

## A Simulation-Based Model for Teaching Business Writing: Exploration and Applications

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this work is to review the important role of technology and authentic assessment in the field of business writing, how it has come about and developed over time. A review of Business English writing classes indicate the digitization of classrooms has led to significantly higher student satisfaction and, even more impressive, greater academic achievement for students (Zhonggen & Guifang, 2016). Additionally, Spector et al (2016) discuss how technology can make assessments more engaging for today's students, largely due to resembling functioning in a real world workplace. Despite these advantages, there have been few sources that have illustrated how authentic assessment can be used for business writing, and how to teach or learn and how effective it is at achieving learning objectives and goals. This work offers a framework for study of simulation-based model for teaching business writing, beginning with a review of the research and scholarship on business writing and authentic assessment, and then explaining a framework that identifies key steps for future investigation while providing instructions for conducting research. Using simulations can prepare business students for future writing success in the rapidly shifting global marketplace.

**Keywords:** Authentic assessment, Business writing, Simulations

### Introduction

Writing skills when engaging in doing business is an increasingly important skill owing to the volume of communications. Content knowledge of the field in which the business is making its mark is certainly important for any successful businessperson, but it is certain that communication is even more crucial for business success. Business today is more visible than ever before. Companies and corporate entities are accessible to their customers, for better or worse, and this has led to an increase in the amount of communication necessary by what were previously often faceless corporations in the eyes of the consumer. Brand presence will likely likewise demonstrate social media presence in multiple forms, complete with customer interaction on a day by day and

sometimes even minute by minute basis, as indicated online. Furthermore, in the age of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, business situations that once might have been written about or noticed only on a small scale often become news stories that require communication from marketing departments, publicity managers, or even the CEO.

Along with all of these additional opportunities for communication in the world of business today, others abound based around the fact that individuals operate in an increasingly global business culture. Communication among national and often international stakeholders is a key point for business success, and that communication is developing in new and unexpected ways, ranging from Skype calls to emails. It is also becoming available in multiple languages. As increasingly more people move more easily in this era of globalization and the technology that accompanies it, it is increasingly more feasible that the people working on a project may never meet in real life or may not even speak all the same languages, but they must complete their tasks regardless, and must communicate effectively, sometimes in challenging circumstances, in order to reach their common objectives.

With the business world's increased need for effective communication, it is naturally the case that companies are looking for candidates for positions who can fulfill this requirement. While speaking multiple languages is definitely an advantage for these applicants for business positions, English is in great part the *lingua franca* of business worldwide. Yet, even those who can write and communicate effectively in just this one language are not always easily found. MBA programs and undergraduate business programs have accordingly focused increasing attention in recent years on teaching business writing. From writing emails to creating effective presentations for marketing purposes, writing for business is notably different from the types of writing that most students learn in university courses, and this special skill is becoming increasingly more important. Teaching business writing takes many forms. However, there has hitherto been little examination in the scholarly community concerning authentic assessment as it can be used for business writing. Authentic assessment, with its focus on real-world tasks and products, would be ideal for functioning in business. The purpose of this work is to examine the importance of business writing for business learning, and discusses the crucial role of authentic assessment in keeping students engaged and in preparing them for real-life situations they will face as members of the workforce. A simulation-based model is proposed for teaching business writing that would allow students to experience the various contexts in which business writing is very important in as close to a real-life scenario as many classrooms would allow. A comprehensive review of the current literature related to business writing and authentic assessment is included, followed by presenting a model in which this method of understanding what students have learned can be helpful to both students and instructors.

## **Literature Review**

The intersection of business writing and authentic assessment has not been explored extensively in the scholarly literature on either topic, while both of these topics have been individually studied in detail. However, these areas

of previous research must be examined and evaluated in order to determine the importance of a simulation model for teaching business writing. Communication in business is especially important since a great deal of business dealings is team-based, and therefore students will need to be duly prepared to enter a field in which they will repeatedly work in teams on projects. The clearer the communication between team members, the more effective these teams will be at both a collegiate/educational level and on a professional level with regard to their functions, as defined by Poysa-Tarhonen, Elen, & Tarhonen (2016). It is thus crucial for students to be able to communicate well with team members. This is what business writing is for, but business writing cannot exist in a vacuum. According to the consensus of the scholarly community, it must be grounded in traditional English language and writing instruction, especially for learners who are working in English as a non-native language (or L2). Quible & Griffin (2007) are concerned about a so-called lost generation of business writers, whose business acumen is high but they cannot communicate effectively. Writing instruction for business must therefore begin with writing instruction for its own sake.

