Article

Business and Professional Communication Quarterly
2016, Vol. 79(1) 119–130

DOI: 10.1177/2329490615610777
bcq.sagepub.com
SAGE

Business Meeting Training on Its Head: Inverted and Embedded Learning

Ellen Van Praet[1]

Abstract

This article explores the value of using embedding to extend the notion of first exposure learning in flipped classroom practices. It describes a preclass assignment for a meeting and negotiation skills course, in which students are instructed to observe an authentic business meeting, interview participants of the meeting, photograph the boardroom, draw a sketch of the seating arrangement, and write a reflective account. Its main argument is that immersion in corporate culture before class makes business communication training not only more authentic but also produces richer in-class discussions, ultimately leading to a level of metacognition associated with deep learning.

Keywords

classroom exercise, flipped classroom, ethnography, meeting, negotiation, portfolio, situated learning, authentic task

In essence, “flipping the classroom” means that students gain first exposure to new material outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the harder cognitive work of assimilating that knowledge (application, analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation), supported by their peers and instructor (Brame, 2013). Whether it is via discussion, debates, minilectures, or “clicker questions” (Crouch & Mazur, 2001), the key to the “inverted classroom” (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000) is to provide an opportunity for students to gain first exposure prior to class and preserve

[1]Ghent University, Belgium

Corresponding Author:
Ellen Van Praet, Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication, Ghent University, Groot-Brittanniëlaan 45, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium.
Email: ellen.vanpraet@ugent.be

classroom time to deepen their understanding and increase their skills at using new knowledge. In the literature on the topic published so far (Berrett, 2012; Brame, 2013; Estes, Ingram, & Liu, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2012; Mazur, 2009; Talbert, 2014), the tools used and recommended for first exposure vary, from simple textbook readings to lecture videos, podcasts, or screencasts. This article argues for extending the toolkit for first exposure in flipped classroom practices with an experiential learning component so as to complement the benefits of inverted learning with those of embedded learning.

Advocating experiential learning in education is by no means new. Already back in the 19th century, John Dewey (1907) would plea for incorporating as much of current society into the educational process as possible to facilitate learning, which would then enhance society as a whole. If individuals were provided with an enriched environment that contained personal meaning and relevance, personal interest would be increased and learning would follow.

More recent studies show that experiential learning in business and accounting programs has become increasingly important. It has now become a taken-for-granted assumption among business and management educators and CEOs that a university must provide experiential learning programs such as internships, real-life cases in marketing research, crisis communication, advertising, and the like. Clark and White (2010), for instance, stated that "a quality university business education program must include an experiential learning component" to enhance professionalism (p. 115). They described their experiential learning program as truly a win-win situation, as three participating corporations (Southern Aluminum, Rodney D. Young Insurance, and Schawn) have all used the ideas generated by participating university teams. Phillips and Clifton (2007) highlighted the power of simulations/role play to create a rich communicative environment where students actively become a part of some real-world system and function according to predetermined roles as members of that group. Furthermore, a study of business education programs, reported by corporations in Silicon Valley, revealed that

> leadership and interpersonal skills are insufficiently addressed in graduate management education. There are certainly limits to what can be achieved in traditional classroom settings. . . . but there is scope for more effective use of simulations, whether technology-based or otherwise, to improve education in these dimensions. (Eischen & Singh, 2005, p. 19)

Summarizing, business education—like the firms and students they serve—is in a continuous process of evolving to meet a shifting global and local environment. Fast-changing corporate settings, along with students' ever-increasing access to technology and online-learning content, force business programs to rethink how student learning can be facilitated in order to make class time and activities as relevant and as valuable as possible. Calling for further rethinking along that line, this article pleas for getting the best of both worlds by merging embedded with inverted learning. In what follows, I will tell the particular case of a meeting and negotiation skills course for master students of business communication. Before embarking on this, I will first take a quick side step. The preclass assignment I devised for the course fundamentally builds on the ethnographic research tradition, and the following section will briefly explain the underlying rationale for doing so.

