students' needs and interests (see Appendix 1 for the discussion questions designed for the case of "The Year of the Goat").

Why Marry in September?

Englishman James Anderson is based in his company's Singapore office. He finds it hard to understand why the key members in his project team all want to take leave to marry in September, the auspicious month in the Chinese lunar calendar. The challenge in the case is about how the *ang mo* (Caucasian) manager keeps his project team working while keeping the team members happy by respecting their cultural practices and family commitments.

The Subordinate University Recruit

"The Subordinate University Recruit" is about conflicts between a fresh Singaporean Engineering graduate and an experienced foreman at a construction site. Miscommunication happens and communication often breaks down between them because of the fresh recruit's unfamiliarity with the on-site customary practices and company history and the foreman's seniority and friendship with the management of the company.

The Year of the Goat

This case involves a group of Singaporean Chinese factory workers trying to convince their Dutch manager why a *lamoloh* (a professional who recites prayers and incantations on occasions such as death or when bad luck needs to be removed) needs to be hired to drive away the *chare* (spell of bad luck or presence of evil spirit) that they think has caused a series of accidents at the plant.

The critical aspects of the cases are synchronized with the relevant communication principles covered in the course. For example, while "The Subordinate University Recruit" was discussed by students after input about organizational communication and interpersonal communication was delivered, "The Year of the Goat" was made available for students after the lecture on small group communication and intercultural communication.

What students say about CBL: Questionnaire results

Generally our findings from both questionnaire surveys—after the workshop and the case discussion sessions in the Professional Communication course—show that students were very positive about CBL and the cycle of activities that we had designed. They found CBL an interesting approach to the study of

communication; they regarded the activities in the CBL cycle useful in many ways; and they found CBL effective in enhancing their awareness of communication principles.

Interest in CBL cycle

Results from the questionnaires reveal that students find CBL an interesting approach to learning communication skills.

A majority of the respondents find CBL an interesting approach to learning communication skills. On a 4-point scale they rated most activities 3 (fairly interesting) and 4 (very interesting) (see Table 1). In particular, the three activities that most of them considered fairly or very interesting were discussing the case with their group mates (89%), listening to other group decisions and discussing the questions (89%), and commenting on the other groups' decisions (84%).

Usefulness of activities in CBL cycle

When asked about the most useful activity in the CBL cycle, six out of 13 valid workshop responses (46%) and 12 out of the 27 valid responses from the communication skills course (45%) indicated that case discussion with the group members was the most useful.

The results are not surprising because it is during the discussion sessions that students discuss why miscommunication occurs and share their opinions about the tricky areas of the cases with others in the group. They also listen to others' perspectives, discuss conflicting views, consider various concerns, and present different ways to solve the problems to their groups in a safe classroom environment. In other words, it is in this part of the cycle when students feel they can freely present their own solutions to the communication problems, which could be unusual and risky sometimes, without worrying about the consequences and get feedback on such solutions before arriving at a group consensus. This is probably why students enjoy the discussion sessions and find this activity the

Table 1

Interesting Activity in CBL Cycle

Activities	Workshop (N=15)	Semester 1 + Semester 2 (N=31)	Total (N=46)
Reviewing cases before the tutorial	14 (93%)	22 (71%)	36 (78%)
Clarifying details of case with teacher	14 (93%)	21 (68%)	35 (76%)
Discussing case with group mates	14 (93%)	27 (87%)	41 (89%)
Presenting group's decisions to everyone	14 (93%)	20 (65%)	34 (74%)
Listening to other groups' decisions and discussing these decisions	15 (100%)	26 (84%)	41 (89%)
Commenting on others' decisions and comparing theirs with the group's decisions	—	26 (84%)	—

most useful one in the CBL cycle. Table 2 shows students' evaluation of the most useful activity.

Effectiveness of activities in CBL cycle

In the questionnaires, students were asked how effective each activity in the CBL cycle was in making them aware of communication principles that were being focused on. On a 4-point scale they rated most activities 3 (fairly effective) and 4 (very effective) (see Table 3). In particular, students found discussing the case with their group mates (93%) and listening to others' decisions and discussing these decisions (93%) effective.