### **English Instruction and Business Writing**

There is some disagreement regarding the proficiency needed in terms of business writing in students' preparation for successful careers in their individual fields. How and how much this skill needs to be taught are matters of debate, and different students and professors have differing ideas about these issues as well. In a study of students of Lebanese descent studying at the Lebanese American University, Bacha & Bahous (2008) found that students tended to perceive their writing skills as more satisfactory than their professors gave them credit for, and that they considered themselves to be sufficient competent to complete writing tasks that both Business and English department faculty members considered to be beyond their learning levels. Students also had different ideas from faculty regarding what business writing tasks were necessary and should be practiced. Despite these differences, both students and faculty in the study considered that business writing was important and, perhaps even more significantly, that both the Business and English department faculty should collaborate in teaching business writing. This is arguably even more important for students of English as a foreign language who are confronting the realities of the importance of effective communication in their field in a language in which they may not consider themselves to entirely competent about using. Good communication is not just based on the individual tasks that come with working in business, but is also based on a fundamental understanding of grammar, sentence structure, syntax, and other mechanics, and in many cases for EFL students, those writing techniques must be explicitly taught in English. Smith (2011) also noted that business students should not just write, but also read both business and unrelated material as a means of improving their writing skills. Being literate is helpful in communication, but this practice contributes to ensuring that students see good writing in actual practice, in terms of both style and mechanics. Bay (2010) argued for greater use of composition techniques in teaching professional writing. Writing as a

discipline in itself has much to do with successful business writing, and the teaching of good writing begins with the teaching of writing mechanics.

The importance of English mechanics instruction as part of the business writing learning process cannot be overstated. Weldy, Maes, & Harris (2014) noted that first year university students recognise the importance of business writing, but they also tend to undervalue it, as well as consider that their skills are sufficiently suitable without there being a need for a great deal of further instruction. Their research presented a two-semester focused writing program that focused on a five-step writing process, in which students completed ten assignments. Students' understanding of the academic importance of business writing, as well as their grammar and the organisation of their writing, improved significantly at the end of this program, thus demonstrating the idea that teaching business writing along with teaching how important it is has a very significant component of conventional English teaching. When students are taught business writing with a process that necessitates careful use of language, much as they might be in a basic English class, they not only become better writers who are skilled at one way communication, but also with a greater understanding of the importance of business writing. Clear, prescriptive techniques for improving their writing, such as the 3D Writing Heuristic put forward by Hershey (2007) help students write more clearly and can provide students with specific directions to follow in order to become better writers.

Washington (2014) makes an explicit connection between the globalisation of business and effective written communication, demonstrating the importance of written work for businesspeople in the twenty-first century. Effective writing skills are becoming more of a focus in business education programs throughout the United States, with three essential factors being identified: teaching writing to international students, faculty attitudes toward the teaching of writing, and workplace writing experience. Collaboration between business and English faculty and departments addresses all of these matters. International students can receive the explicit instruction in grammar and mechanics that they often need, faculty attitudes toward writing are improved with greater transparency and collaboration among faculty members, and workplace-type writing can be undertaken as part of class work assignments within this new model. English writing instruction in the traditional sense thus has an important role to play in terms of teaching students to write specifically in business contexts.

According to Reardon (2015), 84% of students believe that their writing is adequate for the workplace without explicit instruction in either writing or business writing in particular, but it is clear that interventions such as those created by Weldy, Maes, & Harris can greatly improve students' skills. Stowers & Barker (2003) noted the same situation as Reardon - students believe that their writing skills are sufficiently useful for the workplace, although neither professors nor, more significantly, business owners who might hire them agree with this assessment. Stowers and Barker posit that motivation is a crucial part of having business students write better, and their work indicates that one way to motivate students is through the use of technology in the classroom.

