

# Conducting Professional Communication Training with Kickstarter

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# Conducting Professional Communication Training with Kickstarter

Kevin Knight

## Abstract

Knight and Candlin (2015) describe (and explore) program development in the International Business Career major (IBC) in the Department of International Communication of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan as a “nexus of practice” (Scollon, 2001). Following Knight and Candlin, a nexus of practice approach with its mediated discourse analytical (MDA) methodology is adopted to investigate an English for Business Career course (EBC 4) in the IBC major. In this paper, the EBC 4 researcher/instructor/creator, Knight, in his role as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), draws upon accounts in his TESOL International Association Blog posts to clarify the various forces shaping the EBC 4 curriculum and his professional communication training with the crowdfunding website Kickstarter.

## 1. Introduction/Background

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan is described on the website of the KUIS English Language Institute (ELI) (<http://kandaeli.com/>) as “a private university dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in international studies, particularly the study of foreign languages.” In connection with the careers pursued by KUIS graduates, Knight and Murphey (in press) write that for “the fiscal years 2012-2014, the majority of KUIS graduates entered the service and media industries (28%) followed by the trading, wholesale, and retail industries (23%), airline, transportation, and logistics (14%),

manufacturing (12%), and the travel and hotel industries (8%).”

The career choices above are reflected in the curriculum of the International Business Career (IBC) major in the Department of International Communication at KUIS. In the IBC major, the students study both business and the English language. Further, in the IBC major, four English for Business Career (EBC) courses were created (and taught) by the author of this paper, who is referred to as the researcher/instructor hereafter. The EBC courses were intended to reflect the stages of a KUIS student’s business career upon graduation; i.e., a student learns business content, business language, and professional communication skills that he/she will need as an employee (EBC 1), manager (EBC 2), president (EBC 3), and entrepreneur (EBC 4).

After the four EBC courses had been established, the researcher/instructor also created and taught a 2-year *seminar in organizational leadership*. The creation and implementation of the curriculum of the leadership seminar was connected with the PhD research of the researcher/instructor (i.e., leadership discourse as the basis and means for leadership development). Further, the leadership seminar was taught in a way that aligned with the content of the four EBC courses because the KUIS students in the leadership seminar also took the EBC courses.

The leadership seminar and two (of the four) EBC courses have been the focus of other publications. (See Knight (2012) for EBC 2, Knight (2011) for EBC 3, and Knight (2014) and Knight and Candlin (2015) for the leadership seminar.) The focus of this paper is on curriculum changes in EBC 4. In the next section of this paper, the approach used to investigate the changes that have occurred in EBC 4 is described.

## **2. Program development in view of Scollon’s Nexus of Practice**

Knight and Candlin (2015) provide an account of the creation and implementation of *online forums* in the KUIS leadership seminar above in terms of Scollon’s (2001) “nexus

of practice.” In this paper, the development of EBC 4 is also viewed as a nexus of practice “to be analysed in terms of Scollon’s three-step discourse analytical methodology- that is, by 1) engaging the nexus of practice; 2) navigating the nexus of practice; and 3) changing the nexus of practice” (Knight and Candlin, 2015, p. 27).

In exploring the changes to EBC 4, the researcher/instructor draws on his accounts of such changes published in the TESOL International Association Blog. TESOL International Association is described in a press release dated 27 July 2015:

Founded in 1966, TESOL International Association is a professional community of educators, researchers, administrators, and students committed to advancing excellence in English language teaching for speakers of other languages worldwide. With more than 13,000 members representing over 150 countries, TESOL fosters the exchange of ideas, research, and peer-to-peer knowledge, and provides expertise, resources, and a powerful voice on issues affecting the profession. Through professional development programs, its international conference, special interest groups, and publications, TESOL engages tens of thousands of professionals to collaborate globally and create a world of opportunity for millions of people of all ages who want to learn English. For more information, please visit <http://www.tesol.org>.