Ethnography and Embedded Learning

Ethnography is an often misunderstood, yet widely used umbrella term to bundle data-collecting methods such as interviews and observations. Yet it is so much more; it is an epistemology, that is, a way of knowing (Agar, 2006) or, as Anderson-Levitt (2006) argued, a philosophy of research, not a method.

Opting for embedding as a learning strategy ties in with the ethnographic tradition, as well as with social-learning theories positing that people learn from observing other people: "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling" (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

More radically, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) proposed situated learning as a model of learning, examining communities of practice as vehicles for learning. As William F. Hanks stated in the introduction to Lave and Wenger's book, they have tried to place learning in social relationships, challenging us to understand that "learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not an individual mind" (as cited in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 15). Hanks wrote, "Rather than asking what kind of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place" (as cited in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14).

From looking into different apprenticeships (Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, U.S. Navy quartermasters, meat cutters, and nondrinking alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous), Lave and Wenger (1991) explained their theory of learning through a process called "legitimate peripheral participation": Initially people have to join communities and learn at the periphery. As they become more competent, they move more to the center of the particular community.

The process of learning through becoming a full participant in the sociocultural practices of a community is very similar to the ethnographic research mode of learning by participating and observing. Much of the essence of the ethnographic project is based on the assumption that if people learn their cultures in large part through observation, imitation, and participation, ethnographers should do likewise. The major principle and understanding that describing a culture involves establishing "relationships with people, participating with them in what they do," and observe "what is going on" (Duranti, 1997, p. 89) owes major credit to the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1922/1984). Malinowski is often honored as the founder, or at least the major developer, of a style of fieldwork that involves intensive and close contact with the research population. Ethnographic epistemology and methodology builds on "the assumption that we must enter into close social interaction with the people in our research communities if we are to succeed in gathering significant information on their culture and social organization" (Pelto & Pelto, 1973, p. 269).

In view of that, Greenman and Smith (2006) introduced the concept of embedding to describe the process of placing nonethnographers into fieldwork situations. Their project, titled Embed, was created to extend the territory of ethnography to a wider audience, to familiarize senior strategists, product developers, foresight specialists, and marketers with the potential of ethnographic research to inform decision making. Along the same line of thinking, this article supports the idea that extending ethnography to the field of education, that is, placing students (non-ethnographers) into fieldwork situations, provides an instance of *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and encourages experiential learning.

In what follows, I will set out the details of a preclass embedded learning assignment, unravel the "inverted" in-class discussion afterward, and present extracts from postclass interviews in which students reflected on their learning process and outcomes.

Needless to say, students' learning experience will inherently be ill structured. The outcomes will vary based on the social setting and the scene. Learning in this way requires an approach that is highly constructivist and typically team-based or social. Since, in fact, this is "typically the nature of the in-class instructional design for flipped learning" (Estes et al., 2014), I argue that embedded learning and inverted learning are complementary.

First Exposure: The Preclass Assignment

At the kickoff of the course, I showed students the work of Dutch artist and photographer Jacqueline Hassink (see Figure 1). Unconventionally but convincingly, Hassink (1996, 2011) showed how a simple piece of furniture can be value laden. As a reminder of how decisions are made in this society, and who makes them, *The Table of Power* (1996) features photographs of 21 empty corporate boardrooms. Hassink approached Europe's top 40 companies using the 1995 Fortune Global 500 list with the request to take a photograph of the conference table of the board of directors. The 19 out of 40 corporations that refused to allow photography within their boardrooms are included in the book as black photographs. The way the photographs nestle between black pages gives the work a voyeuristic touch, prompting the reader to pose the question: What is concealed within these rooms that we are not allowed to see? Hassink's project also included a short survey asking questions such as: Where does the managing director have his seat? Where is the meeting room of the board of directors situated in relationship to the building (on which floor)? Why did they choose an oval/round/rectangular table?

