

Emotional intelligence: Pedagogical considerations for skills-based learning in business communication courses

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effect of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) training on student satisfaction with the collaborative writing process and product. Business communication students at an AACSB-accredited state university worked collaboratively on writing assignments in pre- and post- EQ-training sessions. Pre- and post-training surveys measured student satisfaction with the collaborative writing process. An independent evaluator measured the quality of the writing product. Our findings suggest that student awareness of EQ strategies enhances their communication behavior in work groups. Incorporating EQ training into the business communication curriculum can provide students a competitive advantage academically, personally, and professionally.

Keywords: collaborative writing; emotional intelligence; EQ; group dynamics; business communication

INTRODUCTION

Most business communication professionals recognize the importance of collaborative writing skills for students entering the job market where teams are the primary work unit (Yost & Tucker, 2000). Such collaboration, however, demands the development of elaborate social and emotional skills (Lopes & Salovey, 2004). However, our students often lack these skills.

Classroom collaboration provides opportunities for students to gain new knowledge and abilities, and develops intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. Students gain valuable experience working as a team toward a common goal and gain satisfaction from contributing to the group's performance and product (Webb, 1995). Moreover, evidence shows that cooperation promotes more frequent use of higher-level reasoning strategies, higher achievement, and more accurate perspective than do competitive or individualistic efforts. These cooperative learning experiences also result in students being more mature in their cognitive and moral decision-making and in considering the viewpoints of others when making decisions (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).

Incorporating social and emotional skills (EQ) training into the business communication curriculum is an important step in preparing our students to function effectively in a global workplace with its complex informal networks, teams, and participatory leadership, where they must constantly learn new skills and adapt quickly to changing technology (Lopes & Salovey, 2004; Johnson, 2003; Johnson & F. Johnson, 2003). If, as Daniel Goleman believes, professionally successful people have high emotional intelligence in addition to the traditional cognitive intelligence or specialized knowledge (1998c), we can better prepare our students by teaching them not only the cognitive knowledge they will need, but also social and emotional skills.

In this study, we investigate the impact of EQ training on student satisfaction with the collaborative writing process and also analyze its effect on the writing product. Although previous studies have discussed the importance of incorporating these soft skills into training models for academic and business applications (Mills, Myers, & Rachael, 1991; McGraw & Tidwell, 2001; Greenan, Humphreys, & McIlveen, 1997), little work has been done on EQ training's effect on either the process or the product of collaborative writing.

Social and Emotional Intelligence

E.L. Thorndike coined the term, *social intelligence*, in 1920 to explain variations of performance measures unaccounted for by an *intelligence quotient* (IQ). Based on Thorndike's original concept and Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences (1983), *emotional intelligence* (EQ) was first used by Peter Salovey and John Mayer when they defined the concept as a type of intelligence in their seminal paper in 1990. Multiple intelligences (i.e., musical, spatial, kinesthetic, and logical-mathematical) are linked inexorably with other forms of intelligences (Gardner, 1983). Research suggests that *both* social intelligence and emotional intelligence skills are essential for personal and professional success. Our investigation of EQ training and its impact on the collaborative writing process and product, however, focuses primarily on social and emotional intelligence (interpersonal and intrapersonal) as described above and refers to those various skills that help us connect emotionally to ourselves and other people or events, learn behavior and emotional responses from others, create the ability to share positive and meaningful experiences with others, and relate to how they are feeling. The term has been most recently popularized by Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (1995).

The concept has been generally recognized as equally, if not more, important than intellectual intelligence (IQ) as an indicator of personal and professional success (Covey, 1996; Goleman, 1998a, 1998b). Salovey and Mayer define this concept as a [cognitive] “ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotions; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth” (1997, p. 10). For others, emotional intelligence constitutes “an array of non-cognitive skills, capabilities, and competencies that influence a person’s ability to cope with environmental demands and pressures” (Martinez, 1997, p. 72). Goleman’s five components of emotional intelligence are generally considered to be the starting point for discussion and include: the ability to become self-aware in managing emotions and controlling impulses; to set goals and perform well; to be motivated and creative; to empathize with others; to handle relationships effectively; and to develop appropriate social skills (1995).

The development of an emotional vocabulary is also essential for raising emotional self-awareness and for communicating at an emotional level with others (Carkhuff, 1993). Scientific research indicates that the use of such *affective* language not only has a physical effect on the brain, but can also alleviate negative emotions (Lieberman et al., 2007). This ability to perceive, understand, manage, and articulate emotions in ourselves and others is necessary in relating to other people on a social and emotional level.