The TESOL Blog is one of four blogs of the TESOL International Association (a.k.a., TESOL). The regular bloggers are selected by TESOL to publish twice a month. The author of this paper has been a regular blogger in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In his TESOL Blog posts, the topics about which he has written include his teaching experiences at KUIS with his IBC students. (See the Author Archives of Knight at <http://blog.tesol.org/author/kknight/>, who has been writing TESOL Blog posts

since 9 March 2012.)

Specific TESOL Blog posts presented in subsequent sections in this paper highlight changes that have occurred in EBC 4. Such TESOL Blog posts record actions in a nexus of practice and become inputs that affect the EBC 4 curriculum design. A nexus of practice is described by Scollon & Scollon (2004, p. 159) as follows:

A nexus of practice is the point at which historical trajectories of people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects come together to enable some action which in itself alters those historical trajectories in some way as those trajectories emanate from this moment of social action.

This paper considers the “social action” in the nexus of practice described above to be the creation and ongoing development of the EBC 4 curriculum. The TESOL Blog posts themselves become an opportunity for the researcher/instructor to reflect upon the curriculum and to consider how the curriculum can be adapted.

The “people, places, discourses, ideas, and objects” (as quoted above) that come together in the nexus of practice can be identified by means of a “nexus analysis.” A nexus analysis raises the researcher’s awareness of the inputs in a nexus of practice and of how the researcher’s activities change the nexus of practice. As Scollon and Scollon (2004, p. 152) write:

The sequencing of tasks begins by engaging the researcher in the key mediated actions that are relevant to the social issue under study, and then moves to navigating and mapping the cycles of discourse, of people, and of mediational means which are at the heart of the significant actions being studied. Although we discuss changing the nexus of [practice] as the third stage, a *nexus analysis*

recognizes throughout the analysis that the processes of change are the results of the activities of the researcher in recording the actions, engaging in discourses with the participants, and constructing new courses of *action*.

Accordingly, in this paper, the changes that are made by the researcher/instructor to the curriculum of EBC 4 are investigated, as is the researcher/instructor's motivation for making such changes.

In conducting a nexus analysis, it is recognized that multiple interactions have occurred, and that the researcher is attempting to clarify these interactions and their relationship to each other. Sarangi & Candlin (2011, p. 36) draw on Sarangi & Candlin (2001) in providing insights into the relevant principles of inquiry:

Such constraints on being open to a range of modalities and to an array of features of potential relevance raise broader issues of “discovery” and “search”; whether we are able to and prepared to notice and identify not only features we are seeking to find instances of, but also whether we remain open to noticing those that are not *a priori* in our research agenda (Sacks, 1984). These three principles may be subsumed under a more general guideline for practice in professional/organisational discourse studies, that of elevating our research gaze beyond the immediacy of the text or the transcript. In other words, the researcher should embody “motivational relevancies” with regard to data analysis and findings – the latter constituting potential uptake.

In view of the above, one of the objectives of this paper is to consider the ongoing development of the EBC 4 curriculum as multiple interactions that may be revealed through the existing data. In conducting such an investigation, it becomes necessary to

look, as stated above, “beyond the immediacy of the text.”

In connection with such inquiry, Knight and Candlin (2015, pp. 38-39) ask three questions (which may also be asked in this paper) in conducting a nexus analysis of ongoing program development:

1. Why is this program being created and conducted in the way that it is?
2. Who are the stakeholders, including the researcher/practitioner, and what are their roles in the creation and implementation of the program?
3. What is the role of “communication” in the creation and implementation of the program?

From the perspective of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), the aim is to see how the curriculum is changed and to provide an account for such changes, from the macro to the micro levels.

For the purpose of identifying the various forces shaping curriculum design, Scollon and Scollon, (2004, pp. 173-175) provide three guiding questions:

1. “How are social power interests produced in this discourse?” (“Critical Discourse Analysis”)
2. “What positions and alignments are participants taking up in relationship to each other, to the discourses in which they are involved, the places in which these discourses occur, and to the mediational means they are using, and the mediated actions which they are taking?” (“Interactional sociolinguistics”)
3. “How are sociocultural or historical thought or cultural patterns in the language and its genres and registers providing a template for the mediated actions of participants in the nexus of practice?” (“Linguistic anthropology”)

The questions of Scollon and Scollon above focus attention on “actions” and “relationships” in a nexus of practice. Such a focus aims to lead to an understanding of “why” the actions in a nexus of practice occur.