Presenting samples from Hassink's books, I tried to make students aware of the diversity of the reality called *boardroom*. Following this icebreaker, I challenged them to go into the field, peek into a boardroom, and be ethnographers for a day. Apart from the occasional youth-movement experience, none of them had ever attended a real-life meeting, let alone experienced a real business context. In the footsteps of traditional

Figure 1. The meeting table of the board of directors of ArcelorMittal.
Note. Copyright (2011) by Jacqueline Hassink. Photograph reproduced by permission.
Source. Hassink (2011, p. 17).

ethnographic methods of data collection, I devised an assignment consisting of the following stages (see also Garvin, 2010, for a similar listing of stages in Linguistic Landscapes Research):

- Selection of a site
- Photographic documentation
- Selection of and contact with participants
- Conducting individual "walking tour" interviews on the selected site
- Transcription and analysis of interviews and field notes
- Reflection

In short, I instructed students to work in pairs and complete an in-depth participation/observation of a business meeting at an English-speaking institution/corporation, interview participants of the meeting, photograph the boardroom, draw a sketch of the seating arrangement, and write a reflective account (see Figure 2).The biggest challenge for students was to find an English-speaking company in a country that is predominantly Dutch and French speaking. On top of that, concerns of confidentiality were hampering their attempts. I motivated the students by insisting that they would

- Approach a multinational/nonprofit organisation/institution conducting meetings in English.
- Find a contact by [DEADLINE].
- Take a photograph of its boardroom/staff meeting room without people in the frame.
- Attend a meeting. Take notes: What strikes you? Who seems to be in charge? How does he/she enact leadership? What happens if participants agree/disagree? Are decisions being made/is the meeting merely information giving? What about time management? How's the agenda set and introduced? How are interruptions handled?
- Draw a sketch of the seating arrangement.
- Interview each participant of the meeting about the purpose of the meeting, seating strategies, power strategies, etc. Question him/her about what happened during the meeting. How did each experience the meeting? Is there a policy about conducting meetings in the firm? Make sure you conduct the interview in English. (Limit interview time to a maximum of 25 minutes.)
- Record and transcribe the interviews.
- Submit a first draft of the report (digital and print version) on [DATE] including (i) a short presentation of the company (100 words), (ii) a digital photograph of the boardroom/meeting room, (iii) a sketch of the seating arrangement of the meeting, (iv) a short presentation of the participants in the meeting (e.g., organigram), (v) a sound file of the recorded interviews, (vi) a transcript of the interviews, (vii) a short summary/reflection (250-500 words).
- You'll get feedback on your first draft on [DATE].
- Submit a revised report (digital and print version) on [DEADLINE].

Figure 2. The assignment.

succeed in finding a company, and I offered backup by promising that if they could not find a suitable company, the assignment would be changed/adapted. I also offered help in finding a fieldwork site if necessary. Although hesitant, they all accepted the challenge and found a fieldwork site without my help. Whenever they found a contact, time, and place of meeting they would email me. Following the principle of expanded opportunity (Killen, 2007), students were asked to submit a first draft; if they did not demonstrate appropriately high levels of understanding, they were required to resubmit their work.

In-Class Discussion

On returning from their fieldwork sites, I invited students to a group discussion, using my own research at a British embassy as a trigger (Van Praet, 2009, 2010, 2011). I had observed the embassy's weekly gatherings of Heads of Section, interviewed the people who attended the meetings, and tried to develop an understanding of the meeting's role in shaping, forming, and transforming the community's cultural system. In doing so, I had investigated both verbal and nonverbal communicative behavior and examined participants' seating behavior along with a detailed scrutiny of turns at talk during the meetings. I told students my embassy story in the format of a whodunit. I unravelled the intricacies of the weekly meeting's seating arrangement and explained the

