

# SPCOM 324: Small Group Communication

Faculty of Arts, Department of Drama and Speech Communication, Fall 2013  
Tuesday & Thursday: 10:30-12:20, ML-117

## Professor Robert Danisch

**Office Hours:** Thursday 1:30-3:00 and Friday 9:00-10:00

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## Course Description:

The purpose of this course is for the people that find themselves in this room every Tuesday and Thursday between 10:30 and 12:20 for the next twelve weeks to become a group and not just a random collection of individuals. Therefore, we will approach small group communication in an experimental, exploratory, and experiential manner in order to test and analyze how we can and do get along with others in this kind of collective setting. Along the way we will review theory and research on small group communication and relate these writings to student experiences in small groups. Topics covered include group formation, leadership, conflict, problem solving, groupthink, decision-making, democratic group behavior, and interpersonal growth in groups. The course's primary objective is to teach you to think critically about how you and others behave in groups, thereby improving the experiences you, and your fellow group mates, have throughout your life. After completing the course, you should have an integrated knowledge of theories of small group communication, and you should better understand the relationship between theorizing about small groups and how you manage your own participation in them. In other words, I hope that students become reflective practitioners of small group communication, capable of moving into any number of different small group encounters and working successfully and effectively within such circumstances.

## Course Objectives:

- Promote students' ability to think critically, clearly and analytically. This means understanding the ideas and concepts raised throughout the course, their origins, strengths, weaknesses, and their relationship to larger themes in this class, in your education, and in your view of the world.
- Improve students' abilities to participate effectively in group settings.
- Improve students' abilities to read and listen critically, to respond reflectively and reasonably to others, and to distinguish successful and unsuccessful arguments.
- To gain a conceptual and practical understanding of the background, elements, processes, and contexts of small group communication from psychological and sociological perspectives.
- To increase your understanding of how perception, attitudes and beliefs, and social norms are active in shaping the sending and reception of messages in small group settings.
- To better understand the relationship of small group communication, personal development and democratic deliberation.

## Course Policies and Procedures:

- *In the Classroom* – Oddly enough, this is a course in small group communication *and* we happen to be a small group communicating. This creates a fascinating laboratory within which to talk and analyze what’s happening. For the most part, we are going to sit together and talk. Sometimes, I will conduct a “debriefing exercise” in which we take a step back and analyze some aspect of our own interaction and I ask you to explain the sources of your miscommunication, misunderstanding, or success. Like it or not, this is your class. I’ll intervene as I see fit, and I am part of your class. Our goal is to become a group, not a collection of random individuals. Our other goal is to become a cohesive group capable of effective decision-making and generating personal growth and development for the members of the group – maybe that will happen and maybe it won’t, we shall see. I prefer that you don’t bring pens or write anything down while we are in class together. We are here to talk and listen, face to face – instruments of recording can get in the way of that. All of your behavior while in the classroom will also impact the group, please be aware of this and act accordingly. We will decide, collectively as a group, if there will be any additional rules that guide our interactions in the classroom.
- *Attendance* – Your presence in class is mandatory. You should be aware that the best way to do well in this course is to show up to every class, prepared and attentive. Inevitably, at the end of the semester, students who missed classes do poorly, while students who show up consistently do well. I do not post lecture notes on the Internet, nor do I respond to emails that say “what did we talk about in class on Thursday.” We cover lots of material in class and for that reason it is critical that you attend in order to do well. Attendance also means refraining from playing with your cell phone, reading the newspaper, surfing the internet, using other electronic devices or doing other coursework while in the classroom. If I notice you engaged in some activity that does not pertain to what is happening in the class, I will ask you to leave. This course is designed for courteous, motivated students who attend each class, do all the reading, and ask questions when they don’t understand something. If you miss class, you are responsible for getting materials we covered from a classmate. Students who fail to meet these basic and reasonable expectations can assume that their performance on assignments will suffer. Students who miss an excessive number of classes can expect to lose points from their final mark. There is presently no formal attendance policy regarding the loss of points or any other punitive consequence for students missing classes. However, the group may, in the course of deliberation at any point in the semester, formulate it’s own attendance policy, which I would enforce should the group decide.
- *Academic Integrity* – I expect that the work you complete for this course will be your own, which is to say that cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Any written assignment that borrows from other sources without giving proper credit or that is plagiarized in whole or in part from another source (including other student’s work) is grounds for an “F” on the assignment, or depending on the severity of the crime, is grounds for an “F” in the course.