In the case of the EBC 4 curriculum, one objective of this paper is to explore “why” changes in the EBC 4 curriculum have occurred; e.g., who or what is driving such changes - the researcher/instructor, the students, the institution, the university administration, and/or society, and to what extent? In the subsequent sections of this paper, the issues raised by these questions are addressed through a description and explanation of the EBC 4 curriculum development followed by an interpretation of the data presented. In the next section of this paper, an account of the changes that have occurred in the EBC 4 curriculum is presented from the researcher/instructor’s perspectives as a researcher and reflective practitioner.

### **3. The transformation of EBC 4 in a Nexus of Practice**

Viewed from a reflective practitioner stance, various changes have occurred in the EBC 4 curriculum. One of the most significant changes has been in the primary focus of the course.

When the semester-long course was first offered, a genre analytical approach was used to prepare the students to create business plans. The significance of genre analysis is identified by Paltridge (2011) in his review of the history of English for specific purposes (ESP):

The origins of ESP lie very much in the field of linguistics where early interest was in the grammatical features of specialized texts such as scientific reports. Following parallel developments in linguistics, ESP researchers then moved their interests beyond the sentence to the discourse level, and focused on



‘rhetorical functions’ (Trimble 1985) such as descriptions, narratives, definitions, exemplification, classification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and generalizations in specific purpose texts. Research has now moved to a further level by looking at linguistic forms and discourse structures within the context of specific texts, or genres.

In EBC 4, the KUIS students were introduced to the parts, language (i.e., “linguistic forms and discourse structures”), and business content in the genre of business plans. For this purpose, the Bplans ([www.bplans.com](http://www.bplans.com)) website, which is promoted as having over 500 sample business plans, was utilized. Although the categories of the sample business plans on the Bplans website differ, ranging from *bar and nightclub* to *wholesale and distributor*, the sample business plans contain similar parts, which facilitates teaching students to write such business plans.

Accordingly, the EBC 4 students’ business plans typically included the following 9 parts of a standard business plan found on the Bplans website:

1. The Executive Summary
2. Company Overview
3. Products and Services
4. Target Market
5. Marketing and Sales Plan
6. Milestones and Metrics
7. Management Team
8. Financial Plan
9. Appendix

These 9 parts of a standard business plan reflect and promote the business plan software

being sold on the Bplans website (i.e., *Business Plan Pro* and the online edition named *Live Plan*). Although the students had access to the software (for a free trial period if so desired), they were not required to purchase it or to use it for the class. Further, the researcher/instructor made the students aware of the apparent sales motivation of Bplans in connection with the standardized format of the sample business plans on the Bplans website.

From the researcher/instructor's perspective, an advantage of the Bplans website was EBC 4 student access to a variety of free and high quality sample business plans that his students could use as reference material when constructing their own business plans. In summary, a primary aim of EBC 4 was to help the students to understand the *parts* and *language* of a business plan.

The utilization of the Bplans website for writing a business plan led to a second course objective: To help the students to understand the *process* of creating a *business*. In order to help the students to understand the steps in creating a business, the Bplans website was also used because of the extensive amount of related information provided on the website. In addition, the students were not only expected to learn the steps in creating a business. They were also required to teach those steps. The Bplans website provided information in a way that allowed students to easily adapt such content into PowerPoint presentations for teaching other students in the class.

In the EBC 4 class, the students were divided into small teams of usually 3 to 5 students. Each team made one or two PowerPoint presentations about creating a business. The content of these presentations came from primarily the Bplans website.

The presentation topics of the EBC 4 student teams included:

1. Personal evaluation
2. Industry analysis
3. The legal aspects

4. The planning process
5. Financing a business
6. Business location
7. Promoting a business
8. Pricing

At the same time that the student teams were making presentations about the process of creating a business, they were also creating business plans of their own.