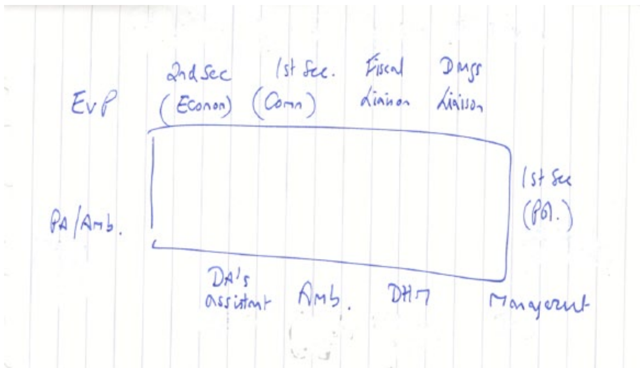

Figure 3. Sketch of the British Embassy meeting table.
Note. Copyright (2015) by Ellen Van Praet. Drawing reproduced by permission.

social symbolism related to participants' preference for a particular seat, along with the hidden struggles for power and status (see Figure 3).

Most students reacted in awe. While they all were intrigued and surprised, some of them also reacted with disbelief. In spite of the fact that I had presented them with evidence from audio-recorded interviews with embassy members, they were hesitant to accept my absolute claim that no seating arrangement is ever completely free of power issues. I related my research findings to their recent fieldwork observations, and we embarked on a lively discussion, a "controlled chaos" (Talbert, 2014, p. 2), in which I offered feedback, assessment, and connectedness. In the next in-class session, we set up a simulated meeting. Students were assigned roles and were told that they must fully accept them both mentally and behaviorally as if they were actually those people. These simulations were followed by a wrap up or debriefing session in which we openly discussed seating behaviors, outcomes of the meeting, general language difficulties, and the contextual appropriateness of their discourse.

Postclass Discussion: Observed Effects of the Assignment

Excerpts From Students' Reflective Accounts

Besides learning in context, the assignment also aimed at encouraging reflection and an adequate opportunity to express their individuality. Overall, students valued the learning outcome of the assignment in positive terms. The following comment, for instance, shows how it may have stretched students to the limits of their understanding and ability to apply their knowledge:

> My first thought when I listened to the explanation of the assignment was "This is going to be the most difficult assignment I have ever had to carry out." After finishing the

> assignment, all I could think was "This was the most difficult assignment I have ever had to carry out but I have learned many different things." (Excerpt 1)

In other words, the activity not only encouraged students to take ownership of their learning and realize their potential, but it also fulfilled their desire to "relate to life 'out there' beyond the classroom's box-like walls" (McArthur, 1983, p. 101), while at the same time reducing their anxiety to do so.

Furthermore, the comments illustrate the extent to which the preclass activity helped them confront culturally embedded attitudes and practices and identify with the target culture, and how this has increased their motivation:

> It felt like we were part of the "working community." We were able to taste business life for a few hours, and then we returned home satisfied, back to our student lives. (Excerpt 2)

Frequently, students reflected on the contrast between simulation/role play and reality:

> I found it an interesting assignment and I liked the fact that we could experience reality. For most of the assignments, we are told to invent a particular situation, which does not always improve our knowledge and skills. I found this assignment particularly interesting, since we could experience real events. (Excerpt 3)

> I think it was a good experience to see a real meeting; it is entirely different from simulating a meeting in class. I now know that meetings (and meeting rooms) vary widely depending on the company. (Excerpt 4)

Summarizing, immersion in the field presented the language skills to be acquired not as lessons to be learned but rather as something to be taken up into the students' own experience, so as to maintain an intimate connection between knowing and doing (see Dewey, 1907).