Among the 31 students in the Professional Communication course who responded to our questionnaires, 26 (83%) said that CBL provided them with

Table 2
Most Useful Activity in CBL Cycle

Activities	Workshop (N=13)	Semester 1 + Semester 2 (N=27)	Total (N=40)
Reviewing cases before the tutorial	2 (15%)	7 (26%)	9 (22.5%)
Clarifying details of case with teacher	0 (0%)	2 (7%)	2 (5%)
Discussing case with group mates	6 (46%)	12 (45%)	18 (45%)
Presenting group's decisions to everyone	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)
Listening to other groups' decisions and discussing these decisions	4 (31%)	3 (11%)	7 (17.5%)
Commenting on others' decisions and comparing theirs with the group's decisions	—	3 (11%)	3 (7.5%)

Table 3
Effective Activity in CBL Cycle

Activities	Workshop (N=15)	Semester 1 + Semester 2 (N=31)	Total (N=46)
Reviewing cases before the tutorial	14 (93%)	25 (81%)	39 (85%)
Clarifying details of case with teacher	14 (93%)	28 (90%)	42 (91%)
Discussing case with group mates	14 (93%)	29 (94%)	43 (93%)
Presenting group's decisions to everyone	14 (93%)	27 (87%)	41 (89%)
Listening to other groups' decisions and discussing these decisions	15 (100%)	28 (90%)	43 (93%)
Commenting on others' decisions and comparing theirs with the group's decisions	—	27 (87%)	—

meaningful contexts to apply theories learnt from lectures and textbooks. For example, students who discussed "The Year of the Goat" found the case effective in sensitizing them to and enhancing their awareness of intercultural issues in Singapore - issues which may stay abstract and remote to them otherwise. Reasons often given by students were:

> … it's relevant to life in Singapore
> … it is an illustration of East meets West
> … the case involves inter-ethnic views related to Singapore
> … relevant to Singapore because there are lots of MNCs [Multi-national Corporations] here
> … related to multi-cultural context in Singapore

It is interesting to note that in Jackson's study (2002), students found it difficult to analyze the cases they discussed. The reason given was that those cases were not Hong Kong-based. Students regarded this as a negative aspect of CBL and noted that the "lack of background information makes the analysis difficult" (Jackson, 2002, p. 273).

It appears that the relevance of the case to the students' immediate context is critical to their perception of how well the case can bridge theory and practice. When asked to elaborate on their points, the students said that CBL gave them chances to apply theories in real life, see why miscommunication happens, discuss multiple solutions to a given problem, and analyze communication events from different angles. The excerpts from the students' responses to the open-ended question about the effectiveness of CBL are indicative of their positive attitude to this approach:

> … allows us to see [how] certain theories and communication principles can be applied to solve/ improve real life situations and problems . . . also increases our awareness of what problems are existing in the workplace.
> … different perspectives from classmates can be heard and I get to understand or see things in a broader context.

Difficulties experienced by students

Among the students in the Professional Communication course who responded to the survey questionnaire, only a few cited difficulties with CBL. The few students who did mention they encountered difficulties in the CBL cycle cited two difficulties—the application of textbook theories in cases and coming to a group decision in group discussion. While students may have found these two aspects difficult to accomplish, these tasks are intrinsic to the CBL approach itself and in fact are features that are meant to heighten the learning experience for the students.

Communication theories are usually presented one by one in a systematic and orderly fashion in textbooks. However, the real life cases which we give to students usually require them to apply more than one theory at any one time and in some cases, students may even have to consider conflicting theories simultaneously. They have to weigh different concerns and the relative pros and

cons of various actions. But this is exactly the challenge posed intentionally by our cases: how textbook theories can be applied in less than perfect situations to solve the communication problems involved.

Some students see discussing cases with group members who have different beliefs and concerns or who come from different cultural backgrounds a big challenge. However, instead of viewing such a challenge negatively, most of them see it as an opportunity to see others' points of view. As one student said:

> This [The Year of the Goat] was a very good case … presented a very difficult and sensitive situation. I find myself more sympathetic towards Seng [Meng] because we share similar beliefs. However, my group mates showed the other side of the argument. We discuss[ed] the issues and managed to come to a similar ground after analyzing … different stands.

Student response to CBL: Classroom observation

During the classroom observations, we noted students' behaviour and listened to their group discussions. In both of these aspects, we noted the students' positive response to CBL.

