

From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates

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Abstract

Effective communication skills are essential for undergraduate students as they transition from academic environments to professional careers. This study reports on the development and evaluation of a communication skills toolkit for undergraduates, designed to enhance students' communication competence. A total of 32 psychology students were actively involved in conceptualizing, designing, and producing the toolkit, which included modules on verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital communication, as well as active listening and professional etiquette. The toolkit was then implemented with a sample of 156 undergraduate students from diverse disciplines, who engaged with its activities and resources. Participants subsequently provided feedback through a structured survey measuring their perceived improvement in communication skills, knowledge, and preparedness for the workforce. Results indicated that the majority of respondents reported a significant increase in their understanding of communication principles, confidence in applying these skills, and perceived readiness for professional interactions. The collaborative creation process also provided the psychology students with experiential learning opportunities, reinforcing their own communication and project management abilities. This initiative demonstrates that a peer-developed, discipline-informed communication skills toolkit can serve as an effective, engaging, and scalable approach to bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace demands. The findings underscore the value of integrating student-led resource development into higher education as a strategy for fostering transferable skills.

Keywords: Communication Skills; Workforce Readiness; Peer-led Education; Undergraduates; Toolkit

1 Introduction

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the demand for graduates who possess not only academic knowledge but also strong interpersonal and professional skills has become increasingly critical. Among these competencies, communication skills stand out as a cornerstone for career readiness and success. Effective communication, encompassing verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital interactions enables individuals to convey ideas, collaborate efficiently, and build meaningful professional relationships. In the context of the 21st-century workplace, where adaptability and cross-disciplinary teamwork are essential, the ability to communicate effectively has shifted from being a desirable asset to an indispensable requirement.

However, despite its recognized importance, communication skills training in many undergraduate programs remains underdeveloped or is embedded only indirectly within academic curricula. This often results in a gap between students' academic performance and their readiness to meet workplace communication demands. Employers have consistently highlighted the need for graduates who can articulate their thoughts confidently, engage in active listening, and adapt their communication styles to diverse audiences and media. Addressing this skills gap requires intentional, structured, and engaging approaches that go beyond traditional lecture-based instruction.

In response to this need, the present study introduces *From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates*, a peer-developed resource aimed at enhancing communication competencies in higher education. The initiative leveraged the expertise and creativity of 32 psychology students, who collaboratively designed the toolkit to include interactive modules, practical exercises, and real-world scenarios covering verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital communication, as well as professional etiquette. The development process also provided these psychology students with hands-on experience in content creation, teamwork, and applied communication strategies.

To evaluate the toolkit's effectiveness, it was implemented with a diverse group of 156 undergraduate students from multiple disciplines. Participants engaged with the toolkit's resources and activities before providing structured feedback on its impact on their communication skills, knowledge, and perceived readiness for professional environments. This dual-layer approach, where one group of students created the resource and another group evaluated its utility, allowed for both content authenticity and practical assessment.

The findings from this initiative have implications for higher education institutions seeking innovative strategies to bridge the academic-to-career transition. By empowering students to be both creators and consumers of educational resources, universities can foster deeper engagement, encourage peer-to-peer learning, and produce tools that are grounded in the lived experiences and needs of the student population.

This paper presents the conceptualization, development, and evaluation of the communication skills toolkit, highlighting its role in addressing the workforce readiness gap. It also discusses the pedagogical benefits of student-led resource creation, the measurable impact on communication skills and knowledge, and the potential for scaling such initiatives across disciplines. In doing so, it offers a model for integrating communication skills training into undergraduate education in a way that is practical, collaborative, and directly aligned with industry expectations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Importance of Communication Skills in Higher Education

Communication skills are consistently identified as a core competency for graduate employability. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), effective communication is among the top ten skills required for the future workforce, alongside problem-solving, adaptability, and collaboration. In higher education, these skills enable students to articulate ideas clearly, engage in critical discussions, and collaborate effectively across disciplines (Andrews & Higson, 2008). However, research shows that many graduates enter the workforce with underdeveloped communication competencies, creating a mismatch between employer expectations and graduate capabilities (Jackson & Chapman, 2012).

