

BreakThrough Communication in a Hybrid World: Amplifying Interactive, Experiential Learning

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Abstract—This paper describes the research foundation and instructional design of BreakThrough Communication, an evidence-based hybrid learning enterprise that builds organizational capacity by boosting communication skill in individuals and teams. BTC’s tiered talent development program combines asynchronous, self-paced video instruction in foundational knowledge; live virtual workshops customized to engage learners in practicing new skills on organizational challenges they face; and change-sustaining follow-through to embed new skills through assessment, video reinforcers, and real-time practice sessions. A certificate program that prepares internal trainers to assume communication coach roles completes the process. The BTC learning system is grounded in the traditional pedagogy of the communication field, aligns with adult learning theory, and reflects recent neuroscience research on how the human brain most efficiently learns. Three distinct areas of communication skill comprise the program’s subject material: interpersonal conflict, teamwork, and persuasive speaking. The communication models within each area have been validated in both experimental and field studies, shown to change behavior and affect outcomes.

Keywords—competency-based instruction, experiential learning, hybrid learning, virtual learning, remote learning, conflict resolution, teamwork, persuasion, leadership

1 Performance centered learning

From the beginning, teaching in the field of Communication has centered attention on performance, on developing an individual’s effectiveness in expressing themselves through speech. The oratory experts of ancient Greece and Rome, charged with preparing the offspring of the elite for their future roles as political leaders, devised methods that today would be called experiential learning. Every student engaged in multiple practice rounds of presentation and debate, and they received ongoing feedback from teachers and peers on their performance. The process is much like skills training for athletes or musical ensembles. Mastery is cultivated through individual study, collaborative group learning, public practice, and continuous feedback.

As the scope of the field expanded to include interpersonal and group communication and the role they play in relationships and organizations, the question of everyday communication mastery and whether it is teachable became pertinent. Research sought to identify the specific communication behaviors that constitute competency in one-to-one and group interaction and what instructional procedures increase the chances a newly acquired skill will transfer from the classroom to the communicative life of the learner.

1.1 Shaping communication competency

Compatible with communication's performance focus, behavioral competency approaches to skill development target specific linguistic and nonverbal behaviors associated with successful outcomes in a particular context, such as interpersonal conflict, team dynamics, and persuasive messaging. A *shaping* process moves learners from intellectual understanding of a competency to closer and closer approximations of its use in real life [1]. Shaping follows a sequence: direct instruction in a target skill's component parts; identification of need for the skill in a learner's life; written scripting of personal word choices for each component; observation of models (effective and ineffective); practice with peers; and recurring performance feedback from instructors and peers.

Evaluation research of behavioral competency approaches has shown it to be effective in increasing communication skill as perceived by learners and those who interact with them. For example, in assessing a conversational skills training course for "communication apprehensive" adults — individual's for whom shyness was so debilitating it was adversely affecting their social relationships and work performance — researchers employed multiple measures: learner questionnaires and self-monitoring; lab samples of social interaction; and evaluation by confederates and coder ratings, to assess ability on completion of a program that targeted skills that previous research showed to be key: complimenting, agreeing, asking questions, describing shared experience, and expressing opinion. The findings showed clear support for the efficacy of this approach. The program produced greater improvements in comfort, conversation skill, and positive impact on others for those who had completed the full learning sequence than for those in a control group who had received direct instruction only. Improvements were shown to have endured in a follow-up evaluation five months after the program's end [2].

Over the last two decades, team-based work has come to dominate organizational life across sectors. With that has come increased demand for a constellation of interpersonal and group process skills. Team members need to be able to effectively express viewpoints, facilitate team process, build consensus, handle conflict, share leadership, and create safe work environments [3]. Research sponsored by a leading technology firm showed that with technical skills sets being equal, communication skills that equalize participation, and create psychological safety for members are the two factors distinguishing the firm's most effective teams from all others [4]. Increasing organizational capability today means team members must learn new set of basic skills, for collaborative problem-solving, joint decision making, and strong interpersonal relationships.