Student behaviour: Interest in CBL

Student behaviour during the tutorials reflected a high level of interest in the CBL approach. It was observed that the majority of the students went to class prepared to discuss the case. For instance, they had downloaded the case from the Internet and reviewed it before the class. It was also felt that students' level of engagement remained high throughout the discussions and very few off-task behaviours were observed. Most students also moved the classroom furniture themselves so that they could see and hear their group members during discussions. Engaging non-verbal behaviours like constant eye contact with group members and presenters were also noted in class. All these suggest that students were interested in the case discussion and their commitment to the class activities was high.

Group discussions and presentations

The students' responses regarding the case-based discussion questions demonstrated their ability to incorporate their concern regarding various communication principles covered in textbooks and lectures before reaching the decisions which they thought were feasible in the Singapore context.

● Application of Intercultural Communication Principles (e.g., high/low context cultures, empathy and tolerance) in Singapore Context—*The Year of the Goat*

Question 1 asked students if they would do what the Chinese supervisor, Seng Meng, did, i.e., write Clemens, the Dutch boss, a letter requesting for a *lamoloh* on behalf of the workers. It was noted in the observations that while more students preferred written communication to oral communication, all agreed that a *lamoloh* should be hired. Yet the fact that they had to deal with a

Dutch boss required them to consider the tricky issues related to intercultural communication. For example, though some students felt that they could put forward their suggestion to their boss who came from a low-context culture in the letter in a fairly direct way, they realized that the boss had worked in Asia for some time and so he would be familiar with the concept of face in the Asian culture. They, therefore, indicated that the suggestion of hiring a *lamoloh* should only be implied but not mentioned explicitly. They thought that the decision should be left to the boss, thereby giving him "face." In their justifications, students mentioned "local" culture and "culture in Asia" several times. Some other students, however, said it was important to write Clemens a letter to make him see how the workers feel as they understood that Clemens came from a low-context culture, one that relied more on logic and reason than feelings and emotions which are important attributes in the Asian high-context culture. Concepts related to intercultural communication like high/low context cultures, empathy, and tolerance were used in students' justifications.

- Consideration of Various Communication Principles in an Organizational Context (e.g., Company Image and Harmony among Workers of Different Races)—*The Year of the Goat*

In Question 3, though all students felt that a *lamoloh* should be hired to remove the *chare* in the plant, students tried hard to balance workers' concerns and company's image, and maintain harmony among workers of different races and different cultures. Therefore, they came up with suggestions like asking the *lamoloh* to come on a weekend or after office hours so that workers who were not interested in the event did not have to join, asking religious representatives from different races to join the event so that direct conflicts among workers of different beliefs could be avoided, turning the *lamoloh* event into a carnival for workers and their families so that a cultural practice with a religious emphasis can be transformed into an event which could be enjoyed by all and asking a public relations company to package the event as a publicity function for the company so that company image could be maintained and the *lamoloh* could be hired at the same time. Students' discussion results not only demonstrate their sensitivity towards communication between the workers (mostly Singaporean Chinese) and a company with a Dutch origin whose concerns were to maintain a forward-looking and innovative image, but also their awareness of the interests, feelings, and religious beliefs of workers of different races (like Malays and Indians) and cultures.

- Integration of Cultural & Academic Knowledge (e.g., knowledge about Singaporeans and importance of the cement pouring procedures in the site) and Various Communication Principles in Organizational Context—*The Subordinate University Recruit*

In answering Question 1 and explaining why the working relationship between the fresh university recruit and the experienced foreman was so bad, it was observed that students applied not only their knowledge of interpersonal

communication principles in an organizational context (like both formal and informal channels of communication are equally important), but also their cultural knowledge about local people. One of the students who tried to explain the lack of understanding between the university recruit and the experienced foreman said:

> *"Singaporeans are like this… they don't socialize after work…"*

And when justifying for the university recruit's concern for the cement pouring procedures, the Engineering students were quick to use their discipline-specific jargons to explain the significance of the procedures and the possible detrimental consequences if the proper procedures were not strictly adhered to.

One can hardly imagine that the specific cultural knowledge and communication strategies of Singapore will be mentioned in communication skills textbooks which aim at a larger international audience. Cases with high relevance to the local context, therefore, are particularly valuable because they provide an opportunity for students to critically review the applicability of communication theories in the local context. They give students a chance to articulate and express their specific cultural knowledge. Moreover, cases which are close to students' academic discipline allow them to apply their discipline-specific knowledge to solve communication problems. Such knowledge can also be challenged and tested in the discussion sessions especially if students in the class are of different nationalities, races, ages, and with different amounts of working experience.