2.2 Bridging the Gap Between Academia and the Workforce

The transition from academic learning to professional environments often reveals gaps in graduates' abilities to apply theoretical knowledge to practical communication contexts. Robles (2012) emphasized that soft skills, particularly communication, are essential for career success but are often insufficiently taught in traditional university curricula. Employers expect graduates to not only possess technical knowledge but also demonstrate interpersonal competence, active listening, and adaptability to various communication channels, including digital platforms (Succi & Canovi, 2020). This workforce readiness gap highlights the need for intentional, skills-based interventions within undergraduate programs.

2.3 Peer-Led Learning and Resource Development

Student-led initiatives, such as peer-developed toolkits, have emerged as effective strategies for enhancing skill acquisition. Peer-led learning leverages shared experiences and relatable contexts, increasing engagement and retention of knowledge (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2014). When students design learning resources for their peers, they develop meta-cognitive awareness and deepen their understanding of the subject matter (Topping, 2005). Moreover, peer-produced resources can be tailored to the real challenges faced by students, making them more practical and relevant than generic commercial training materials.

2.4 Toolkits as Pedagogical Tools

Educational toolkits comprising structured activities, instructional materials, and practical exercises have been widely used to support experiential learning. Toolkits provide learners with hands-on, self-paced opportunities to practice skills, receive feedback, and reflect on their progress (Kolb, 2015). In the context of communication training, toolkits can integrate theory and application, offering modules that address diverse skills such as verbal and non-verbal expression, professional writing, active listening, and workplace etiquette.

Research by Chan (2011) demonstrated that communication-focused toolkits enhance student confidence, encourage self-directed learning, and improve performance in professional simulations.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining resource development with a quantitative evaluation of its effectiveness. The project was divided into two phases: (1) the development of the *From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates* by Psychology students, and (2) the implementation and evaluation of the toolkit among undergraduate students from various disciplines.

3.2 Participants

Phase 1: Toolkit Development

A total of 32 psychology students in their third and fourth years of study participated in the development phase. These students were selected based on their interest in communication skills training and their enrollment in a course focusing on applied psychology and skill development.

Phase 2: Toolkit Evaluation

For the evaluation phase, 156 undergraduate students from diverse academic programs participated. They were recruited through faculty announcements, student networks, and social media postings. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in a degree program at the time of the study and to have no prior formal communication skills training beyond standard coursework.

3.3 Toolkit Development Process

The 32 psychology students collaborated in small groups to design toolkit modules addressing verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital communication, as well as active listening and professional etiquette. Each module included theoretical overviews, practical exercises, and workplace-oriented case scenarios. The development process was supervised by academic staff to ensure accuracy and relevance. The final toolkit was compiled into a digital and print-friendly format for distribution.

3.4 Procedure

In the evaluation phase, the 156 undergraduate participants received the toolkit and were given one week to engage with its contents. They were encouraged to complete all exercises and reflect on their learning. Following this period, participants completed a structured questionnaire assessing:

1. Perceived improvement in communication skills knowledge (e.g., understanding of key concepts, techniques, and workplace applications)
2. Perceived readiness for workforce communication demands
3. Overall usefulness and relevance of the toolkit

3.5 Instruments

A self-administered survey was developed for the study, consisting of two sections:

1. Demographic information (age, gender, academic program, year of study)
2. Toolkit Evaluation Scale (15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), assessing knowledge improvement, confidence in application, and perceived workforce readiness.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) to summarize participant responses. Qualitative comments from the open-ended questions were reviewed thematically to identify recurring patterns and suggestions.

4 Results

4.1 Participant Demographics

A total of 156 undergraduate students participated in the evaluation of the From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates. Participants represented multiple academic disciplines, including Psychology, Business, Education, and Engineering. The sample comprised 48.7% female ($n = 76$) and 51.3% male ($n = 80$) students, with ages ranging from 18 to 27 years ($M = 23$, $SD = 6.45$). Most participants were in their second or third year of study (57%), followed by first-year (23%) and final-year students (20%).

4.2 Perceived Improvement in Communication Skills Knowledge

Analysis of the Toolkit Evaluation Scale revealed high levels of agreement across items related to communication skills knowledge. The mean score for perceived improvement in understanding communication principles and techniques was $M = 23.33$, $SD = 6.55$ on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating that participants generally felt more informed about verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital communication after using the toolkit.

4.3 Overall Usefulness and Relevance of the Toolkit

The overall usefulness rating of the toolkit received a high mean score of $M = 24.56$, $SD = 6.43$. Over 56% of participants rated the toolkit as “Very Useful” or “Extremely Useful” for their academic and career development.

