



University of Texas at Austin

HIGHER ED SOLUTIONS

“What I love about Pearson is that I can tell them what I want and they make it happen. I don’t have to know how to do it myself—it just appears and it works. It’s like magic.”

—Adria Battaglia
Assistant Professor

The University of Texas at Austin (UT) is one of the largest public universities in the United States. Founded in 1883, the university has grown from a single building, eight teachers, and 221 students to a 350-acre main campus with 21,000 faculty and staff, 17 colleges and schools, and more than 50,000 students. More than 8,700 bachelor’s degrees are awarded annually in more than 170 fields of study and 100 majors. The university has one of the most diverse student populations in the country and is a national leader in the number of undergraduate degrees awarded to minority students.

Professional Communication Skills is one of UT’s largest undergraduate courses. A freshman-level course, it regularly holds 44 sections of 25 to 30 students each, and is taught by up to 23 graduate student instructors. By offering students the skills they need to be more effective communicators, analytical thinkers, and critical listeners, the course gives students a leg up on the competition no matter what fields they pursue upon graduation.

The course has long been one of the most popular choices among UT freshmen; purchasing its required textbook, however, has not. Consequently, students frequently arrived to class unprepared and unmotivated to engage in class content. Dr. John Daly, Liddell Professor in the College of Communication, sought a way to connect students to course material and convince them that the textbook was relevant—and thereby worthy of their time and financial investment.

Daly turned to his Pearson rep for help. In collaboration with the Pearson Learning Solutions team, they arrived at a solution: a highly customized, original-material textbook and Web-accessible media designed to connect students to course concepts and material through original content that is timely, local, and tailored to their experiences. Daly immediately started work on textbook content; Adria Battaglia, assistant professor, joined him as coauthor in fall 2008 and worked closely with Pearson on the customized online media and Web portal. “Both the custom textbook and the Web portal enable us to keep course material meaningful to students,” she says.

Course content incorporates interviews and video contributions from students, graduate TAs, and faculty, making the portal an evolving, collaborative project. “Students appreciate seeing their own work online, getting advice from faculty they know, and watching demos of UT’s own forensics team,” says Battaglia. “Material is accessible, they can relate to it—and that keeps them using it.”

Most important, UT’s custom solutions are pedagogically sound.

- Textbook content correlates with and is reinforced by the media content. Students are signaled by icons in the textbook that direct them the Web portal for more resources, enabling them to get the most out of both materials while in the context of learning.
- Media assets are proven effective and aligned with course objectives. Customized media is accessible online, where they are housed in a customized Blackboard cartridge. The easy to use and updatable cartridge contains components of Pearson’s MySpeechLab online courseware; assessments for each chapter of the textbook that are aligned to textbook content and written by Battaglia; and hand-picked links to resources for each chapter of the textbook. The cartridge is an integral aspect of the course curriculum and provided to all instructors and TAs.
- Integrated assessment options provide students with more ways to review for exams. Battaglia and the Pearson Learning Solutions team

developed online quizzes that are housed on the Pearson server and can be updated as often as the instructors wish. Because former text questions are used for quiz questions, students know they are learning relevant concepts and reviewing material that will be applied to the standardized final exam.

After piloting the customized course format in summer 2009, UT officially launched the course across 44 sections in fall 2009. Pearson Learning Solutions remains available for both instructor and TA training, and to field questions and resolve any issues students may have with the new system.

“The new format motivates students to invest their time and energy in the class. As an instructor, that makes a huge difference.”

—Adria Battaglia
Assistant Professor

“The most obvious change has been that book sales are through the roof and students are actually reading it—so class time is more productive,” says Battaglia. “If students don’t read the book, class time is wasted on preparation instead of hands-on learning. Students today come to class having read the material, connected it to their world, and are ready to take it further.”

Both students and instructors give the exam review opportunities a thumbs up. “Students have a wealth of materials help familiarize them with important communication concepts before course exams, including sample student speeches, interviews with UT faculty, research and outlining tools, and chapter quizzes,” says Battaglia. “They feel better prepared and more in control of their learning experience. It’s alleviated the blame game students frequently play when they fall behind.”

Battaglia sees improvement in her students’ work, as well. “I’m seeing changes in their speeches,” she says. “As a result of integrating relevant, local examples, the students have connected more to class content and are able to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying structures and concepts.”

The course’s new teaching and learning model has also helped its many TAs become more effective instructors. “Our instructors are more interested and excited since seeing the possibilities that custom media offers,” says Battaglia. “They’ve learned how to incorporate media into their classrooms, weave timely material into their curricula, and connect theories and concepts to real-world skills media. And thanks to Pearson, they’ve also been offered a host of pedagogical workshops.”

Several instructors coauthored sections of the textbook. “The collaboration has been good for the department,” says Battaglia. “There’s unanimous buy-in of the project, and a greater sense of teamwork and unity among the instructors.”

From an institutional standpoint, the custom Professional Communication Skills materials are a winning proposition. “The school is making money, instead of losing it, on book sales,” says Battaglia. “The book and online code sell through 100 percent at the bookstore each semester. The bookstore is delighted and, more important, students aren’t complaining about a book they don’t use.”

Although the initial structure is firmly in place, Battaglia and the other instructors see the project—and their partnership with Pearson Learning Solutions—as ongoing. “We’re committed to keeping all of the course content ‘live,’” says Battaglia. “We plan on updating, fine-tuning, and evolving the online media complement every semester; and the textbook every two years. The project is only going to get better and better.”