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COMM 240.01: Communication in Small Groups

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COMM 240

Spring, 2013 – LA 302

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 8:10 – 9:30

Required Reading:

Beebe, S.A., & Masterson, J. T.
(2012). *Communicating in small groups: Principles and practices* (10th Ed.). Boston, MA:
Pearson/ Allyn and Bacon.

Additional course readings are posted on the course Moodle site. Go to www.umtonline.edu and look for the COMM 240 page.

Course Description:

We will learn about small group communication theory via readings, lectures, class discussions, and examination. The opportunity to integrate theory and practice will occur while working in small groups for the semester, along with writing group application papers which respond to theory and your experiences with your group.

With that in mind, we will make extensive use of naturalistic group interaction as a learning tool. It is my hope that we will develop a strong community, discuss a number of different topics, and have fun in the process.

FYI

All coursework must be completed in order to receive a passing grade in this course!

NO EXTRA CREDIT!



COMM 240 Instructor Information

Betsy Wackernagel Bach, Ph.D., Professor

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Office Hours: Tuesdays, 10:00 – 11:30 am; Wednesdays, 12:30 – 2:00 pm, and by appointment



The Special Nature of Group Work

It is essential that you become *actively involved* in class and in the group that you will be assigned the first week of class. If you are here only to attend lectures about groups—this is not the class for you. While you will be given ample class time to work in your groups, you will also spend time meeting in your groups outside of class. The amount of time you will spend outside of class depends upon your group and the final project you undertake. Please remember that time spent outside of class does not alone determine the grade earned.

The nature of group work dictates that it is sometimes stressful. Discussing points of conflict and stress with your group members may be difficult, however, it is a rare *opportunity* to provide insight for each other into the nature of group process. While the focus is on group issues, you will find yourself examining your own personal communication style. Your willingness to self-reflect will help both you and your group understand group process.

Given the issues discussed above, when it comes to your grading of others' participation on group assignments, it will be done anonymously. At the end of the semester, you will evaluate the participation of everyone in your group, including yourself. These evaluations will be used to assist the instructor in determining participation grades.

Course Objectives

We are collaborative by nature and many of the tasks we much accomplish in life are done in small groups. Information learned in this course will allow you to participate more effectively in a number of group settings. As such, students should be able to do the following upon completion of this course:

1. Articulate the difference between groups and teams along with the advantages and disadvantages of working in small groups.
2. Compare and contrast the various theories of small group communication along with their practical application to small group behavior;
3. Discuss the reasons people engage in groups;
4. Describe the concepts of group norms, trust, collaboration, and culture;
5. Demonstrate defensive and supportive group communication;
6. Articulate the ways in which groups manage conflict;
7. Compare and contrast various decision-making and problem-solving strategies for small groups;
8. Discuss how creativity in groups and teams might be enhanced;
9. Compare and contrast small group leadership styles;
10. Examine one's own participation in groups and to experiment with and improve upon those behaviors;
11. Provide observational and evaluative skills in the small group behavior of others.

FYI

Don't forget to review samples of "A" papers to see what I expect. They are filed in the COMM Office, LA 301.



Course Schedule and Due Dates

For a complete listing of, and direct links to all course readings, go to the course Moodle site

January

1/29 and 1/31 – Course Introduction (Chapter 1)

February

2/05 and 2/07 – Designing Theoretical Models (Chapter 2)

2/12 and 2/14 – Group Formation (Chapter 3; Moodle Readings)

2/19 - EXAM #1 (Chapters 1-3)
2/21; Preparing to Collaborate (Chapter 4)

2/26 and 2/28 – NO CLASS

March

3/05 and 3/07 – Relating to Others in Groups and Teams (Chapter 5; Moodle Readings); Tips for writing papers

3/12 and 3/14 - Group Climate (Chapter 6); Permission to Observe DUE!!

3/19 and 3/21 – Paper #1 Due! Managing Conflict (Chapter 8; Moodle Readings)

3/26 and 3/28 – Leadership (Chapters 7, 9); Permission to Observe Due! A note on surveys

April

4/02 and 4/04 – NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK

Instructional Policies

The following policies govern this course:

1. Active student participation (in the form of contribution to discussion and involvement in class activities) is instrumental for the success of this course, and is **MANDATORY**. Moreover, although I am not anyone's Mother, I expect you to contact me in advance if, for some reason, you must miss a class. Missed classes will be reflected in your participation grade, as 10 points will be deducted from your grade for each day absent (after three).
2. You are expected to read assigned material prior to class and be prepared to discuss the readings. Expect to be called on to answer questions about what you've read.
3. All assigned projects must be completed in order for a student to receive passing grade for the course.
4. The University and COMM department regulations on plagiarism and all other unethical behavior will be strictly enforced.

Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated!!

Anyone caught plagiarizing will be given a grade of "F" for the course and will be reported to the Department Chair and to the Dean of Students. All students must be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php (see p. 6).

