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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Practical Positive Approach to Critical Thinking

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| ABSTRACT
This article focuses on helping business majors understand critical thinking skills linked to negative thinking such as psychological context, Imposter Experiences. It begins with discussing a business communication course within the scope of theoretical frameworks linked to critical thinking skills and Imposter Experiences. The next section reports findings from how cross-disciplinary units in business departments collaborations were beneficial to students as they prepare for professional life. The final section discusses how learner-centered interactions can help business majors recognize and use practical critical thinking skills to circumvent negative thinking, i.e., Imposter Experiences they might encounter in both settings (academic and workplace).

| KEYWORDS

Business Communication, Collaborations, Critical Thinking, Imposter Experiences, Learner-Centered Interactions, Workplace Readiness

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

"Who's That Behind Those …?" Perhaps this iconic slogan, even with the missing word, may be easily recognized without conducting a search. If not, a quick search of this memorable slogan will reveal the marketing plan used elements of persuasion, celebrity endorsements, to "influence" positive thinking about a product (sunglasses) with the possibility of glamour outcomes (https://clickamericana.com/topics/celebrities-famous-people/whos-that-behind-those-foster-grants-sunglasses-on-the-stars; https://adage.com/article/rewind/rewind-foster-grants/293896/

Yet, purposefully omitting the missing word from the slogan might prompt negative thinking for some people. Metaphorically speaking, this negative thinking is akin to a barrier (shade) which can influence communication. For example, at the beginning of the semester in a sizable undergraduate business communication course, a student (business major) wearing sunglasses was asked by a business professor, in a joyful tone, "Who's That Behind Those Sunglasses?" The student -laughed- then wittily stated "It's your favorite student." Most students (all business majors) and the business professor -laughed- at the witty comment. The student then "politely" explained they simply forgot to remove the sunglasses. In turn the professor, "thanked" the student for having a good sense of humor and providing a reasonable courteous explanation.

Noticeably, observing the audience during this interaction, a small number of students' facial expressions and body language depicted uncertainty. *What were these students thinking? Was the professor's question interpreted as criticism? Did the student's words "favorite student" cause others self-doubt?* This brief *reality-based interaction* and *questions* (illustrates) how a potential barrier, i.e., negative thinking such as psychological context, Imposter Experiences, can influence the communication process. To address this barrier, the author seeks to bridge the gaps between theory and practice by facilitating learning focusing on learner-centered interactions. These interactions emphasize the role of an instructor as a facilitator of learning (Weimer, (2002). Mainly,

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"building on student understanding and experience rather than just imposing a single view on the class. …shifting to use active and reflective learning to help students create a learning community where both students and the instructor are empowered to question and to make meaning, and all are invigorated in the phenomenon we call learning" (Smart, Witt, Scott, 2012, p.402). In doing so, "the task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake is associated with a result or outcome that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student" (Schlechty, 2002, p.3). This article discusses theoretical frameworks linked to critical thinking and Imposter Experiences.

2. Literature Review

In this article, for contextual purposes, the course business communication is in a business department within a College of Business. Pedagogically speaking, the business communication coursework focuses on business problems affecting the communication process. Examples of topics include – critical thinking, emerging technologies, interpersonal skills, listening, oral/presentations, team communication, written communication - suitable for students with (limited work experience or professional experience). The reality-based course helps business majors develop workplace practices in diverse contexts, i.e., different cultures, places, and hierarchies. While (all) these topics/skills are all essential in helping students develop their business communication, this discussion will explore critical thinking skills - how they are learned in the classroom and how they are practiced in the workplace.

A key objective of the business communication course is to develop students' critical thinking skills, e.g., gather realistic information, analyze the information, situation, audience, and plan an applicable mode to communicate findings (Russ, 2009; Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn & Harding, 2012; Bloch & Spataro, 2014; Moshiri & Cardon, 2020; Sharma, 2024). This short description of critical thinking skills was adopted from Meek's (2017) definition below, to (highlight) facilitating learning focusing on learner-centered interactions.

> "**Critical thinking skills.** The transformation of knowledge is significantly different from the application of knowledge (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2012). Transformation of knowledge requires the application of critical thinking, and critical thinking means to analyze objectively. Furthermore, the lack of critical thinking skills may be demonstrated in the inability to integrate multiple perspectives (Flores et al., 2012). Critical thinking allows an individual to use analytical skills to assimilate and evaluate information and then produce a response based on the analysis (Bloch &Spataro, 2014).
>
> The disposition to critical thinking emerges from a culture of critical thinking and it is an ability that needs to be developed. Critical thinking cultures provide prospects for an individual to explore and grow their skills by examining other viewpoints, perspectives, and possibilities (Bloch & Spataro, 2014). While some scholars believe that critical thinking is a general skill; others posit that an individual must develop critical thinking skills. Flores et al. (2012) asserted that critical thinking skills need to be developed through formal education, or a person may experience negative consequences related to how effectively and efficiently they can lead and perform at work. In fact, a person might demonstrate poor critical thinking skills by not being able to integrate multiple perspectives that contain a variety of facts and then decide the proper response or make an adequate decision. Well-developed critical thinking skills allow an individual not only to assess difficult and complex situations but also to reach feasible solutions and make logical and pragmatic decisions" (pp. 34-35).