In connection to creating a business plan, other resources introduced by the researcher/instructor to the EBC 4 students in class included the following websites and the content therein:

1. *Intellectual property rights*: United States Patent and Trademark Office (<http://www.uspto.gov/>), Japan Patent Office (<https://www.jpo.go.jp/>)
2. *Entrepreneurship for young people*: U.S. Small Business Administration (<https://www.sba.gov/content/young-entrepreneurs-series>)
3. *Big Bang – UC Davis Business Plan Competition (2013)* (<http://uctv.tv/shows/Big-Bang-UC-Davis-Business-Plan-Competition-2013-25193>)

The researcher/instructor's choices above were related to his professional and educational experiences. The researcher/instructor had worked for 7 years in the International Affairs division of the Japan Patent Office (JPO), which was one of the “big three” intellectual property offices in the world. (Note: The JPO together with the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) and the European Patent Office (EPO) form the Trilateral Offices.) In addition, the researcher/instructor had obtained his undergraduate degree from the University of California in Davis (i.e., UC Davis).

The UC Davis business plan competition titled Big Bang became a model for the

KUIS students. The Big Bang competition included teams with members in the MBA program at UC Davis. The PowerPoint presentations made by the Big Bang competition finalists were shown to the students in the EBC 4 class. The focus in class was not primarily on the content of the Big Bang business plans, which often involved advanced technology. Instead, the EBC 4 students were asked to replicate the communication styles of the Big Bang competition speakers.

With the introduction of the EBC 4 class requirement for student teams to teach their peers about the process of creating a business plan, there was less time for the student teams to spend on the writing their own business plans. Accordingly, the primary focus of the class was shifting from the writing of a business plan to the delivery of PowerPoint presentations about business ideas. This shift to a focus on public speaking and persuasion in EBC 4 was especially apparent with the introduction of a Kickstarter activity in class.

The EBC 4 researcher/instructor's initial use of Kickstarter is recorded in a TESOL International Association Blog post. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1. Excerpt of TESOL Blog post of Knight (2013)**

In the business creation course [EBC 4], I have found the Kickstarter website to be very effective in getting students to focus on the creation and promotion of a business idea.

On its website, [Kickstarter](#) is described as follows:

“Kickstarter is a new way to fund creative projects. We’re a home for everything from films, games, and music to art, design, and technology. Kickstarter is full of projects, big and small, that are brought to life through the direct support of people like you.

Since our launch in 2009, 4.9 million people have pledged \$807 million, funding

49,000 creative projects. Thousands of creative projects are raising funds on Kickstarter right now.”

....

In class, I am experimenting with having students make promotional videos such as those on Kickstarter as well as more traditional presentations about their business ideas. Another benefit of Kickstarter is that it can be used for leadership training. Getting “buy in” (or stakeholder support) for a project proposal or business plan is essential for a leader, and Kickstarter is perfect for conducting training in this area as well.

In the TESOL Blog post above, the *more traditional presentations* refer to those EBC 4 student presentations based on the Bplans website. In effect, the EBC 4 students were being asked to make two different presentations about their business ideas: the first presentation was related to crowdfunding (i.e., the Kickstarter video) and the second presentation was related to a business plan competition (i.e., a Bplans-based presentation). The researcher/instructor considered both types of presentations to be helpful in preparing his students for their international business careers in the future.

One Kickstarter project in particular became an important model for the EBC 4 students. In Table 2, Knight (2015a) provides details about how a Kickstarter project was used as an example of professional communication in the EBC 4 class.

**Table 2. Excerpt of TESOL Blog post of Knight (2015a)**

This is not the first time that I have written about Kickstarter. (See my [blog post](#) in October 2013.) The reason that I bring up Kickstarter again is because of the recent success of [CHIP](#), which is promoted as the world’s first \$9 computer!

The CHIP project creators (Next Thing Co.) were seeking pledges (from backers) for

a total of \$50,000 within a specified time limit. If you were following the project as backers made their pledges, you know that the target amount (which must be met) of \$50,000 was achieved well before the time limit had expired. In fact, as the [Kickstarter website](#) states: **39,560 backers pledged \$2,071,927 to help bring this project to life.**

It was fun to watch the number of backers and the dollar amount change in class. During a 90-minute class, for example, we saw an increase of a few thousand dollars. In my classes, we also discussed why this project was so successful. (We did this while money was still being pledged.) We realized that the project had gained a significant amount of publicity as the amount of money pledged became impressively high. In class, a student might comment how he had seen information about the CHIP project on the TV news. I had first become aware of the success of CHIP when I read a technology-related blog post.