The pandemic and mass exodus to remote work that it triggered has created further need for communication skills that support teamwork and talent development. A northeastern software developer now trains its managers to work with distributed teams, with an emphasis on conversations that establish team cohesion and build personal relationships. A national insurance firm trained all its managers to facilitate career development for their employees, creating templates for conversations about skills and interests. They also developed a fully virtual four-week leadership course and made it available to employees at every level of the firm [5].

Field research in team development has shown that using the shaping process to teach concrete communication skills to intact teams can yield outcomes with long-term effects. Longitudinal study of a teambuilding intervention with a conflict-ridden public service organization, whose members were taught basic interpersonal skills and group problem solving methods, found lasting results. Three years after the initial intervention, comprehensive interviews with team members revealed four consistent impressions: increased ability to raise issues and manage conflict; increased mutual praise, support, and cooperation; clarified roles and responsibilities; and enduring commitment to teamwork and innovation [6].

A communication-based intervention in a large governmental organization treated five variables of organizational culture that take shape through communication practices and interaction rituals (supervision, teamwork, morale, involvement, information flow) in an initiative aimed at shifting the culture from hierarchical and authoritarian to participative and involved. One year after the organizational intervention members at all levels and external public officials who interact with them indicated movement toward participative culture on five dimensions. Three variables, morale, involvement, and information flow showed statistically significant change [7].

These studies, demonstrating the effectiveness of a behavioral shaping approach to developing communication competency, have also shown its applicability for learners of varying ages, in settings ranging from academic institutions to working organizations. The next logical step, given the nature of today's learning environments, is to apply this method of shaping skills incrementally to virtual and hybrid learning, developing solutions that are widely accessible, from anywhere. The learning system described further in this paper takes that step.

1.2 Teaching adult learners

Communication skills training in organizational environments requires a curriculum where the specific needs of adult learners are taken into account.

American educator Malcolm Knowles is widely known for making the term “andragogy,” (Greek for “man-learning” in contrast to pedagogy, which means “child-learning”) synonymous with adult education. He called it the “art and science of adult learning” [8]. He provides a platform of assumptions and principles for instructional design compatible with a competency-based approach.

Knowles' assumptions about adult learners: They are *self-directed* and want learning experiences that give them autonomy and the freedom to draw their own conclusions. They bring a reservoir of *experience* to learning that will be diverse in terms of

backgrounds, skill sets, and perspectives and must be tapped to stoke engagement. Their *readiness to learn* is directly associated with the relevance of the material to their personal development in their current role. Adult learners want *immediate application*, subject matter that is going to solve problems they regularly face. And finally, they are *motivated* by engagement, active involvement with the learning material, and clarity on the reason behind every learning activity.

Four principles follow from these assumptions that underlie curriculum design: involve adult learners in shaping the content of their instruction; employ activities that make direct experience the basis of learning; tie instruction directly to jobs or personal life; and make problem-solving the focus of course content [9]

Knowles published his theory of adult education almost 40 years ago, but its continuing relevance to instructional principles and practices is being demonstrated by cognitive science today. A 2016 review of neuroscience research on human learning found that the core assumptions of andragogy have a connection to the brain's neural networks related to memory and cognition [10].

2 Launching experiential, interactive virtual learning

As long-time practitioners of in-person, experiential learning, the key challenge in this initiative was to achieve the same engagement and quality outcomes in the virtual environment as we do live onsite. One central question ignited this work: How can we apply all we know about the art and science of teaching and learning to a hybrid environment? How can we drive experiential learning through every element of the virtual context, both synchronously and asynchronously?

Lessons being drawn from two years of remote work suggest some organizing principles that correspond to an outcomes-driven approach to virtual adult learning. Firms that managed remote work successfully took the time to compile important information in clear, easily digestible, flexible forms that employees could access from anywhere at any time [11]. This was particularly useful to new employees who were scaling the learning curve in their jobs and knowledge of the company. Successful firms were also very intentional about people dynamics, “scaffolding” the social dimensions of remote work. They established clear norms and etiquette around meetings, held town halls to reduce power distances, and ensured that all meetings were inclusive across time zones. They regularly sponsored virtual events that brought people together in remote coffee rooms, games, and happy hours, for interaction that kept them both physically distanced and yet in touch with each other's lives [12].