However, gaps in critical thinking skills, such as the *sunglass scenario* described above, may prompt subtle circumstances which might influence "a true psychological experience that can arise in response to situations with certain features. …Many people in *these* situations experience feelings of impostorism, and thus impostor feelings can be present or absent in a given individual at a given time as a function of the situation. … One central tenet of Impostor Theory is that impostors believe that others think they are more competent or intelligent than they know themselves to be" (McElwee & Yurak, pp. 184-185).

Tewfik's (2022) research cited below provides insight into suggestive patterns of negative thinking linked to Imposter Experiences. There are several overarching implications from this extant research, which supports the need to develop soft skills, such as **critical thinking**.

> "Characterized by thoughts like "Others think I am smarter than I think I am" and fears of intellectual fraudulence (Clance & Imes, 1978), the impostor phenomenon is associated with a host of negative outcomes (for reviews, see Langford & Clance, 1993; Mak, Kleitman, & Abbott, 2019; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). For example, psychologists—who were the first to study it (Clance & Imes, 1978)—have found relationships with decreased self-esteem (Schubert & Bowker, 2019), decreased psychological well-being (Bernard, Lige, Willis, Sosoo, & Neblett, 2017), and increased negative behaviors like self -handicapping and self-denigration (Ferrari

> & Thompson, 2006). The limited body of extant organizational research paints a similarly bleak picture, outlining negative associations with primarily work-related attitudes (Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018; McDowell, Grubb, & Geho, 2015; Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015)" pp. 988- 989.

It is important to mention here, drawing from Meek's (2017), page 5, … "Soft skills do not always have a consistent definition between different cultures, places, and hierarchies" (Dharmarajan, Pachireflectgalla, & Lanka, 2012). Each of these factors influence the communication process as mentioned above in the – *reality-based interaction and questions- used* to (illustrate) a barrier such as psychological context, i.e., Imposter Experiences. With this point in mind, and because critical thinking is also a soft skill with varying definitions, the author for contextual purposes specified key elements of critical thinking, cited by Meek (2017): gather realistic information, analyze the information, situation, audience, and plan an applicable mode to communicate findings. Hence, critical thinking, as suggested by Flores et al. (2012), "if not developed by a person, may experience negative consequences related to how effectively and efficiently they can lead and perform at work" (p.34). Mirroring the workplace, these negative consequences may also be experienced in academic settings, such as the above *sunglasses scenario* in a sizable business communication's course.

Based on the author's experience in teaching business courses, related scholarly research and consulting practitioner, it is reasonable to suggest (barriers to critical thinking development) may prompt Imposter Experiences. For instance, pertinent to this discussion, how perceptions of stakeholders, i.e., potential employers, academicians, and business majors, differ about gaps in workplace readiness. As a result, decades of research examining these stakeholders' perceptions about workplace readiness continue to (illustrate) varying degrees of disagreement between their responses about readiness, e.g., Abston & Soter, 2020; BizEd, 2018; Chamorro-Premuzic & Frankiewicz, 2019; Danao & Main, 2024; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; McDonough, 2020; Nealy, 2023, 2021, 2016, 2005; Robles, 2012.

Regardless of disagreements, these *cross-stakeholders'* contextual perceptions help facilitate discussions about planning "*meaningful valuable*" learning experiences for students, i.e., business majors. It is plausible to mention here, as noted above these ***contextual*** disagreements may help identify barriers linked to (critical thinking and psychological context). In practical terms, as an internal stakeholder, i.e., business faculty, analyzing and reflecting on these disagreements, have provided useful data for planning program and course content. As suggested by Hynes & Stretcher (2008) … "collaboration among professors in different departments within a college of business, will result in improved transfer of learning and a more integrated program of study" (p. 211). In so doing, further emphasizing the need to (reflect) reality-based business environments when preparing teaching materials.

3. Methodology

This section shares (reflections) about how cross-disciplinary units in business departments collaborated and developed coursework to help business majors understand how subject areas are linked. These collaborations among professors operationalize Hynes & Stretcher (2008) … "a much -ignored synergy across discipline, particularly between business communication and analytical subjects, would be beneficial to students as they prepare for professional life" (p.207). The author suggests cross-disciplinary coursework should help business majors with improving their critical thinking *rather than adhering* to negative thinking experiences.

The passages below authored by a faculty member provide insight about the importance of *collaborations across departments*. The passages also embody this author's description of ***critical thinking skills***, e.g., gather realistic information, analyze the information, situation, audience, and plan an applicable mode to communicate findings, adopted from Meek's (2017) definition above (highlighting) facilitating learning focusing on learner-centered interactions.

> Dyrud (2008) pondered, "Those of us who have been teaching for a number of years realize that department boundaries, while not arbitrary, are certainly artificial. Academic departments may embody a useful institutional organizational structure, but knowledge cannot be so restrained: It leaks out across departments. If anything, communication functions as a glue that cements the disciplines to each other. The big **question** is, How do we coax our **students into making that discovery** and thus having a more holistic educational experience" (p.339)?