Excerpts From Interviews With Students

A similar reaction was found in interviews with students at the end of the course module. Experiential learning is a complex construct and therefore difficult to measure (Matey & Fickell, 2014). In order to test the innate benefits of my approach, and encourage self-reflection on my part, I interviewed 14 students (4 males, 10 females) face to face. I transcribed the interviews and analyzed them with the help of NVivo research software, identifying themes and coding those themes accordingly under labels called *nodes*. Recurrent themes in the interviews were increased self-monitoring and an improved awareness of real-world understanding. Observe, for instance, how, in the following excerpt, a student contrasts the "real" meeting with the meeting we "played in class," revealing a confrontation with the sheer messiness of real life:

> Student: During the meeting which was real, everything was much more loose. People answered their phones, started typing things, reclined, and

relaxed. They were not even listening to one another and these were managers, they were rather high in the hierarchy of the organization. Whereas in class, where we simulated a meeting, everybody was quiet, and nicely listened to one another. In real life, this wasn't the case. I found that really funny. At the beginning of the meeting, I actually thought the chairman didn't really know what he's doing. But at the end, during the interview, he actually convinced me that he did know what he was doing. It was just a totally different strategy, a strategy that I wouldn't have thought of. Yeah, I like to control everything. And he just, at moments, just sat back and did nothing.

Teacher: Deliberately decided

Student: Yeah

Teacher: Not to control?

Student: I would have intervened, or even levelled. That wasn't the case. He let it happen. (Excerpt 5)

Forcing students to break with the familiarity of a classroom surrounding challenges them to consider alternative perspectives and reflect on attitudes previously thought of as common sense. It makes evident things into puzzles and provokes fresh perceptions and a more reflective approach to the taken for granted. In short, it teaches them to deal with complexity:

> The main lesson it has taught me is perhaps the following: real life is messy, and is never anything like what the course books tell you. (Excerpt 6)

Conclusion and Implications for Teachers and Practitioners

Whereas in more traditional ways of teaching business meeting skills, first exposure occurs via lectures and role plays or simulations in class, this article has argued that attending a *real* meeting prior to class and reflecting on it in the company of peers and teachers afterward makes business meeting training not only more authentic, meaningful, and motivating but also produces richer in-class discussions, ultimately leading to a level of metacognition and reflection associated with deep learning.

Postclass interviews with students have demonstrated that sharing onsite experience with peers and teacher encourages self-monitoring and inspires them to reframe their perceptions, view existing knowledge/practices in different contexts, and give different meanings to it. In this inverted process of learning, the lecturer is not so much a teacher but a coach, facilitating the negotiation of meaning and reflection about the learning process. A suggestion for further research would be to investigate the effects of enabling business practitioners to actively engage with and participate in the in-class discussions.

Admittedly, "strained budgets make it difficult for colleges to decrease class sizes and create more seminars in which low student-to-professor ratios allow a high degree of personal attention" (Berrett, 2012, p. 2). On top of that, merging embedded and inverted learning strategies requires that teachers be good at answering students' questions on the spot, even when their misconceptions are unclear because they are still processing the information. Counterbalancing these commonly heard objections, however, is the evidence listed in this article, which shows that a mixed method of embedded and inverted learning helps business students develop a key quality of high-achieving professional communicators: "Adaptive to complexity in the workplace; can interpret what they need to know on the fly" (Schriver, 2012, p. 305).

If students are to become successful in the modern corporate world, they must gain many diverse experiences that they can use to transform and adapt themselves to fast-changing circumstances throughout their lives. A preclass exposure to real life, careful coaching along the way, and in-class discussion about these messy fieldwork experiences may help in attaining that goal.

Acknowledgments

We thank Jacqueline Hassink for kindly permitting us to reproduce a picture from her book.

Author's Note

The findings and results described in the article were presented as a pilot study at the 10th European Conference of the Association for Business Communication, Antwerp, Belgium, 2010. This study was conducted according to generally accepted ethical standards for human subjects research; student comments are reproduced by written permission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Agar, M. (2006). An ethnography by any other name … *Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung/ Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 7*(4), 36.