## Teaching with Technology

Reardon (2015) found that the use of computerized assessment technology for writing can be especially effective for business writers, who focus much more on the areas in which their writing is lacking, such as editing mechanics, when assessed in this manner. Notably, students agree with teachers on this issue, finding that computerized writing assessment can help them learn and remember the rules of grammar and editing, which could be their greatest shortcomings. Thus, assessment can actually become a useful part of the learning process for business writing in and of itself.

Technology can also be useful in the sense of the "flipped" classroom, in which students learn at home, often through streaming videos or other forms of technology, and practice the skills they have learned in class thereafter. Zhonggen & Guifang (2016) found that flipped classrooms used specifically for Business English writing classes led to significantly higher student satisfaction and, even more impressive, greater academic achievement for students. Web 2.0 activities, including the use of social media and other interactive web applications, have also been found to lead to higher student satisfaction and greater student creativity, as well as to higher student self-efficacy, according to Liu, Lu, Wu, & Tsai (2016). Yen, Additionally, Hou, & Chang (2015) found that Facebook and Skype were effective learning tools that enhanced business students' ability and comfort levels communicating in English, in a study of Taiwanese students. Using of technology in the business writing classroom thus has a wide range of positive effects for students that extend beyond simple mastery of the material.

Peer evaluation of business writing tasks has been examined in literature sources at least since the publication of the work by Lynch and Golen (1992), but the methods of peer editing and writing collaboration have been greatly enhanced by technology that has since been developed. Lin, Yu, and Yang (2014) posit a model of cloud-based writing instruction and assessment that encourages collaboration among students and between students and faculty members. In their model, students work on documents and writing assignments in the cloud, such as with the use of Google Docs, and are able to see and comment upon each others' work as part of a peer review process and revise their own as needed while a greater range of skills are improved. This model of interactive learning has been found to be effective specifically for business writing, and has obvious applications to the real world, which, the authors point out, make it both more engaging and more effective as a strategy for teaching business writing. Even before the introduction of cloud technology, Forman (1991) emphasized the importance of collaboration in business writing, and technology has since allowed for this method of teaching, learning, and writing to have become a practical reality. According to Hanjani (2016), collaborative writing and making continuous revisions are especially helpful for learners working in a second language. The process of peer review and feedback, when applied gradually with an instructor's guidance, empowers students and is an effective learning technique. Stoddart, Chan, & Liu (2016) took the idea of collaborative writing a step further, investigating the use of wiki-based writing for collaboration. Wikis allow students to share their knowledge with each other, with students all contributing to the class knowledge base and are enabled to edit and collaborate

on each other's writing. The resulting product can be used by future classes and students. This kind of writing, with its peer-editing component, is especially helpful for L2 learners, and wiki-based collaboration, along with cloud-based collaboration, is supported among practitioners as the best practices for business writing. Computers and technology clearly have a role to play in terms of learning to write in the business context, and this is further amplified by the work of Chang (2016), who examined e-learning as a teaching modality for aspiring entrepreneurs in Taiwan. His study found that students who went through an e-learning based training created better business plans, and noted that team-based learning, when led effectively, can lead to the achievement of learning goals. The burgeoning utility of the internet in teaching business writing is clearly evident, which is advisable, especially given how much business students will use online tools in their future careers. The real-world applications are evident.

### **Assessing Business Writing Effectively**

Even writing instruction that has components of traditional English instruction and is aided by technology may not be effective for every student, and in order to ensure that all students are learning what is expected and that programs are graduating students ready for the workplace, intensive and effective assessment is needed. May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite (2012) note the importance of robust assessment for business writing, including the use of data analysis to determine whether students are coming away from their learning experiences with the requisite skills for success in future workplaces.