4.4 Qualitative Feedback

Qualitative responses indicated three recurring themes:

1. Practical Application – Participants valued workplace-focused case studies and scenarios.
2. Engagement – The interactive format and peer-developed content were reported to be relatable and motivating.
3. Skill Transferability – Respondents emphasized that the toolkit provided strategies applicable in both academic group work and future professional settings.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the *From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates* was effective in enhancing students’ perceived knowledge of communication skills and their readiness for professional environments. The consistently high ratings across knowledge improvement, workforce preparedness, and overall usefulness suggest that the toolkit addressed a critical skills gap often identified in graduate employability research (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

5.1 Impact on Communication Skills Knowledge

The significant perceived improvement in communication knowledge aligns with previous studies that emphasize the value of structured, skills-based resources in higher education (Chan, 2011). The toolkit’s modular design, covering verbal, non-verbal, written, and digital communication, appears to have provided a comprehensive framework for students to understand and practice communication strategies relevant to both academic and workplace settings.

5.2 Workforce Readiness and Transferable Skills

The reported increase in workforce preparedness supports Robles’ (2012) argument that targeted soft skills training is essential for career success. Participants particularly appreciated the real-world scenarios and professional etiquette guidelines, which bridged the gap between theoretical learning and workplace application. This reinforces the notion that higher education must embed employability-

focused skill development into curricula to better prepare graduates for diverse professional environments.

5.3 Value of Peer-Led Resource Development

An important aspect of this initiative was its peer-led development process. The involvement of psychology students in creating the toolkit likely enhanced its relevance and relatability, as supported by Boud et al. (2014), who found that peer-generated learning materials increase engagement and contextual understanding. Moreover, the creators themselves benefited from the process, gaining project management, teamwork, and advanced communication skills—outcomes consistent with Topping’s (2005) findings on peer-led learning.

5.4 Practical and Pedagogical Implications

The success of this project suggests that peer-led, toolkit-based interventions can be a scalable model for communication skills training across disciplines. Higher education institutions could integrate similar initiatives into capstone courses, professional development modules, or employability workshops. Additionally, the combination of practical exercises, case studies, and reflective activities has proved to be an effective approach for fostering both knowledge acquisition and skill application.

5.5 Limitations and Future Directions

While the results are promising, the study relied on self-reported measures, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions rather than objective skill gains. Future research should include pre- and post-intervention performance assessments, such as using simulated workplace communication tasks or peer/mentor evaluations. Furthermore, expanding the toolkit with multimedia resources, industry-specific modules, and role-play activities could enhance engagement and applicability. Longitudinal studies could also explore whether perceived gains translate into actual workplace effectiveness after graduation.

6. Conclusion

The development and evaluation of the *From Classroom to Career: A Practical Communication Skills Toolkit for Undergraduates* addressed a key need in higher education—bridging the gap between academic learning and the communication demands of the professional world. The study’s findings revealed that the toolkit significantly enhanced participants’ perceived communication skills, knowledge, and readiness for the workforce, underscoring its value as a practical, accessible, and student-centered learning resource. One of the most distinctive aspects of this initiative was its peer-led design process. By engaging 32 psychology students in the creation of the toolkit, the project leveraged authentic student perspectives to produce content that was both relevant and relatable. This approach

not only benefitted the end users—156 undergraduate students from various disciplines—but also fostered skill development among the creators themselves, particularly in teamwork, project management, and applied communication strategies. Such dual-impact initiatives reflect the potential of experiential learning to cultivate transferable skills for all parties involved.

The study further reinforces the importance of integrating structured communication training within undergraduate curricula. As employers increasingly emphasize soft skills as essential for career progression, higher education institutions must adopt proactive strategies to ensure graduates are prepared for the realities of diverse and dynamic workplace environments. The combination of theoretical overviews, practical exercises, and real-world scenarios in this toolkit offered a holistic learning experience that participants could immediately connect to future professional contexts. Looking ahead, expanding the toolkit to include multimedia resources, role-play simulations, and sector-specific examples could enhance its scope and impact. Furthermore, implementing longitudinal evaluations would allow educators to assess the sustainability of skill gains and their translation into real-world performance. Overall, this initiative provides a scalable and adaptable model for embedding employability-focused skills training into higher education, supporting students in their journey from the classroom to a successful career.

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