Fall 9-1-2018

COMX 511.01: Survey of Interpersonal Communication

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COMX 511  
Survey of Interpersonal Communication  
Fall, 2018  
LA 302 (or as arranged)  
Tuesday: 6-8:50pm  
CRN # 74613

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Phone: (406) 243-4951  
Office Hours: Wednesday 1-2 and by appointment

Course Overview

The purpose of this course is to provide graduate students with a comprehensive look at the study of interpersonal communication. We will learn about the major current trends, perspectives, methodologies, contexts, and theories in research on interpersonal interaction, and use scholarship in the area to generate new ideas for research, or novel applications that could help improve the quality of communication for others. By the time you finish this course, you should be able to:

(1) Hold a conversation with one or more interpersonal communication scholars about the major areas of research in interpersonal communication.
(2) Identify major questions or implications raised in a body of research on a given topic, and argue for your position on those questions or implications.
(3) Generate your own scholarly questions about interpersonal communication, and develop answers those questions using scholarly evidence.
(4) Be able to write a scholarly paper on a topic related to interpersonal communication, drawing from past research to support your ideas and arguments.

Required readings:


Other readings available in Moodle
Course Assignments

Individuals learn most efficiently, effectively, and permanently when they remain active in their relationship with their course content. Thus, your coursework will involve a combination of participation and several regularly-submitted assignments.

Discussion questions 75 points

Graduate seminars are small, discussion-based gatherings, in which ideas are generated and analyzed by all members of the group. The professor typically facilitates and guides the conversation, but does not normally lecture for the entire time. Your participation is therefore essential to the success of the course.

For every meeting, that is, before noon of each Tuesday, you will send an email to me and your classmates that has two parts. The first part of your email should be a 1-paragraph statement in which propose some thought-provoking, controversial, interesting, or otherwise discussion-generating observation, reaction to, or evaluation you made about the readings. The second aspect should be one or two questions aimed at generating discussion about the issue you raised. The best questions will be:

- Open-ended, allowing for multiple perspectives and responses
- Clear and focused on one general or specific issue
- Encouraging participants to respond with informed opinions and arguments – not mere personal experiences.
- Oriented toward integrating previous readings or knowledge gained in other seminars.
- Open to a variety of answers – with no single right or wrong being objectively identifiable in the article.
- Potentially aimed at the implicit assumptions of the authors of a research report
- Potentially extendable beyond the article itself, such as regarding various implications of the findings.

On one (and only one) occasion that you must miss a class (this should be an extremely rare and deeply necessary event in a graduate seminar), you may still earn the points by submitting your discussion questions prior to the class you will miss. Any missed seminars beyond that one event will result in point deductions.

Position statements 50 points

To help promote your ability to identify and dialogue about important issues in the study of interpersonal communication, you will write two position statements over the course of the semester. You will present your position statement to the class each time you write one. We will use these, along with the discussion questions, to drive conversation in the seminar. You will not be required to write discussion questions on days that you write a position statement.

Each position statement should be brief – about 1 or two pages is fine. Your goal in this paper is twofold. First, you want to identify and reflect upon some major issue being raised by the readings for that week. By issue, I mean some controversy, unanswered question, a way of applying the findings/ideas, or development of a new direction in research. Other issues can exist
and be raised. Explain what the issue is, and help us understand how all of the readings touch upon that issue in some way. Use examples from the readings to make your point. Second, you want to take a position on the issue. In this way, you can provide an answer to the question, argue for what the next step of research should be, propose an application of the findings, or so on. **The important part is that you make a claim reflecting your position, and support your claim with evidence.** Use examples, research findings, anecdotes, or other sources of evidence to make your argument.

You will sign up for weeks that you will submit your position statements in the first week of the semester.

**Seminar Project**

**Total point value: 150 points**

Ultimately, this seminar should bolster your professional development. Because you might have a variety of professional goals in your graduate program, you have three different projects with which you can complete this seminar. You will present your project in the final exam week (week 16).

**Option 1: Publishable Literature Review**

A number of journals exist in Communication that exclusively publish literature reviews. *Review of Communication* and *Communication Yearbook* are two examples. The purpose of this type of publication is to highlight a controversy, problem, or movement in communication research, and more specifically, in the study of communication in personal relationships.

- The hallmark of a literature review is the synthesis of ideas. To borrow a well-used metaphor in our discipline, think of yourself as a party host who has invited several scholars to a social gathering. You have a purpose in inviting these specific people (i.e., the research problem they all address). Your job as a host (i.e., the writer) is to introduce the guests to one another, and help identify what it is that they have in common (your thesis). Obviously, not all the guests will have everything in common, so you will probably end up having several groups talking with each other (i.e., your subtopics throughout). The point is that no single study should be discussed separately from the others at length – rather, all the studies should be integrated and synthesized into one cohesive narrative about the research on the specific issue you are addressing.