In *reflecting* on the **question** about *coaxing students into making the discovery*, suitably, *persuading* business faculty to engage in this discovery is vital. The following passages detail how informal arrangements with colleagues, i.e., *synergy across disciplines, particularly between business communication and analytical subjects,* validate this perception.

> Krajicek (2008) shared, "From day one, I was blown away by the knowledge, professionalism, and generosity of my new colleagues, and, in particular, by the way they immediately showed a willingness to help me create excellence in the **business communication course**. As I began developing rewarding relationships with these fellow professors, the opportunities for **cross-disciplinary exercises became obvious, natural, and easy.** And with my colleagues' help, we have slowly but surely increased the **interconnectivit**y between my course and other courses in the program" (p. 370).
>
> "In this spirit, my colleagues and I have devised a number of written and oral assignments that cut across our disciplines. Sometimes these **connections are simply topical**. When planning an impromptu writing exercise, I might pick a colleague's brain about what is going on in her or his class; if our students have been learning about revenue recognition in accounting, for example, I will create an assignment asking them to explain the nuances of that accounting concept to a lay audience. This gives our students an opportunity to practice articulating and rehearsing what they know, while at the same time working on their writing skills" (p. 371).
>
> "A supply chain management colleague and I have devised a very rewarding cross-disciplinary writing exercise. …. "a laboratory in which students must test their ability to present analyses and recommendations clearly." …. the students read Harvard cases, and … grills them. This is all done orally. The only time students must present their analyses in written form is on the final exam. In the past, too many students have performed well throughout the semester but, unfortunately, not so well when it came to the written analysis. This distressed …, and **he approached me with a proposal**. We now conduct "mock" final exams, in which students write up a response to an assigned case" (p. 371).

3.1 Results

The above passages illustrate *meaningful tasks with clear criteria for both students and business faculty adaptable for* (undergraduate or graduate) business courses. As suggested by Dyrud (2008), … "knowledge cannot be so restrained: It leaks out across departments" (p.339). In doing so, both students and business faculty were beneficiaries of *discoveries* linked to developing **practical critical thinking** skills which may minimize suggestive patterns of **negative thinking** related to *Imposter Experiences*. The point here is that, in this case, *business faculty* (illustrated and used) critical thinking skills e.g., gathered realistic information, analyzed the information, situation, audience, and planned applicable modes to communicate. By doing this, business faculty facilitated learning, i.e., scaffolded-built support to help business majors *practically use critical thinking* skills by drawing from previous knowledge during the (writing and oral exercises). It is feasible to suggest these *tasks* helped with identifying psychological barriers, such as anxieties linked to writer's block or fear of presenting.

Krajicek's (2008) informal arrangements with business colleagues depicted how collaborations provided opportunities to help *business majors'* deepen understanding of how to navigate perceived barriers – across different departments within a college of business. In doing so, business majors should be able to *discover gaps in abilities and attributes;* useful for *closing identified gaps*. These findings are also useful for (mitigating) stakeholders' perceptions about workplace readiness. As previously mentioned, drawing from decades of research examining stakeholders' perceptions about workplace readiness and this author's experiences, these collaborations simulate business environments, adaptable for providing business majors with opportunities to develop expected workplace readiness.

From a learner-centered teaching perceptive, these learning exercises should help with identifying strategies to develop critical thinking processes which may be the source of - *decreased psychological well-being*, i.e., Imposter Experiences. In learning-centered classrooms, says Weimer (2012), "faculty encourage students to learn as communities of learners, i.e., collaborations. Research consistently confirms that students can learn from, and with, each other. Certainly, the teacher has the expertise and an obligation to share it, but teachers can learn from students as well. Learner-centered teachers work to develop structures that promote shared commitments to learning. They see learning individually and collectively as the most important goal of any educational experience" (p.81).

4. Conclusion

Learning Exercise

Answers to Sunglass Scenario Questions: What were these students thinking? Was the professor's question interpreted as criticism? Did the student's words "favorite student" cause others self-doubt?

The author, a facilitator of learning, respectfully requests that the answers to these questions are suitable for dialogue with cross-stakeholders: potential employers, collaborations among professors in different departments within a college of business or

other academic program on (your) campus, and (your) business majors or other majors on (your) campus. My point here is that readers of this article should be able to (think) about sharing (your window) of insight/discoveries about collaborations -internal or external. Some expected outcomes include but are not limited to: Critical thinking skills need to be developed through formal education (Flores et al., 2012); An ongoing dialogue between academics and employers is critical to ensure students develop key communication proficiencies before they enter the workforce (Kleckner & Butz (2022); and, Dialogue must be continuous, as academic and professional environments are constantly evolving (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019).

This article underscores the importance of cross-stakeholders collaborations to help business majors improve their practical critical thinking skills to circumvent negative thinking, i.e., Imposter Experiences they might encounter in both settings (academic and workplace). The author hopes these collaborations "influence" positive thinking – thru the lens of the iconic slogan "*Who's That Behind Those Foster Grants*?"

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