## **University Policies on Academic Integrity:**

**Academic Integrity:** In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

**Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about “rules” for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy71.htm>

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy70.htm>

**Appeals:** A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, <http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infosec/Policies/policy72.htm>

### **Academic Integrity website (Arts):**

[http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic\\_responsibility.html](http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html)

**Academic Integrity Office (University):** <http://uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/>

### **Accommodation for Students with Disabilities:**

The Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD), located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the OPD

## **Required Texts and Readings:**

I like books - I like buying them, I like reading them, I like keeping them on my bookshelf, I like talking to people about them. Reading makes you smarter. You should read a lot. I wish I could assign a book a week, but that doesn't seem to be the culture anymore for undergraduate students. During the first class I will ask all of you to write down your email addresses, and afterwards I will construct a class list. What I'm going to do is email the class, each week, a set of

pdfs of the following week's readings (or potentially a url link if there is an electronic resource). You should print the readings out and read them each week or you should use some electronic device to read them off a screen. I expect students to access all readings regardless of their location. I will ensure that the readings are available at least one week prior to the date listed on the course schedule as the date on which we would hypothetically discuss those readings. Your success in this class depends on completing the assigned readings. The material from the readings will appear on the final exam and ought to appear within the written work that you do. Because this course is experimental in design I cannot guarantee that we will discuss all of the readings as a class. Instead, my assumption is that the readings work as background information for what happens in class. The readings are designed more as resources rather than conversation-instigators.

\*\*\*Hint: If any super ambitious and engaged student wants to learn more or think more deeply about the kind of experiment/experience that we are engaged in, then I encourage someone to go and find *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* by Donald Schon and read Chapter 10 ("A Reflective Practicum in Counseling Skills"). Schon taught at M.I.T. and this chapter represents his interpretation of a seminar he used to teach very much like what we are up to. It's great stuff, and I am deeply committed to a perspective on education very similar to Schon's.

## Assignments:

- 1) **Record of Analysis** – For five of the weeks during the semester, students will be asked to write a record of analysis of the previous week's discussion. This assignment requires that students do the following: First, describe in some detail a significant piece of interaction during the past week's session. Second, justify why that piece of interaction is significant. Third, discuss the interaction in terms of the conceptual vocabulary from class or from the readings. Fourth, generalize about small group communication based on the analysis. These papers will be typed, written, and 1-2 pages single-spaced. These assignments will each be graded on a scale of 0-20, for a total of 100 possible points. In total, these short papers are worth 25% of your final grade. There are no due dates. You are to hand in five separate papers for any of the five weeks of the term starting in week #3.
- 2) **Final Exam** – At the end of the semester, during the exam period, we will have a three-hour final exam. This exam will include short answer questions AND live, interactive, small group exercises – your performance in these exercises will be evaluated. The date and time of the exam will be announced by the final exams' office, and the exam will be graded on a scale of 0-100 and worth 25% of your final grade.
- 3) **Smaller Small Group Project** – Students will be randomly assigned a 4-5 member group toward the beginning of the semester. That group will have several tasks throughout the semester. One of those tasks will be to participate in an in-class group challenge on November 19<sup>th</sup>. The other parts of the smaller small group project will be decided organically by the smaller small group itself. More

information on this assignment will be discussed in class once we have assigned the smaller small groups. Collectively, students participation in their smaller small group will be evaluated on a scale of 0-100 and will be worth 25% of the final grade.

- 4) **Research Synopsis** – As individuals, each of you will be asked to choose a particular problem, issue, kind of group, or concept within the field of small group communication. You will then write a 5-7 page paper, that includes footnotes and references, that summarizes and analyzes current research into this problem, concept, etc. I'm not asking you to say anything original in this paper. I'm asking that you go to the library and read some stuff and figure out what people are saying about a particular problem or issue and then come back and report on that. This should be an easy assignment, but it often isn't. This assignment will be graded on a scale of 0-100 and will be worth 25% of your final grade and is due in class on October 10th.

## Grades:

- *How are Grades Calculated?* - Each assignment will be graded on a scale of 0-100 points. I will then average the four scores out of 100 to come up with your grade for the semester. I do not like giving students numerical marks and I think it is an inferior system of grading for humanities work. In my mind, I often think in terms of letter grades. So that you know, your number out of 100 points translates into the following letter grades:

90-100 = A+	73-76 = B	60-62 = C-	0-50 = F
85-89 = A	70-72 = B-	57-59 = D+	
80-84 = A-	67-69 = C+	53-56 = D	
77-79 = B+	63-66 = C	50-52 = D-	