EQ and Teams

A growing body of educational-based research underscores the importance of social and emotional competence in the development of effective teams. Specialists have developed and successfully marketed EQ-specific courses for business and industry. Educators are also recognizing the need to prepare students for real-world group decision-making and functioning within the team structure (Kaplan & Welker, 2001). Boyle and Strong, for example, proposed a list of key skills for Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), among them interpersonal and team-building and interpersonal skills. Business schools that already have ERP programs can use the list to determine how well they meet industry needs (2006).

Some evidence indicates that team-building efforts may facilitate and reinforce emotional and social skills learning. Moriarty and Buckley’s research shows that development of team-skills through experiential learning and a focus on process results in increased emotional intelligence among undergraduates. These findings suggest that facilitating self-awareness opportunities results in deeper self-awareness, and perhaps, a higher level of emotional intelligence (2003).

Conversely, emotional and social skills development may, in turn, facilitate team-building efforts. Researchers at Yale University compared teams with an identical aggregate IQ and found that teams with high emotional intelligence outperformed teams with low emotional intelligence by a margin of two-to-one (Welch, 2003). Similarly, Yost and Tucker (2000) conducted a problem-based study of nineteen teams and found that emotionally intelligent teams are more successful, in problem-solving, performance, and grades. Druskat and Wolff (2001) further assert that emotional intelligence in groups can determine organizational effectiveness. They maintain that, like individuals, the most effective teams are ones that are emotionally intelligent. Such research supports Stephen Covey’s beliefs that organizations must be effective at the personal and interpersonal levels (1996).

Many business schools recognize the value of team skills training and have implemented such programs for their students (Moriarity & Buckley, 2003; Thomas & Busby, 2003; McGraw & Tidwell, 2001; Greenan et al., 1997; Mills et al., 1991). Proponents agree that information should not be conveyed solely in lecture format, but that emotional skills should be taught in an emotional and experiential context as well (Kremer & McGuiness, 1998; Dwyer, 2001). Some practitioners urge the use of a team approach to teach interpersonal skills (McGrew & Lewis, 1998).

Few of these studies, however, have actually undertaken an analysis of process *and* product. Rozell, Pettijohn, and Parker explored the measurement of emotional intelligence in undergraduate business majors and discussed the implications for management development, questioning whether EQ relates to student performance (2001). Other researchers argue that EQ constructs can be managed more effectively by performance analysis than paper and pencil tests (Duelwicz & Higgs, 2000). Despite the predominance of literature on emotional and social intelligence and team building, little research uses a pre-post design to measure the effect of emotional skills training on the collaborative writing process (of which teamwork is clearly a part) and a resulting performance outcome.

PURPOSE

This study examines student satisfaction with the collaborative writing process and the writing product generated by student groups before and after EQ training. Our hypothesis is that student awareness of EQ strategies (developing sensitivity to non-verbal messages, defining and understanding the skills used in articulating an emotional vocabulary in themselves and others, and applying these skills for the purpose of managing business scenarios more effectively) enhances their communication behavior in work groups and improves the quality of response to various business writing scenarios.

METHODOLOGY

Students in four sections of a required business communication course at an AACSB-accredited College of Business Administration in a state university participated in this study during the spring semester of 2007. The study was divided into four sessions: a pre-training collaborative writing task and survey; two EQ training sessions of 1.5 hours each; and a post-training collaborative writing task and survey. In performing these collaborative writing tasks, students were able to practice the social and emotional skills learned during the training. The survey measured student satisfaction with the collaborative writing task during the pre- and post-training stages; an independent evaluator measured the quality of each group's product pre- and post-training.

Test-groups in this experiment, ranging from 3-8 students each, were composed of 88 undergraduate business students (55 males; 33 females) ranging in age from approximately 19 to 28. Test-groups were as evenly distributed as possible with males and females to ensure heterogeneity.

In the first session, the groups were given a business scenario (claims message) taken from Lesikar and Flatley's *Basic Business Communication* (2005, pp. 160-61)) that required a written response. Without guidance from the instructor and functioning independently as a team, students were given 50-60 minutes to compose a business message in response to the scenario.

Students then completed a collaborative writing satisfaction survey during the remaining 20 minutes.