In my classes, we also looked at the CHIP video through the lens of [Aristotle's powers of persuasion](#): ethos, logos, pathos. (To see the 1 minute 9 second CHIP video, click on this [link](#), and scroll down the page until you see the *About this project* heading. Click on the “play” button.) Examining the video closely provided some insights into why the project had been so successful.

- **Pathos (The power of emotion)** – When I asked the students in my classes how they felt after they had watched the video, one student responded that she had felt “joy.” If you watch the video closely, you will notice that there are surprises everywhere. The video starts off with a drum roll and a magic act. When you are expecting the gloved hand to remove the cover and reveal the \$9 computer, something completely unexpected happens. The world changes. We can’t fall asleep. We’re trying to figure out what is going on, and that’s just the start. Count how many times you are surprised by what happens in the video. For example, I

expected the drum roll to come from another source. I expected the drummer to speak, but surprise, surprise! And it goes on and on. We are entertained and feel excited to participate in a “world’s first” project! We only need to pledge \$9 to make the dream come true!

- **Ethos (The power of credibility)** – Can these guys really make a \$9 computer? Well, they are working in a garage. There are a lot of tools. There is someone working on a computer. (Hmm. It kind of reminds us of Steve Jobs, and their name has the word *Next* in it.....See other subliminal influences like the number “9” on the drum and...) They show us the product. They demonstrate how it works. In addition, if you scroll down on the website under the video, you can see what looks like a series of PowerPoint slides and notes about CHIP. Top that off with a production schedule, pictures of the team members, and an FAQ. Finally, you can click on information about the CHIP creator. These guys have professional experience. This is for real!
- **Logos ([The power of logic])** – Okay. These guys seem to be successful. Why do they need the money? At the end of the video, they become “honest” with us. They need our help because they need to buy components in large quantities to make an inexpensive computer. Ah, so that’s why they need \$50,000. That makes sense.

What is the connection between the EBC 4 students’ Kickstarter videos and their final (Bplans-related) business plan presentations? From the TESOL blog posts above (in Tables 1 and 2), *persuasive presentation skills* would seem to be the answer. However, such persuasive presentation skills are only one part of the answer. The key is to understand the researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of leadership and its impact on program development. Accordingly, in the next section of this paper, the researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of leadership is explored.

#### **4. The researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of leadership**

Knight and Candlin (2015, p. 36) comment on the leadership conceptualization of the researcher/instructor of KUIS leadership seminars. (The researcher/instructor of those leadership seminars is also the researcher/instructor of the EBC 4 course.) His leadership conceptualization as it appears in an illustration can be simply stated as follows: “Leadership is making real a vision in collaboration of others.” A note attached to that illustration states that the researcher/instructor’s “personal conceptualization of leadership” is “based on semi-structured interviews with 20 leaders in the public, private, and academic sectors, the creation of multiple online forums on leadership, and the experience of high profile leadership roles in a study of the discourse of leadership.”

In a TESOL Blog post in Table 3, Knight (2013b) further clarifies the EBC 4 researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of leadership.

**Table 3. Excerpt of TESOL Blog post of Knight (2013b)**

<p>As a researcher of professional communication, I recognize that many different conceptualizations of leadership exist. For me personally, however, I like to view leadership as a communication process consisting of two parts: 1) communicating to create a vision and 2) communicating to achieve a vision. Leadership is considered by many to be an “influence relationship,” and in my personal conceptualization of leadership, leadership would involve influencing others through communication associated with the goals of part 1 and part 2.</p>
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The researcher/instructor’s conceptualization of leadership in Table 3 led to a transformation in his teaching of leadership. In addition, he began to focus in the EBC 4 class on the persuasive aspects of communicating business ideas with the aim of getting



stakeholder support (or “buy in”) in order to make the vision real (or as stated in Table 2: “bring [a] project to life”).