One way to assess business writing is by having students both analyze and sometimes write case studies, and this has been found to be helpful for L2 learners in Russia, where Brattseva & Kovalev (2015) noted that reading and writing case studies was a tool to both teach and assess the learning of native Russian-speaking business students in English. They found that using such a method of assessment and learning helps students be more communicative, as well as helping establish a host of other positive traits: students also become more goal-oriented, more creative, and more decisive. If it is done correctly, assessment can then also contribute to the learning process for students of business writing. According to Giulioni & Voloshin (2014), the use of mini case-studies is perhaps even more useful for both learning and assessment. In some instances, since these are less intimidating for students.

### **The Role of Authentic Assessment in Learning**

Authentic assessment involves students creating results that have actual use and that imitate what they would do in real-world situations. Huba & Freed (1999) characterize authentic assessment as large part of their model of learner-focused assessment on college campuses, noting that students learn more effectively this way and are more highly motivated to learn as well. Ullah & Wilson (2007) confirm the importance of student involvement in learning and in the assessment process for student success. Trevitt and Stocks (2012) argue for the use of portfolios as part of assessment, and these have the flexibility to be composed of a range of different results, which can lead to more authentic

assessment as students are tasked to create and complete the same items and tasks they would in a real world career context.

One way to increase the authenticity of both formative and summative assessment for twenty-first century learners in particular is by using technology as part of the assessment process, and not just of the learning process, as is discussed above. Spector et al (2016) discuss how technology can make assessment more engaging for today's students in large part because it resembles what they will do in a real world workplace. Problem-based and inquiry-based learning, in which students learn organically and are assessed in ways that make sense in the real world, are, according to the study group that produced this study, the best practices for modern, tech-savvy learners.

Experiential learning functions in conjunction with authentic assessment, and this is especially true in a business context. When so much of what students are learning is going to be used directly in the real world, learning by doing, and being assessed on the products they create, can be extremely helpful for students. Deeter-Schmelz (2015) discusses a unique corporate and academic integrated partnership in which students in a sales management course underwent a combination of role play, traditional learning of course content, and real-world application through interaction with corporate partners in order to learn business writing skills. These elements created an effective project in which students were able to learn and then to apply new skills in an authentic manner. This type of learning and assessment therefore definitely has a purpose, specifically in a business English classroom.

### **Simulations in Business Learning**

Moving away from the field of writing directly, it is clear that simulations are used consistently in business process and concept learning at both the university and the MBA level. Simulation programs are designed to give students authentic tasks on which they can practice and apply skills they have learned in the classroom. With the introduction of increasingly more effective technology, these learning modalities are becoming increasingly more common in MBA programs. Neely & Tucker (2013) found that they are considered effective by teachers and by students, although one caveat is that the learning that ensues may be difficult to assess. The authors found particular difficulty in quantifying and assessing indefinite "soft" skills, such as communication skills, in these simulations, in contrast to "hard" skills, such as data analysis. Case-based in-basket writing tasks, in which students are asked to prioritize and respond to a variety of tasks given to them at the same time in order to simulate a real office working environment, have been found to be especially effective in eliciting business writing and in forcing students to give evidence of the various skills necessary for effective business communication. These case study based in-basket activities give what Stearns, Ronald, Greenlee, & Crespy (2003) call "contexts for communication," allowing for students to demonstrate their expertise in this otherwise difficult to assess area.

Since simulations are already being used, adapting them to assess business writing in particular more effectively is a clear next step for research. Simulating writing-heavy tasks, using a peer editing component, writing and communicating collaboratively, and utilizing technology are all elements that

students must perform in such a simulation for it to be consistent with the best practices, as presented in the current literature. The simulation described below attempts to combine these elements into a cohesive model for assessing business writing via simulation activity.

### **A Simulation for Business Writing: Rationale and Procedures**

Learning through doing, as well as being assessed on real-world products (termed "authentic assessment," as described above), are touchstones of the business education model, but clearly any activity or procedure designed to teach business writing needs to do so in a manner that also incorporates some of the other best practices of business education, including collaborative teamwork and the introduction of writing and English-language elements outside of the sphere of business writing only.

Such a simulation would need to include a great deal of opportunities for writing that would not just be technical, but also provide a wide scope for some of the conventions of general composition, such as descriptive wording. At the same time, teams within the simulation need to be able to work in groups to create products that have some meaning and can be assessed not just by a professor, but perhaps also by future potential employers as well. Students will gain writing skills, business experience, and self-efficacy as they are motivated by the completion of tasks that are analogous to the real world, and will come out of the simulation with a business plan that might even provide material for future class work or for their own ventures outside of the classroom.