The next two class sessions involved EQ training lectures and experiential learning. A professional trainer drew heavily on Blakeman's and Goleman's work. Table 1 lists the topics that were addressed during the training sessions for each emotional and social skills category.

Recognizing that “[c]ognitive skills can be taught by lectures, but emotional skills need personal involvement where the learner experiences the emotional context,” the trainer modeled the behaviors for the groups and incorporated simulations, role plays, and meta-cognitive exercises (Dwyer, 2001, p. 317). Students were also given a list of emotional words to use in training exercises to quickly develop their emotional vocabularies and to stimulate affective brain activity. Following the seminar, participants were encouraged to think about their own strengths and weaknesses and ways in which they could improve and facilitate their team dynamics and their responses to the writing scenarios based on their new awareness of social and emotional skills.

In the final class session, without any prior training in professional writing, the groups were given another business scenario (claims message) taken from Lesikar and Flatley's *Basic Business Communication* (2005, p.160) that required a written response. Again, functioning independently as a team, students were given 50-60 minutes to formulate a business message in response to the scenario. Students then completed a collaborative writing satisfaction survey during the remaining 20 minutes.

The results from pre- and post-EQ training collaborative writing satisfaction surveys, along with the independent analysis of pre-and post-EQ training writing samples were then compiled and analyzed.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

Our first research question was, “Did students’ satisfaction with their group and satisfaction with their own contributions to the group change as a result of the EQ training intervention?”

A 27-item survey was developed to measure students’ satisfaction with their group interactions and with their own contributions to the group’s work. Means were calculated for the responses to each item on the survey, both pre- and post-EQ training. T-tests for paired two-sample means were calculated. The results show significant differences for 8 of the 24 items on the survey (Table 2) ($p < .05$, $df = 64$).

The student satisfaction surveys attempted to capture students’ perceptions about their group’s dynamics as well as their own behaviors and contributions as the group worked collaboratively on the writing tasks. Results for each of these survey sections are discussed below.

Thirteen survey items asked about the student’s group’s effectiveness. Table 2 shows the six items in this section that significantly differed between the pre- and post-training. For each of these six items, the students’ perceptions of their group’s effectiveness improved post-training. The factor showing the most improvement was “nonverbal behavior being noticed by others” ($p < .001$), a finding that was not surprising because of the emphasis on nonverbal communication during the EQ training sessions. Also significant were students’ perceived

improvements in their group's ability to share equally in the outcome of their writing product ($p < .003$), their group's ability to relieve tension ($p < .007$), their group's ability to maintain rapport ($p < .029$), and their group's ability to encourage and synthesize everyone's ideas and opinions ($p < .037$ and $p < .043$).

A second section of the survey consisted of ten items about the student's perceptions of their own behaviors during the group task. Only one item in this section showed statistically significant improvement between the pre- and post-training: "encouraging" behavior ($p < .01$) (Table 2). Thus, it appears that students' satisfaction with their own performance on factors such as listening, responding, resolving conflict, and noticing others did not significantly improve as a result of the EQ training.

The third section of the survey consisted of four items concerning the student's contributions to the group task. The items asked for respondents to rate their satisfaction with their own intuitive/emotional contributions, logical/analytical contributions, engagement with the group, and level of independent work. Although the mean scores improved for all four of these items, only one item in this section showed statistically significant improvement between the pre- and post-training: "intuitive/emotional contributions" ($p < .008$) (Table 2). Considering that the EQ training stressed emotional and social skills, this result was predictable.

In summary, the data support an affirmative answer to our first research question. The students' satisfaction with their group and satisfaction with their own contributions to the group significantly improved on a number of dimensions as a result of the EQ training intervention.

Research Question 2

Our second research question was, "Did the writing quality of the documents composed by each group change as a result of the EQ training intervention?"

Each student group collaborated to compose a business message based on a case taken from their course textbook. The tasks were assigned immediately before and after the EQ training sessions. Because this study was conducted at the beginning of the semester, the students had not yet received any instruction in business writing principles or practices.

An independent expert in business writing evaluated each student group's writing sample using a rubric developed by the researchers. The rubric consisted of 16 items: three concerned the document's organization, two were about content, six were about diction and grammar, and five concerned the document's tone and "you-viewpoint." The evaluator assessed each writing sample on all 16 items using a four-point scale.