- *What do the Grades Mean?* – Loosely translated the letter grades you earn mean the following: an A+ is truly outstanding and spectacular work that goes well above and beyond the normal expectations of an assignment and demonstrates a complete mastery of the subject matter. An A or an A- is excellent and exceptional work. A grade in the B range is good to very good work that demonstrates a solid grasp of the material. A grade in the C range is average work that demonstrates a satisfactory but incomplete grasp of the course material. A grade in the D range is unsatisfactory work of poor quality. And an F is failing work that does not meet the minimum requirements for the course. Because grades in the A range are exceptional and grades in the C range are average, A grades are rare and difficult to obtain.
- *Extensions* – There are no extensions for any assignment. Assignments are announced well in advance of due dates. If you know in advance that you cannot make a due date for an assignment, please discuss it with me beforehand. Requests for extensions after a due date has passed will only be granted in exceptional and unavoidable circumstances and must include (a) one typed, double-spaced page explaining the reason for missing the deadline, and (b) relevant documentation such as an official doctor's note. The written request for an extension must be in my hands within one week after the scheduled due date. I am under no obligation to accept late assignments; assignments that are accepted may suffer a significant penalty (5 points for each day late).

- *Negotiations and Missed Assignments* - I do not haggle with students over grades, nor do I listen to declarations about why a student deserves an extra point here or there. You and I will not be negotiating your grade for the class – you will be earning a grade based on criteria that are explicitly stated in class. In addition, after the final grades are posted for the semester I will not re-mark or re-consider any grade from earlier in the semester. If you do not understand why you got a particular grade or why you lost points on a given assignment, you should come to my office hours or make an appointment to see me and I will explain your grade. If you do not participate in, or hand in, the final exam or the smaller small group projects you will receive an F for the course.

## Course Schedule

### **Week #1 – September 10<sup>th</sup> & September 12<sup>th</sup> –**

Introduction to Course – What is Small Group Communication?

### **Week #2 –September 17<sup>th</sup> & September 19<sup>th</sup> –**

The Basics: Theories, Goals, and the Group in Society

Readings:

Marshall Scott Poole, “Group Communication Theory,” from *The Handbook of Group Communication Theory & Research*, edited by Lawrence Frey (Sage Publications, 1999): 37-70.

Gerard Egan, *Face to Face: The Small Group Experience and Interpersonal Growth* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1973): 19-31.

John Gastil, *The Group in Society* (Sage Publications, 2010): 3-24.

### **Week #3 – September 24<sup>th</sup> & September 26<sup>th</sup> –**

Self-Disclosure, Active Support, Learning and Growing

Readings:

Gerard Egan, *Face to Face: The Small Group Experience and Interpersonal Growth* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1973): 40-105.

### **Week #4 – October 1<sup>st</sup> & October 3<sup>rd</sup> –**

Social Identities, Group Bonds, and Cooperation

Readings:

John Gastil, *The Group in Society* (Sage Publications, 2010): 167-216.

Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (Yale University Press, 2012): 3-39.

### **Week #5 – October 8<sup>th</sup> & October 10<sup>th</sup> –**

Language and Team Talk

Readings:

Anne Donnellon, *Team Talk: The Power of Language in Team Dynamics* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996): 25-45 and 195-213.

### **Week #6 – October 15<sup>th</sup> & October 17<sup>th</sup> –**

Nonverbal Communication in Groups

Readings:

Barbara Pease and Allan Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (Bantam, 2006): TBD.

### **Week #7 – October 22<sup>nd</sup> & October 24<sup>th</sup> –**

Making Decisions and Solving Problems

Readings:

John Gastil, *The Group in Society* (Sage Publications, 2010): 81-138.

Steven Beebe and John Masterson, *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* (Allyn & Bacon, 2012): 232-259.

Jonah Lehrer, “Groupthink: The Science of the Team Effort,” from *The New Yorker* (January 30, 2012): 22-27.

### **Week #8 – October 29<sup>th</sup> & October 31<sup>st</sup> –**

Democracy in Small Groups

Readings:

John Gastil, *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision Making & Communication* (New Society Publishers, 1993): 15-48.

Nathan Schneider, “Some Assembly Required: Witnessing the Birth of Occupy Wall Street,” from *Harper’s Magazine* (February, 2012): 45-54.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfTf2db6YfI>

**Week #9 – November 5<sup>th</sup> & November 7<sup>th</sup> –**

Groups as Drama, Ritual, and Game

Readings:

Erving Goffmann, *The Goffman Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1997): 95-146.

**Week #10 – November 12<sup>th</sup> & November 14<sup>th</sup> –**

Conflict, Confrontation, Leadership

Readings:

Gerard Egan, *Face to Face: The Small Group Experience and Interpersonal Growth* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1973): 32-39 and 106-153.

**Week #11 – November 19<sup>th</sup> –**

Smaller Small Group Challenge in class on November 19<sup>th</sup>.

No class on November 21<sup>st</sup>, instructor away at a conference.

**Week #12 – November 26<sup>th</sup> & November 28<sup>th</sup> -**

Knowledge, Communication, and the Group in Society

No New Reading.