The simulation will begin with students divided into teams of four to six participants. The professor can decide whether to randomly assign these groups, or whether to pair specific students together at their discretion, depending on whether or not personal interaction is part of what is being assessed. It is preferable, all other things being equal, to put students in random groupings, since in the real world they will have to work with teams of diverse personalities and skill sets. However, to adapt this activity for a beginner group, a professor might choose to group individuals who will work well together, or whose strengths complement one another. For example, they might group someone who is comfortable with speaking in public with someone who has great ideas, but is not good at organising details, or someone who is effective at delegating and someone who is very detail oriented. Such a group might produce optimal learning for new business students within the context of the activity.

Once students are grouped, their task is to develop a business idea. They will develop a product or service, create a written business plan, create and deliver a presentation to attract investors, create a mock social media presence for their new brand or service, and create position descriptions, interview questions, and a recruitment drive for potential employees of their new company. Throughout this process, students will use cloud-based computing to share and critique each other's work, and assessment will be undertaken during this process.

### **Assigning Roles**

Students will be presented with a list of the various products that will be expected of them, as described above, and be asked to divide up the separate

tasks among the members of the team. They will then be asked to each produce a written rationale explaining why they have taken on their particular role and how this will contribute to the team's success. This will allow students to practice compositional writing outside of the regular parameters of business communication. Students should upload these files to the cloud folder the instructor has set up for each team, and should edit and comment on each other's work. One aspect of the assessment of this stage of the project should involve whether or not students commented on and edited others' work, and whether or not students made changes to their own work in conformity with the comments that had been given to them. This can be tracked in a cloud-based editing program, such as Google Docs.

### **The Business Plan**

The business plan should be a written document aimed at investors, analysing the market of the specific product or service, and include analysis of how the product will differentiate itself (essentially a SWOT-type analysis) as part of the written document. The plan should outline the products or services that will be offered, the sales and marketing objectives and plans along with information about pricing and distribution as applicable, the general operations of the business, the composition of the management team and their expertise to bring the product or service to market, financial plans, such as an explanation of how much initial investment will be needed and what that money will be used for, and finally, an assessment of risks and competitors. Other elements of the business plan may vary depending on the particular business that the students have chosen to pursue.

This document, whether it is worked on by one person on the team or by multiple team members, should be edited and commented on by all, as was the initial written part of the role assignment process described above. Finally, each student in the group should write an executive summary of the business plan, and students should compare theirs to others and critique each other's summaries, since this provides another avenue for practice in business writing.

### **The Presentation**

The presentation should include slides or PowerPoint, with the number of slides or length of the presentation being at professor's discretion, and this might be one way to differentiate this project for different levels of learners. For example, an MBA group would do a different length and depth of presentation material than would a group of first year university students in an introductory class. The slides should come with speakers' notes as well as with handouts or materials that would be given to potential investors.

Like other documents created, these should be edited by all of the students. The students involved in the creation of these particular materials should also submit a reflection document, which could take the form of a narrative in which they describe their choices and the way they went about the task, as well as discuss what they learned. Narrative writing is one of the conventions of composition that usually falls outside the parameters of business writing, but practice doing this can make for more literate and articulate students who are overall better communicators.

## **Social Media**

The next stage of the project relates to using social media. In today's internet-driven business environment, it is important for brands to maintain social media presence. Brands go so far as to pay social media "influencers" to promote their products in subtle ways, such as by featuring them in photos on Instagram or videos on SnapChat. There appear to be an ever-growing number of platforms, and these represent both an opportunity and a set of potential pitfalls for products and brands, since interaction with customers, for better or worse, is quicker, easier, and more public. In terms of the simulation exercise, social media strategising presents a way for students to explore these trends and for them to learn to further communicate in business terms.