- In this review, you can take an historical, theoretical, philosophical, qualitative, quantitative, or rhetorical approach to the problem, but by the end of the review, you should have a coherent offering for the discipline. This offering could be a set of hypotheses/predictions about the issue, an answer to an original question that you posed for the literature, a set of questions that should be addressed in future research, a solution to the controversy or problem, or an informed commentary about the historic (and future) development of a particular movement in the discipline.

- The overall review should be deeply comprehensive, and, according to the aims and scope of *Review of Communication*, “build theory, advance our understanding of a method, extend or challenge a current paradigm, bridge a divide, clarify a term or concept, or demonstrate a pragmatic function.”
Normally, reviews of this type are approximately 30 pages, but no more than 9000 words. Examples of published reviews can be found in *Communication Yearbook* (in the library), or in *Review of Communication* (an electronic journal – also accessible through the library).

At the end of the semester, you’ll present the main problem and conclusions of your review to the class in about a 12-minute presentation, just as you would for an academic conference.

**Option 2: White paper**

A white paper is a scholarly, informed, and authoritative report that addresses some kind of practical problem and provides a brief set of research-based solutions to it. These are often distributed as resources by consultants and scholarly institutes, so it could be used as part of a professional portfolio when you leave your MA program. A white paper usually has three parts: An executive summary, a description of the problem and its relevance to society or the specific audience you might be addressing (e.g., government agencies, policy makers, nonprofit organization board members, etc.), and a set of specific, actionable guidelines or recommendations that could be enacted to solve the problem. The entire paper should be written in a way that could be easily understood by a lay audience, typically at about a 6th grade reading level. To analyze a passage and see how you’re doing, you can use this website: https://datayze.com/readability-analyzer.php

**Executive Summary**

The executive summary is normally a one page overview of the entire paper. This is usually written last, after the ideas in the white paper have been fully developed and articulated.

**The Problem**

The description of the problem is at least six, but no more than 10 pages of text (i.e., substantive content), which describes and explains the theory and research findings around the problem in a way that a lay audience could easily understand. Beyond the mere description of the theory and research findings around the problem, however, you should also discuss what the practical implications are the theory and research findings. That is, you should be describing and interpreting the theory and research for your audience, explaining to them along the way why this information is relevant to them.

**Recommendations**

The third section of the paper, your recommendations, should be comprised of a concise set of actionable recommendations that your audience could take. These recommendations should have two aspects about them, other than being specific and actionable.

1. They must be focused on communication. That is, they should be communicative actions that people could take.

2. They must be connected to the research you discussed in the description of the problem. In other words, they should make perfect sense to your audience in light of the research and theory that you reviewed in the description of the problem. It would be problematic,
for example, for the recommendations to seem surprising and unrelated to much of what you described in the research and theory around the problem.

The recommendations section might be 2-5 pages of substantive content, depending on how many recommendations you have, and the content necessary to explain why you are making them, and why they are effective.

End your paper with a conclusion that summarizes your main points, and provides your readers with the main point you want your readers to know as they finish reading your report.

APA format should be used to cite your in-text and bibliographic sources. However, you can be more creative with the format of the title page and the text. It would be normal to make the cover visually appealing, and to integrate images, tables, charts, or call-outs in the text to highlight and increase the visual appeal of the content. However, these extraneous components should only complement the content – never replace it. I will not be counting them as substantive content when I assess the overall report, so please do not proceed believing that integrating visual content will somehow turn your paper into an amazing 15-page white paper that is going to receive an outstanding evaluation. The page numbers here are provided as a guide – and I always assess the quality of the content rather than the quantity of it.

Option 3: Research Proposal/Full Project
This assignment is designed to promote your entrance into the communication discipline, by providing the foundation for what could be a study you conduct, and present at an academic conference. The paper will take place in four parts: the significance statement, the review of literature, the method proposal, and the final submission.

You can write a proposal on your own, or you can work with another person to collect/analyze data and write a full report.

The significance statement
The purpose of this paper is convince your readers that your topic is important and worthy of research. While it might be tempting to say that some issue is important to investigate and discuss because nobody has done so before, few scholars will find that argument convincing. Instead, you should try to frame the importance of knowledge on a particular issue in terms of its: (a) potential to help people, (b) ability to fill “gaps” in current knowledge about the issue, (c) contribution to the field overall, or (d) ability to advance established theory.

Begin your paper with a strong opening statement (about one paragraph) that indicates what it is that you are interested in examining, and specifies your position on the topic. Proceed then to argue for the importance of your study. Provide evidence of the prevalence or effects of the problem. Continue to argue how or why addressing that problem is relevant to the state of current research or theory. Once you’ve made your points, provide a single clear statement indicating the intent of your study. Your purpose or intent should be obviously linked to the significance of the problem. In other words, upon finishing reading this paper, I should be convinced that this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed, and the need for your study
should be clear. Underline or italicize your purpose statement (e.g., “The purpose of this project is to...”). Usually, significance statements are about a page and a half.