Teacher reflection

Based on our observations, it seems that CBL was quite helpful to our students. First of all, the cases opened the students' eyes to work world realities, e.g., the power structure and struggles within an organizational structure, as seen in the case "The Subordinate University Recruit" and the need to balance the company's and workers' concerns, as seen in the case "The Year of the Goat". CBL also proved an excellent medium for learning and applying the communication theories. The situations depicted were not contrived so that students very easily got into the role playing mode without too much coaxing from the teacher. The real life situations which were depicted in the case also provided opportunities for students to apply their problem-solving and negotiating skills in a workplace environment. A particular skill that students seemed to learn was how to disagree politely, a necessary but often absent skill among our students. Secondly, cases with a high relevance to the local context provided an opportunity for students to critically review the applicability of communication theories and the suggested solutions in the textbooks. They gave students a chance to articulate and express their specific cultural knowledge. Thirdly, cases which were close to students' academic discipline (e.g., The Subordinate University Recruit) allowed students to apply their discipline-specific knowledge in understanding the communication problems. In all, the students acquired vicarious experiences of communicating in the workplace.

We attribute the effectiveness of CBL in the classes to several factors. One was the intercultural composition of the classes, which generated various styles of communicating and dealing with problem situations. It was, for the students, a real life intercultural experience. Another factor was the ability of the students to perform under time pressure. The fact that the discussion activities had to be completed within a given time forced the students to manage their time well. This ensured that the CBL cycle of activities was carried out during the class period. A third factor was the students' generally high level of preparation, a requirement for the success of CBL. Students came to class having read the cases beforehand and ready to discuss the cases. The teacher's commitment to CBL is another factor. By refraining from taking the centre stage and giving out "answers" and allowing the students to freely express their opinions, communication opportunities were maximized. This was very much appreciated by the students. Here again, our findings differ from Jackson's (2002) study. While the teacher in the Hong Kong class held very positive views about CBL in business administration programs, it seems that the teacher, more than the students, played a more dominant role in the full-class case discussion. Jackson noted that "[since] the students did not jump in with their own questions or comments, it was the professor's questions that determined the direction and flow of the discussion" (Jackson, 2002, p. 279). It should be noted, however, that this seemed to be the teacher's strategy for coping with his students' reticence in the case discussions. Students in our classes were different from the Hong Kong students in this regard. Finally, the classroom setting we observed was conducive to discussion. In our case, the classroom was large enough for students to form into groups and the class size was not too big.

An aspect of CBL that needs some attention is that, unlike traditional approaches, no one correct answer is provided to the students. Clearly, students are still uncomfortable about this aspect, given their background where certainty and "correct" answers are often available. CBL is largely a discovery process, where decisions are negotiated rather than dictated and where in some ways, anything is possible.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the Professional Communication course, CBL has been an effective approach in enhancing our students' awareness of communication principles and applying these to realistic local work situations. This is evident both in the students' response to the approach as well as our classroom observations. CBL generated a high level of interest among the students and therefore it took little persuasion to engage them in the CBL cycle of activities that was set for them, leading them to put into practice the communication principles they had learned about. In this study, the principles involved intercultural and small group communication, which in multi-cultural Singapore is definitely an added bonus. Moreover, CBL has effectively linked the classroom to the globalized work world in a highly-interactive manner, thus persuading students about the relevance of the course to their working lives in the future. Results in this exploratory study

show CBL, which moves away from the traditional topical approach where students deal with one communication topic at a time, can engage students successfully as they find the activities both interesting and useful. However, CBL is admittedly still a new experience for our students and so there still seems to be a need for them to become more familiar with this approach. Nevertheless, the rewards of CBL for the students and teacher have indeed been satisfying.

Results of our preliminary investigation into the use of CBL in our course have been encouraging. Nevertheless, in view of these results we make the following recommendations:

1. Emphasize the interactive nature of CBL to students.
   Some students still expect teachers to provide a "model" answer at the end of the discussion session and this reflects a deeply rooted expectation that knowledge has to be transmitted from teachers to students uni-directionally and a common expectation that there is always only one answer to a problem. Teachers need to orient students to the CBL approach, justify the activities and explain to students what is expected of them and what they can expect from teacher.