Anderson-Levitt, K. M. (2006). Ethnography. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. B. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (3rd ed., pp. 279-296). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Berrett, D. (2012, February 19). How "flipping" the classroom can improve the traditional lecture. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://moodle.technion.ac.il/file.php/1298/Announce/How_Flipping_the_Classroom_Can_Improve_the_Traditional_Lecture.pdf

Brame, C. J. (2013). *Flipping the classroom*. Retrieved from http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/

Clark, J., & White, G. W. (2010). Experiential learning: A definitive edge in the job market. *American Journal of Business Education, 3*, 115-118.

Crouch, C. H., & Mazur, E. (2001). Peer instruction: Ten years of experience and results. *American Journal of Physics, 69*, 970-977.

Dewey, J. (1907). *The school and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Eischen, K., & Singh, N. (2005). *Lost, dysfunctional or evolving? A view of business schools from Silicon Valley*. Retrieved from http://ssrn.com/abstract=1281154

Estes, M., Ingram, R., & Liu, J. C. (2014). A review of flipped classroom research, practice, and technologies. *International HETL Review, 4*, 7. Retrieved from https://www.hetl.org/feature-articles/a-review-of-flipped-classroom-research-practice-and-technologies

Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Fitzpatrick, M. (2012, June 24). Classroom lectures go digital. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/us/25iht-educside25.html?_r=0

Garvin, R. (2010). Postmodern walking tour. In E. Shohamy, E. Ben-Rafael, & M. Barni (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape in the city* (pp. 254-276). Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.

Greenman, A., & Smith, S. (2006). Embed: Mapping the future of work and play: A case for "embedding" non-ethnographers in the field. *Ethnography Praxis in Industry Conference, 2006,* 229-243.

Hassink, J. (1996). *The table of power*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Van de Koppel.

Hassink, J. (2011). *The table of power 2*. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz.

Killen, R. (2007). *Teaching strategies for outcomes-based education*. Cape Town, South Africa: Juta.

Lage, M. J., Platt, G. J., & Treglia, M. (2000). Inverting the classroom: A gateway to creating an inclusive learning environment. *Journal of Economic Education, 31*, 30-43.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Malinowski, B. (1984). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. (Original work published 1922)

Matey, G., & Fickell, J. (2014). Experiential learning: A review of some literature. In V. Neal (Ed.), *Learning through cases of experiential learning*. Retrieved from http://tlcentre.pressbooks.com/

Mazur, E. (2009). Farewell, lecture? *Science, 323*, 50-51.

McArthur, T. (1983). *A foundation course for language teachers*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pelto, P. J., & Pelto, G. H. (1973). Ethnography: The fieldwork enterprise. In J. J. Honigmann (Ed.), *Handbook of social and cultural anthropology* (pp. 241-288). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Phillips, D., & Clifton, J. (2007). The authenticity of business simulations in ESP: Implications for materials design. *Global Business Languages, 10*, 3-12.

Schriver, K. (2012). What we know about expertise in professional communication. In V. W. Berninger (Ed.), *Past, present, and future contributions of cognitive writing research to cognitive psychology* (pp. 275-312). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Talbert, R. (2014, April 1). Toward a common definition of "flipped learning." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from http://chronicle.com/blognetwork/castingoutnines/2014/04/01/toward-a-common-definition-of-flipped-learning/

Van Praet, E. (2009). Staging a team performance: A linguistic ethnographic analysis of weekly meetings at a British embassy. *Journal of Business Communication, 46*, 80-99.

Van Praet, E. (2010). The dual voice of domination: Ritual and power in a British embassy. *Text & Talk, 30*, 213-233.
Van Praet, E. (2011). *Meeting as ritual: A linguistic ethnography of weekly meetings in the British Embassy*. Ghent, Belgium: Acco Academia.

Author Biography

Ellen Van Praet is an assistant professor at Ghent University, where she teaches organizational communication, intercultural communication, and business meeting and negotiation skills. She has published about media discourse, power, negotiation, and decision-making strategies in *Journal of Language and Politics, Journal of Pragmatics, Text & Talk*, and *Journal of Business Communication.*