Change scores were computed (pre- v. post-training) for each item on the rubric for each student group's product. Means for each of the four categories of items were computed, and overall change scores were compared for each document using a paired two-sample t-test. Results show that ratings of the post-training documents improved for eight of the 16 items. Of particular interest were changes in the "tone" category, since we expected that the EQ training would potentially impact students' sensitivity to language and emotional tone. While the writing samples composed post-EQ training were rated higher than the pre-training samples on three of the five items in the "tone" category, none of the differences reached statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

In summary, the data support a negative answer to our second research question. The students' writing did not improve significantly as a result of the EQ training intervention.

DISCUSSION

From these findings, we can conclude that the EQ training intervention significantly increased the students' level of satisfaction with the collaborative writing process, particularly in the area of perceived group effectiveness. Improvement in the groups' ability to relieve tension and to maintain rapport, and to encourage and synthesize everyone's ideas and opinions enabled the participants to share equally in their writing product. Not surprisingly, the training sessions also significantly influenced individual behavior within the group, primarily in the areas of non-verbal communication and intuitive/emotional contributions. Students were better able to communicate at a more emotional level, to perceive an emotional vocabulary in others, and to manage their own emotions and those of others. Consequently, they felt that they became more effective in communicating within the group and more cohesive as a group.

While the effects of EQ training on the process of collaboration are significant in this study, there appear to be no differences in quality of the writing product generated by the test groups. We had expected that a greater appreciation of empathy might improve the "you-attitude" (audience awareness and adaptation) in these messages. And although an analysis of the Gunning/Fog Indexes on pre- and post writing samples indicated a slight movement toward writing clarity in the latter, to conclude that this outcome resulted from our EQ intervention would be over-reaching in the context of this study.

Limitations of the study design that may have affected the performance outcome include the fact that all writing samples were written at the beginning of the business communication course, before students had studied business writing principles and strategies. Because the objective of this research is to help students apply their newly acquired EQ skills to group work as well as to business writing tasks, we hypothesize that sustained EQ training over a longer period of time will make a difference in the quality of the writing product generated by these groups.

Future research will continue with additional test-groups. We will examine the impact of EQ training sessions throughout the semester, so that internalization of these social and emotional skills is more likely. In addition, we plan to refine the student satisfaction survey and the writing rubric in order to identify pre- and post-training differences that could not be captured with the current macro scales.

CONCLUSION

Although no quantitative measures were used, the instructors involved in this study noticed an overall improvement in the students' attitude toward the course and in their response to business scenarios and the writing process. We conclude that increased proficiency in social and emotional skills, coupled with training in making and handling requests, can be directly related to students' success and satisfaction in a business communication course.

Finally, the importance of preparing our students to enter a job market where collaboration is expected and excellent communication skills are required cannot be overemphasized. Our findings support the suggestion that business schools should consider including a course in social and emotional skills in the business communication curriculum. Such a course would provide ample opportunity for developing students' EQ along with developing their ability to apply EQ principles in practical business contexts.

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Table 1: EQ Training Key Competencies

Skills Category	Topics
Persuading and Influencing Others	Social skills Emotional Intelligence Skills Verbal Techniques Rules of Confrontation Interpersonal Problem-solving
Non-Verbal Communication	Kinesics Proxemics Paralanguage Haptics Facial Expression Chronemics Appearance Context
Facilitating, Managing, and Building Relationships	Arranging Positioning Posturing Observing Listening
Communication	Responding to Content Responding to Feeling Responding to Feeling and Meaning Asking Questions
Controlling/Supervising	Handling Requests Making Requests Reinforcing Behavior
Emotional Intelligence	Developing Emotional Vocabulary Raising Emotional Self-Awareness Demonstrating Empathy Self-Motivation Regulating and Managing Emotions Managing other People’s Emotions
Managing Interpersonal Conflict	When to Confront Confrontation Ground Rules Destructive versus Constructive Conflict Conflict Tactics Managing conflict

Table 2: Significantly Different Pre- and Post-Training Means for Student Satisfaction Survey Items

Survey Item	T-statistic	P-value
Group Effectiveness Scales		
• Ideas/opinions synthesized effectively	-1.74	0.043
• Ideas/opinions encouraged	-1.82	0.037
• Good rapport	-1.92	0.029
• Tense moments relieved	-2.48	0.007
• Equal impact on outcome	-2.82	0.003
• Nonverbals noticed by others	-3.44	0.001
Student's Behavior Scales		
• Encouraging	-2.35	0.010
Contributions Scales		
• Intuitive/emotional contributions	-2.46	0.008