   In addition, students need to be made aware of the fact that the complexities intrinsic to the discussion of the case-related questions are built into the case primarily to enhance their learning. Therefore, the perceived "difficulties" should be seen by students as inherent challenges in the CBL approach.

2. Investigate the effect of CBL on student's communication skills, e.g., study the impact of the CBL cycle of activities on students' projects in the course, i.e. their written and oral assignments.

3. Conduct a more in-depth investigation of the student response to CBL by conducting individual interviews with students to probe and confirm their answers to the survey questions.

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Appendix 1. Discussion questions for the Year of the Goat

1. Having noticed the series of accidents that happened in the plant and talked to the operators there, would you do what Seng Meng did? Would you write Clemens a letter on behalf of the employees requesting for a *lamoloh*?
2. If you were one of those who do not believe in *chare* and *lamoloh* because of either personal or religious reasons, would you feel bad if Vermeer Electronics decides to go ahead with Seng Meng's suggestion? What should the management do if it wants to keep a united workforce?
3. Clemens' various concerns at the end of the case are not unjustified. If you were Clemens, what would you do then? Justify your answer.

Appendix 2. Questionnaires

WORKSHOP QUESTIONNAIRE
Communication Skills Workshop—5 April 2003

Thank you for coming to today's workshop. Before you go, could you respond to the questions below?

We would appreciate your feedback on the workshop activities as it would help us plan the materials and learning activities for the forthcoming professional communication course, which will be offered in Sem.1 of next academic year.

Please write your responses in the table below.

1. Look at the activities listed in Column 1. In your opinion, how effective were they in making you aware of the principles that affect communication? (In Column 1, please circle the number that best describes your response. **4** means "very effective"; 1 means "not effective at all".)
2. How interesting were the activities? (In Column 2, please circle the number that best describes your response. **4** means "very interesting"; **1** means "not interesting at all".)
3. Rank the activities according to how useful they were in terms of learning about communication principles. (In Column 3, write **1** for the most useful method, **2** for the second most useful, etc. Please write a ranking for all the 6 activities.)

Activity	1 Effective?	2 Interesting?	3 Useful?
Reviewing Case 1 before the workshop	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Clarifying the details of the case with the teacher	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Discussing the case with my group mates	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Presenting our group's decisions to everyone	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Listening to the other groups' decisions and discussing these decisions	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Choosing my own communication strategy	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	

What difficulties did you have during today's workshop?

_____

In your opinion, what was the most interesting thing you learned from the workshop today?

_____

Any suggestions to make the activities more meaningful/useful to you?

_____

Once again, many thanks for your participation!

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE
Case Studies Approach

Your feedback on the case studies approach as you have used it in ES20007: Professional Communication would help us make improvements to the course in the future. Please respond to all the questions. Note that your responses will be held in strict confidence and that they will not in any way affect your grade in the course. Thank you!

1. Look at the activities listed in Column 1. In your opinion, how effective were they in making you aware of the principles that affect communication? (In Column 1, please circle the number that best describes your response. **4** means "very effective"; **1** means "not effective at all".)
2. How interesting were the activities? (In Column 2, please circle the number that best describes your response **4** means "very interesting"; **1** means "not interesting at all".)
3. Rank the activities according to how useful they were in terms of learning about communication principles. (In Column 3, write **1** for the most useful method, **2** for the second most useful, etc. Please write a ranking for all the 6 activities.)

Activity	1 Effective?	2 Interesting?	3 Useful?
Reviewing Cases (*The Year of The Goat* and the *Subordinate University Recruit*) individually before the tutorials	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Clarifying the details of the case with the teacher	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Discussing the case with my group mates	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Presenting our group's decisions to everyone	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Listening to the other groups' decisions and discussing these decisions	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	
Commenting on others' decisions and comparing theirs with your group's decisions	4 3 2 1	4 3 2 1	

What difficulties, if any, did you have in doing any of the activities specified on the previous page? What did you/ your group do in order to overcome these difficulties?

_____

_____

In your opinion, can the case studies approach provide you with meaningful contexts to apply the communication principles learnt in the lectures and theories discussed in the textbook?

_____

_____

Which case, *The Year of the Goat* or *The Subordinate University Recruit*, appears more interesting/more challenging/more useful in the Singapore context to you? Why?

_____

_____

Any suggestions to make the activities more meaningful/useful to you?

_____

_____

END
Once again, many thanks for your participation!