Finally, successful firms demonstrated awareness of diversity and equity issues. Among the employees most likely to prefer remote work are women and people of color, who even before the pandemic reported higher levels of underrepresentation and isolation at work. But being remote without conscious support and engagement could increase alienation and decrease opportunities for good assignments and career growth. Companies who managed remote work well put systems in place to ensure equal support and equal access for all [13].

These values of flexible, well-packaged information delivery; norms of structured yet informal interaction; and emphasis on equal engagement are reflected in the content

and structure of all three courses that comprise the BreakThrough Communication learning system. BreakThrough Conflict, Hardwiring Teamwork, and Persuasion & Influence all share a common goal: measurable increase in communication capability.

2.1 Each course in brief:

BreakThrough Conflict — Navigate Challenging Conversations

- CONVERT criticism from defensiveness to insight.
- RAISE issues that solve problems and strengthen relationships.
- CREATE habits of gratitude and recognition.

Hardwiring Teamwork — Build inclusive, productive meetings.

- TACKLE questions meaningful to the team’s work.
- CRAFT action agreements from discord.
- CREATE meeting climates free from personal attack and wheel spinning.
- EQUALIZE input from dominating and quiet people.

Persuasion & Influence — Create powerful, convincing presentations

- DELIVER with 5 dynamism capabilities.
- CONVERT nerves into productive enthusiasm.
- ORGANIZE with intention, clarity and impact

2.2 Each course has 3 progressive levels of increasing skill mastery

Foundational Knowledge: Self-paced [Video Courses](#)

These asynchronous courses provide foundational knowledge on a schedule convenient for each learner, ranging in time from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. They include engagement activities and [interactive digital workbooks](#) that move learners from knowing to doing, by applying skills as they are introduced.

- **Modular Learning**

Each course is modularized, to build communication skill incrementally in its content area. Each module includes outlined learning objectives; text and audio overviews of core concepts; video lectures recorded before a live audience; audio/visual concept reviews; summary application exercises; and interactive workbooks.

- **Engaged Learning**

Learners actively engage with concepts and skills in two ways in each course. The application exercises built into course summaries provide timely tests of comprehension via multiple-choice reflection questions whose answers are provided immediately. Interactive workbooks make course material relevant to each learner’s local circumstance with short answer questions that stimulate them to apply concepts

to their life experience and a scripting tool that guides them through preparation for real-life interaction they are anticipating.

- **Autonomous Learning**

The learning system is designed for easiest possible use. A click-and-listen navigation guide walks learners through each element of the program interface, showing them how to control each aspect of course delivery, including starting, stopping, and revisiting the overviews, video lectures, slides, and reflection questions for each module. Each course site is fully searchable and includes full transcripts of its contents.

Skill Practice: Live interactive Virtual Workshops

A serious challenge with asynchronous experiences is that they are solitary. To boost real-time engagement and collaboration, a synchronous [virtual workshop](#) is customized around scenarios taken directly from the organization's life, addressing learners' social and professional settings. Every person interacts, practices, and gets feedback in facilitated breakout rooms. Because practice enhances memory, this opportunity to perform new skills increases their "stickiness" and gives practice addressing actual challenges learners face in their daily lives. The social interaction of these breakout sessions also enriches learning by building a sense of community into the fabric of the experience.

Learning is further amplified with [dramatic scenarios](#) that are customized to capture the content and tone of challenging conversations from which the learners prepare. This is accomplished by trainers recreating compelling conflict scenarios directly from the work lives of the learners.

Within 30 days following training, key performance metrics are measured and participant learning evaluated using surveys, interviews, and follow-up sessions.

Follow Through: Sustaining Change

Ongoing reinforcement embeds best communication practices and amplifies learning until Breakthrough Communication habits are formed. There are three follow-up initiatives:

Micro reinforcement workshops — 45-minute virtual practice sessions hardwire skills by practicing with new scenarios harvested from learners. In-house facilitators are trained to sustain this initiative.

Mini learning capsules — 1-minute video clips keep the skills in conscious awareness. A few titles from this library: Make Gratitude an Event, The Power of Apology, Be Curious not Furious, Never Weaponize Silence.

Trainer Training — a certification program that can be fully completed online. Participants work with coaches and then demonstrate mastery with application assignments and teach-backs.

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