**The Review of Literature**

The purpose of the literature review is to discuss previous research on your topic in such a way that your readers: (a) understand the history of research on this topic, (b) are familiar with the major issues surrounding research on the topic, and (c) are convinced that new research should be conducted. You can include in your review actual research reports, theoretical proposals or critiques, and/or other literature reviews (Communication Yearbook is dedicated to publishing reviews of research and is thus a good source to consult for ideas and examples of excellent literature reviews). The essence of the literature review is synthesis and integration of ideas. That is, the literature should be reviewed in such a way that the connections between the articles and ideas are obvious to the reader. Some organizing patterns used in literature reviews include: chronological order (good to use when tracing the development of research on the topic), general to specific order (good to use when using theory to drive specific predictions about a specific issue), comparison/contrast (good to use when illustrating divergent perspectives on a topic), methodological focus (good to use if you will use a novel method to investigate your topic), and topical order (most common organization pattern – good to use when building up to a specific prediction or research question). See me for more information on any of these organization patterns or for further questions about writing a literature review. I also have a couple of chapters on reading/writing quantitative and qualitative research reports. See me if you would like to copy them.

Regardless of the organization pattern you choose, your review should logically lead up to a specific question (i.e., a research question) and/or prediction (i.e., a hypothesis) that could be examined using a specific research method. Hence, the third paper is a proposal of a study that you might conduct in the near future.

**Method proposal**

Although the predominance of research on personal relationships is conducted using quantitative methods, qualitative research is becoming increasingly common. You are free to propose using any type of research method you want, provided that you have good reason to support your choice. My philosophy is that your choice should be based on how you will best be able to fulfill your purpose stated in your significance statement and on which method will best help you answer your question – not on subjective thoughts and evaluations such as “I hate statistics,” or “I am a quantitative/qualitative person/researcher.”

That said, your method section should have roughly four sub-sections: (a) an introduction describing the general methodological approach and why that approach was selected, (b) who will participate in the study and how those participants will be collected (Labeled “Participants”), (c) the instruments that will be used (labeled “Instruments” or “Measures”), where you describe the questionnaires or interview schedule that you will use if you are using them (Note: If you are proposing a qualitative study, this is the section in which you would describe your “position” and role that you propose taking in the field [i.e., what relationships will you share with the cultural members? Will you be a complete observer, complete participant, or participant-observer?]), and finally, (d) a description of the procedures (labeled
“Procedures”) that you will use to answer your research question, test your hypothesis, and ultimately accomplish your stated goal(s). End your method section with a summary of how your proposed method will help you accomplish your stated purpose.

While this is only a proposal (you won’t actually be conducting the study), my hope is that you will be able to turn this in to a study within the next year (perhaps in an independent study with me, Alan, or Christina, or for use as your thesis). Doing so would allow you to present your paper at a professional conference, which looks good on your resume if you are interested in a professional position (it shows your ability to organize, manage, and present major projects), and is necessary if you are interested in applying to Ph.D. programs and teaching.

**Final Submission**
Revise your previous submissions and combine them into one paper. Bring them to class and present your proposal to the class.

**Due dates**
Each of these assignments is dividable into four components. Although the white paper and research proposal are naturally dividable, the literature review can also be. However, you should decide how you would like to divide up the three main parts of the review, if that is your chosen project.

- Part 1: Due 9/18
- Part 2: Due 10/23
- Part 3: Due 11/13
- Part 4 (Final submission, integrating previous feedback): Due 12/4
- Presentation: Due during the final exam time.

**On Civility and Professionalism**
I try to develop a collective, civil, and scholarly community in my courses. A number of actions help promote this goal, but I generally believe this means coming to each class prepared to make thoughtful, appropriate, responsive, and supportive contributions to the discussion. During class, it means attending to others’ comments, and avoiding electronic distractions. Professionalism includes civility, but extends to a separate set of actions local to the current context. Professionals submit timely work, and are ethical in the work they do. Ethical work includes being honest in one’s efforts, and giving credit to others’ ideas and efforts. Of course, the student conduct code applies to all activities and assignments in this class.

**Readings**

**Week 1: Course overview**

**Week 2: History, Trends, and Methods of studying in the study of Interpersonal Communication**


**Week 3: The nature of interpersonal communication** (read these articles in the order presented)


**Week 4: Interpersonal Communication and Health**


Week 5: Emotions


Week 6: Nonverbal communication


Week 7: Technology and Social Media


Week 8: Social cognition


Week 9: Relationship maintenance


**Week 10: Social support**


**Week 11: Uncertainty reduction/ information management**


Week 12: Language and Communication Accommodation, and Discourse


Week 13: Self Disclosure/privacy management


Week 14: Persuasion and Interpersonal Influence


**Week 15: Conflict and communication skills**


**Week 16: Seminar project presentations – Tuesday, 12/11/18, 6pm**