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Knight and Candlin (2015, p. 47) conclude that:

...a nexus of practice approach provides for an ongoing review of and reflection on a program in progress. As such, it increases the [researcher/] instructor’s awareness of the need for change. This enhanced awareness results in timely decision making, thereby making the [researcher/] instructor a better program developer and leader.

Adopting a nexus of practice approach caused the researcher/instructor of EBC 4 to *see* and *take* opportunities for curriculum change in EBC 4. For example, in his leadership seminar, the researcher/instructor required his students to do “leadership projects.” In that leadership seminar, the students worked in teams to create the visions to be achieved and then took action to achieve those visions. In contrast, the researcher/instructor began to view the EBC 4 crowdfunding and business plan presentations as being limited to the “selling” of business ideas, as those ideas were not made into reality. A focus on such “selling” of business ideas in EBC 4 led to the utilization of *Shark Tank*. (See Table 4.)

**Table 4. Excerpt of TESOL Blog post of Knight (2015b)**

<p>As we move forward with the ESP project leader profiles, I have become increasingly interested in how ESP project leaders get the “buy in” (i.e., support) of stakeholders for ESP projects. In this connection, I have found the TV program <i>Shark Tank</i> to be relevant. In this TESOL Blog post, I share how I have used specific episodes of <i>Shark</i></p>
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*Tank* to teach my students how to more effectively promote their business ideas in English. What is *Shark Tank*? The show is described on its [website](#) as follows:

“*Shark Tank*, the critically-acclaimed reality show that has reinvigorated entrepreneurship in America, has also become a culturally defining series. The recipient of the 2014 Emmy Award for Outstanding Structured Reality Program, the business-themed show has returned to the ABC Television Network for its sixth season. The Sharks — tough, self-made, multi-millionaire and billionaire tycoons — continue their search to invest in the best businesses and products that America has to offer. The Sharks will once again give people from all walks of life the chance to chase the American dream, and potentially secure business deals that could make them millionaires.”

An analysis of the TESOL Blog post (in Table 4) indicates that when the EBC 4 students are acting as Sharks, they are taking on the *new role* of “business investors” (instead of business founders). In other words, the EBC 4 students are becoming the stakeholders that provide entrepreneurs with support in the form of funding (and possibly guidance as consultants). Furthermore, from a leadership communication perspective, the students in their roles as Sharks learn to critique the business ideas of others, and thereby learn what is necessary for an effective persuasive presentation of their own business ideas.

As the TESOL Blog posts (in Tables 1 to 4) have also shown, the business culture of the U.S. has influenced the EBC 4 class. The researcher/instructor’s leadership conceptualization, which has been informing the EBC 4 course, is based on the instructor’s research of primarily U.S. leaders’ conceptualizations of leadership. In addition, Kickstarter, the B-plans website, and *Shark Tank* are based in the U.S. Accordingly, the professional communication training in the EBC 4 course incorporates

U.S. business and leadership discourse.

In conclusion, the U.S. based conceptualization of leadership of the EBC 4 instructor appears in the following response of former President Clinton when asked, in the 14 April 2014 edition of *Fortune* magazine (p. 66), “What does leadership mean to you?”

Leadership means bringing people together in pursuit of a common cause, developing a plan to achieve it, and staying with it until the goal is achieved. If the leader holds a public or private position with other defined responsibilities, leadership also requires the ability to carry out those tasks and to respond to unforeseen problems and opportunities when they arise. It is helpful to be able to clearly articulate a vision of where you want to go, develop a realistic strategy to get there, and attract talented committed people with a wide variety of knowledge, perspectives, and skills to do what needs to be done. In the modern world, I believe lasting positive results are more likely to occur when leaders practice inclusion and cooperation rather than authoritarian unilateralism. Even those who lead the way don't have all the answers.

In view of the leadership conceptualization above, the EBC 4 students are learning to clearly and persuasively articulate their visions as leaders in order to persuade stakeholders to help the students to achieve those visions. In this way, the EBC 4 students are preparing themselves to become leaders in their future international careers.

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