This task will consist of a written out social media plan, including discussion of which platforms to use, what kind of tone to take, post frequency, plans for growing social media presence, etc. This will be written as a comprehensive plan, and then the material will be vetted and become the subject of a shorter form of communication in the format of a memo in order to give students practice in writing this form. The memo and the fully described social media plan will both become part of the collaborative folder, and all group members will, as with other products, be responsible for editing and proofreading each other's work, while leaving constructive comments.

## **Hiring and Recruitment**

The final step of the simulation will involve hiring and recruitment. Students working on this stage will create a written out strategy document detailing hiring research, including potential salary ranges, a mocked-up organizational chart, text for hiring and recruitment ads, and potential interview questions, as well as model answers to these interview questions. At minimum, two students should work on this portion of the simulation, since one should write the interview questions and the other or others can then write answers. This gives students an opportunity to communicate business-related experiences and personal accomplishments succinctly and clearly, which is something that they will have to do both aloud in job interviews and in writing over the course of their careers.

One possible extension of the simulation is to have a simulated "job fair" with another class in which students do mock interviews for the positions they are "hiring" for. If this is added to the simulation, then additional writing, such as a memo detailing the company and its products or services, could be provided to the "interviewer subjects" ahead of time, who would then use that writing sample to decide which companies they were interested in pursuing "jobs" at. Doing this with two classes of students would allow for both sets to create hiring materials and conduct interviews and to be the individuals seeking jobs. Writing a reflection on this experience could be an additional business writing sample, allowing for more practice with narrative writing, as well as with editing and giving feedback to peers.

This stage of the simulation might be especially useful for L2 learners, because they would have opportunity to work not just on writing skills, as in other parts of the simulation, but also on public speaking and conversational

skills as well. For these learners, the intersection of writing and speaking can benefit both skill sets.

### **Assessment**

This project can be assessed in a number of ways, depending on what aspects of business communication and writing the professor would like any given group to focus on. It could even be done more than once, as an introductory project and a capstone project for a year long course of study, with different products or simulated services, for example, and the two experiences being compared.

Within the simulation, there are opportunities for formative assessment by virtue of the writing products that each student turns in at the start along with the role assignments. They also should receive grades and feedback based on the commenting and editing they do of their peers' work.

It is important to note that assessment should be as collaborative as possible in order to realistically resemble the authentic assessments that students will face when they are in the workplace: the feeling should be that of going back and forth on a project with a supervisor, rather than the usual professor-student dynamic. This adds to the reality of the simulation and also gets students to be more cognizant of their writing skill level (which the literature showed many overestimate), and of the importance of business writing and communications.

Along with grades taken throughout the process for separate assignments, the final product of the activity is the entire portfolio of documents in final draft form, including the presentation, business plan, and all other elements detailed above. This can be a group grade, so that every member of the group receives the same amount of credit. This project is designed for students to get a combination of peer feedback, instructor feedback, individual formative and summative assessment, and group assessment, which are all to be based on their various writing and communication tasks.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that simulations have an undeniably important place in the teaching of business practices, and this can certainly be extended to business writing. Business writing is one of the most important skills that today's students need to learn, since communication is becoming increasingly more important as the business world becomes more globally focused and collaboration from office to office, and even country to country becomes more common as a result of increased pace of globalization, such as outsourcing of production by head offices to other countries. Taiwanese corporations shifting production to China or Vietnam are currently prime examples, and therefore this evaluation method could be of specific interest to Taiwanese business English instructors and students.

However, business writing classes often involve activities that are not reflective of the business tasks students will have to take on in the real world. This is where authentic assessment comes into play, since this style of evaluation resembles tasks students may indeed have to take on in their future careers. Using simulation for business writing tasks specifically is not something that has

previously been examined in the existing scholarly literature, but the idea offers a wide range of possibilities for future applications and research. The common denominators of future studies need to be simulations designed with the best practices of business writing instruction in mind. Specifically, all versions of this project or related ones must use technology for both learning and assessment, as well as teach English conventions specifically and directly. Editing, and particularly peer editing, needs to be a part of the process within the simulations, as well. With these practices in place, simulation can be a successful way to teach business writing. Using simulations, it is to be hoped, can prepare business students for future writing success in the rapidly shifting global marketplace, in their first jobs and thereafter.

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