

Thoughts on Professional Practice and Education

Article 11: Common Practical Deficiencies in Student Education

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This is the eleventh article I have prepared in the series of articles offering thoughts on professional practice and education. In this article I am going to explain what I believe to be common deficiencies in student education from the perspective of the professional practitioner.

I offer this perspective from teaching surveying for over thirty years in four different universities and practicing surveying for over fifty years.

Of course, I will acknowledge from the outset that individual students often suffer from one or more deficiencies in their knowledge despite the best efforts of the faculty. Also, there are programs that have unique deficiencies brought about by faculty deficiencies or program deficiencies. This article will focus on deficiencies found across the many survey programs found in the United States. I should also state there are individual programs that don't suffer from the deficiencies I will discuss because of the efforts of faculty in the program. I will exclude a discussion on one common deficiency that I have already written about – business and management knowledge.

The most common deficiency that will be the focus of this article is communication skills. Communication skills involve e-mails, reports, correspondence, public speaking, and CAD. Within each one of the methods of communication are numerous facets that could be explored.

I must acknowledge before continuing that this is the eleventh article I have written on practice and education. For those that have read my earlier articles, articles on my web site, or even read my fictional books, I am clearly not the source to expound on writing perfection. With my *mea culpa* on record, I continue.

The form of communication that a student has the most experience is often the area the student is most deficient. I am referring to e-mail and digital messages. It is discouraging to receive an e-mail from a senior or graduate that begins a formal e-mail with the salutation of 'hey' or fails to include an adequate subject line that a business needs to triage e-mails.

The typical student's experience with digital communication seems to be composed of continuous repetition of bad habits. The student and recent graduate have failed to shift their focus from e-mails, tweets, and twitters composing electronic messages that seems to be the center of their life to a business e-mail read by the employer or client. As an employee they should realize that continuous quips during working hours from friends and family are a frustrating distraction that is inappropriate to continue as an employee during working hours, in a business environment.

Unfortunately, surveying programs have not been able to improve the communication skills of students using university resources. Many universities lack courses that teach business communications. All universities abound in courses on poetry, fictional writing, grant writing,

persuasive writing, or technical writing. The last course is more appropriate to an engineer reporting engineering test results. The technical writing course has little relevancy to a surveyor reporting on a boundary location. Writing courses taught by English faculty that have no experience in business and in many cases have never worked outside of a university environment, perhaps majored in literature, poetry, medieval writing, or such in graduate school, cannot be expected to teach the necessary writing and communication skills needed by surveying graduates practicing surveying.

The next deficiency of college graduates involving communicating is public speaking. Surveyors that have practiced for years know the value of public speaking. Public speaking courses offer a good start but fall short of educating the student on the public speaking a surveyor most often encounters. I need not elaborate what many of you reading this article experience when speaking at planning board meetings filled with a crowd opposed to a client's development, testifying as an expert witness, or coordinating a business meeting involving a multi-discipline project.

CAD is another deficiency often found in surveying and engineering students that has surprised me. Diagraming, platting, and plans should be one form of communication that surveying students excel yet I often must resort to first threatening then later removing numerous points for a student's repeated failure to use a diagram that would immensely clarify their communications.

Having given my opinion, I now offer advice by suggesting surveying faculty take it upon themselves to instruct students on communication deficiencies that continue to exist after the student has taken numerous writing and speech courses. Request letters of transmittals with assignments. CAD should be taught sooner rather than later in the surveying program. I believe six credits of CAD to be a minimum for a surveying student. Require diagrams with every assignment that would benefit by inserting a diagram into an assignment response.

I would and probably should end this article at this point but for one more item I must mention. In reviewing the article, I see that I have failed to create much fodder for controversy. To write an article without generating some controversy is unimaginable. Allow me to do so now.

I have noticed one concerted university effort at teaching communication to students that I must admit I roll my eyes in mystification. There are so many avenues of guidance that can be given to improve communication that are ignored. So, I must ask, why is it necessary to encourage, on a formal sign-off, what pronoun the writer wishes to associate with themselves when it is otherwise obvious. For example, if a person signs off as "Nancy" why would I ever begin to think I should address 'Nancy' using some other pronoun than as a she or her? If a 'Harry' wishes to be addressed as a she/her pronoun, I almost get the point. Perhaps I am not sensitive enough to evolving social norms. I do know that if I could change social norms I would focus on tv newscasters that show the picture of a person clearly dressed in a Marine uniform and then in a display of gross incompetence and insensitivity to thousands of Marines refer to that person as a soldier.

† Other books and articles by Knud can be found at <https://umaine.edu/svt/faculty/hermansen-articles/>