

Exploring Organizational Communication Through Website Analysis: A Problem-Based Learning Community Exercise

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Abstract: This paper discusses the pedagogic value of website analysis. It describes such an exercise administered to third-year business students at a major university in the United Arab Emirates, in which students were required to analyze a range of business school websites. The analysis was conducted employing four frameworks: (1) identification of 'concept clusters' and the linguistic and navigational creation of these clusters; (2) 'framing' of information provided to tap into students' socio-cultural, intellectual, academic mindset; (3) the navigational mode by which meanings are created in the user's mind based on the presentation and sequence of hyperlinks; (4) the Ashridge mission model of purpose, strategy, values, and behavior standards. The heuristic value of the exercise was very high since, on completion of the assignment, students demonstrated a firm understanding of how organizational realities are created through the management of information on websites, a corporate strategy which has enormous relevance for organizational development, CSR, corporate communications, and marketing.

Keywords: organizational communication, problem-based learning communities, experiential learning, information framing

Introduction

This paper describes a highly successful approach to teaching communication theory related to web site analysis and design. The pedagogic technique was formulated as a problem-based learning exercise in which third-year business students were required to analyze the websites of a range of business schools and make recommendations for the enhancement of their own business school's website. The 170 students who engaged in the exercise are completing their Bachelor's degree in business at Zayed University, a major university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Methodology

The objective was for students to learn how information is framed on corporate web sites, a crucial channel for organizational communication with both internal and external stakeholders. The goal was to complement theoretical learning through the practical application of theory-related skills. The pedagogic experience was cyclical, that is, it involved theoretical input followed by its practical application, which therefore contextualized and consolidated theoretical learning.

The value of choosing university web sites is that not only are students familiar with them, they also form an important group of stakeholders as (potential) students for the organizations that produce them. This facilitated their analysis of content and usability of the sites and enhanced their grasp of related communication theory. This context for learning was critical since cognition theory holds that context is central to effective learning (Sherwood, 2004). Attempting to advance student understanding of communication theory through web site analysis was apposite given the rising importance of online communication activity in general and the key role of corporate web sites in particular. The IT context was also appropriate since students at Zayed University

are highly IT-literate with each student required to use their own personal laptop daily for a variety of pedagogic and communication purposes, including Blackboard and ePortfolio. These realities established a further degree of familiarity of the context within which students were immersed while learning about new tools for corporate web site analysis, a familiarity which enhanced their absorption and application of communication theory.

Findings and Discussion

The procedure adopted in the exercise was first to teach students key concepts relating to communication strategy and website design, namely, concept clusters, framing, multi-modality, and a content analysis based on the Ashridge Mission Model. Each concept, and its application, was discussed in class and students were also provided with a set of academic papers which they could refer to in order to extend their knowledge. These are discussed in more detail below. Having learnt how these four analytical frameworks are applied to the processing of data presented on web sites, students were then asked to form themselves into groups of three or four. Luft (1970) points out that learning in groups allows students to discover more about themselves through working with others. These groups were then asked to select the website of three business schools from the Gulf region and three from other parts of the world, that were similar to their own, that is, business schools that were associated with a university. The purpose of this choice was to generate awareness of communication strategy as determined by cultural context. The Gulf web sites would have points of cultural identity with their own school while the other sites exposed them to different approaches to communication in diverse socio-cultural, political, and economic, and environments. The students selected web-sites in the UAE and beyond for the Gulf region, e.g. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, etc. For those elsewhere in the world, the typical choices were the US, the UK, Canada and Australia.

To allow the students to apply their earlier learning on how information can be framed, how concept clusters are employed to develop an image identity or brand, how the navigational choices prompted by a web site carries semantic value, and how the mission statement can be analyzed, each group was asked to analyze their selected sites employing the following four analytical frameworks:

Identification of 'concept clusters,' that is, recurring concepts that are used to create the image and perception of an organization, for example, leadership, excellence, global perspective (Planken, Waller, Nickerson, 2007).

'Framing,' that is, how the business school taps into previous knowledge, background, mental filters, and experience of the audience to direct their recognition of the school in a particular way, e.g. the acknowledgement of Islamic cultural values on business school web-sites in the Gulf region. Students were required to classify the themes that the school presents to build its identity among its audience (Planken, Waller, Nickerson, 2007). They were also asked to consider how culture may affect our reading of the site (Hynes & Janson, 2007).

The 'navigational,' function of the website, that is, how the audience reads particular sections and then navigates via hyperlinks to other sources of information on the site. Students had been taught issues relating to the fact that a web site user is required to engage in two modes when accessing information from a site – reading and navigating (Askehave & Ellerup Nielsen, 2005). The students were made aware of how such hyperlinks not only allow the audience to access related or supplementary information, but also serve to establish connections within the mind of the audience and therefore have a meaningful, or semantic, function. That is, they help in constructing a particular meaning thus determining audience response to the school. They were asked to pay attention to the number of clicks it takes to reach a particular body of information since this is a crucial factor in establishing links of meaning.

Students were instructed to analyze the effectiveness of the organizational mission of each school using the Ashridge Mission Model, that is, identifying the purpose, strategy, values, and behavior encouraged of organizational members (Rogers, Gunesequera, & Yang, 2010).

The final part of the exercise required students to peruse their own business school's site in order to identify areas that needed improvement and then to make specific suggestions for the site's enhancement. This website had been looked at in class and students had agreed on its need for improvement. They were asked specifically to relate this to their analysis and assessment of the other six web-site that they had investigated. This part of the task established a context for problem-based learning which encourages cognitive learning, affective learning, and behavioral learning (Brownell & Jameson, 2004). In formulating the activity as the identified requirement to enhance their own school's web site, the student groups were transformed into learning communities with a specific problem to address. This provided the opportunity to transfer their learning of key communication theories to a practical domain and thus consolidate and expand on the applications of this theoretical knowledge (Kloppenburger & Baucus, 2004).

The value of posing the problem as the necessary improvement of their own business school's web site was that, as experiential learning proponents insist, learning is enriched when students are academically, socially, and emotionally involved in an exercise (Kolb, 1984). The students' loyalty to their school, their strong collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1994), and commitment to their country and its development (Erogul & McCrohan, 2008), stimulated a strong emotional connection with the exercise. Working in groups was also effective given the collectivist nature of the UAE culture. This multi-faceted connection with the problem strengthened their linking of theory with practice and would arguably encourage their application of the learning achieved in this context to other contexts rendering their undergraduate studies more coherent. This is an essential part of developing students as life-long learners, an essential skill if they are to adapt to the varied business environments they will enter after graduation (Goby & Lewis, 2000).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The student development of recommendations for the enhancement of their web site's provided the opportunity for their efforts to be recognized and validated. Throughout the project, the support of senior administration within the school was instrumental in achieving this, such that the students involved could see both the immediate application and value of their recommendations. Several of their recommendations were adopted by the school at a later date and their contribution therefore became part of the marketing of the school. As a learning exercise, students became more aware of organizational communication through their website analysis. They also had an opportunity to see how an integrated approach to theory and practice can be implemented in order to improve that communication in an effective and systematic way.

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