Attendance Policy:

Because this course involves in class group work to apply the theories and practices studied, you can't "get the notes" if you miss class. Therefore attendance is mandatory!

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Course Schedule and Due Dates (continued from page 3)

Remember to check Moodle for pdfs of course readings!

April (continued)

4/09 and 4/11 – Making Decisions and Solving Problems (Chapter 10); PERT Project Chart Due

4/16 and 4/18 – EXAM #1 (Chapters 4,5,6 and 8); Using Problem Solving Techniques (Chapter 11);

4/23 and 4/25 – Using Problem Solving Techniques (Chapter 11)

4/30 and 5/02 - Enhancing Creativity (Chapter 12)

May

5/07 and 5/10 – Presentations on Project #2

5/16 – EXAM WEEK – Presentations on Project #2
(8:00 – 10:00am)

Instructional Policies

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5. Assignments are to be typed and proofread. Messy, poorly spelled assignments communicate that you don't care about the reader—who in this case will also be the grader of the assignmentme!
6. Exams must be taken on the assigned date. IF you must travel because of sports, exams will be given prior to your departure.
7. I like to joke around and have fun during class. Please don't mistake my sense of humor for a lack of standards. I expect you to do your best work.

Course Requirements

Exam #1	75 points	(15%)
Exam #2	75 points	(15%)
Paper #1	75 points	(15%)
Paper #2	150 points	(30%)
Paper #2 Presentation	50 points	(10%)
Participation	75 points	(15%)

TOTAL 500 points

What Grades Mean

A = Excellence in all assignments, highly motivated, innovative ideas, engaged in all aspects of the class

B = Above average in all work

C = Completion of all projects, satisfactory class participation

D = Under prepared for class, little participation

F = Incomplete work, poor participation, more than three unexcused absences.



Paper# 1: Profile of Group Communication Style

Rationale

The assignment of this project assumes that there is value in self-reflection by taking stock of the communication behavior of members in your group, and focusing on your role in creating group behavior, when appropriate. By looking at the behavior of your own group, you will get both practice in and insight to observe the communication behavior of those in other groups.

Procedures

You will keep a log of the participation of your group members in at least 5 group sessions. You should focus upon your own behavior as well as its impact on the entire group. You are then to write a paper where you *observe and report* what is happening in your group, and respond to each of the five questions below, by discussing what you have observed in light of the theories that you've read about and discussed in class.

Task

You are to complete a 5-7-page paper analyzing communication behavior in your small group, and attach your observation notes at the end of your paper. Answer the following questions:

1. Identify the task, social and individual roles in your group, focusing specifically on your roles. What behaviors have been exhibited that lead you to make this claim? What do people say and do? How do your roles work in relation to the roles that others in your group have assumed?
2. Identify two norms in your group (realizing that there may be an overlap in these two areas). Are these implicit or explicit norms? Provide examples of how these norms are communicated and enforced. Again, what do people say and do?
3. Identify the power exhibited in your group and explain what kinds of power members demonstrate. Explain, using specific examples of the communication behavior(s) you observed.
4. What do you perceive to be your group's strengths and weaknesses?
5. At this point, what might you do to become a more effective and competent communicator in your group?

Note

When I ask you to tie in ideas from class readings and discussion to support your claims and to provide specific examples of behavior, I expect to see prose such as this:

"Beebe and Masterson describe task roles as those that accomplish a group's task (p. 98). In our group, I notice that I often play the role of energizer. For example, when we were discussing which group to observe for our project, several of my group members started talking about what they did over the weekend, discussed the upcoming exam, and were not working on the task at hand. I became the energizer saying, "Hey, let's work on deciding which group to observe. After that we can discuss what everyone did over the weekend!"

FYI

PowerPoint slides for each lecture can be downloaded from the course Moodle site.

Sample copies of "A" papers are available for your review in the COMM Department office, LA 301

Paper #2: Group Observation Project

Rationale

The assignment of this project assumes that there is value in applying the theories and concepts learned in this class to naturalistic observation of small group communication. There are 3 parts to this project.

Part #1 - Preparation

You and your team members are to observe and analyze the processes of an on-going task group in a real-world context, preferably a non-profit group. The goal of this project is to allow you to see real groups in action by gathering both observational and survey data to understand communication in small groups. Please do the following:

1. Find a group. This is often the most difficult part of the project. It is important to begin early and to get the group in place by mid-term so that you can observe *at least* six meetings. The best groups to observe are those that meet on a weekly basis and consist of no more than 8-10 members.
2. Obtain my approval to observe the group. You may choose a group from a Greek organization, a religious group, citizen's action committee, local board of directors, university task force, etc. Any task oriented group involved in decision-making and/or problem solving is acceptable.
3. Secure permission from the group leader to observe the group. Please get this permission in writing. Permissions are due to me by _____. The most complete permissions include informing the group a) the purpose of your observations, b) asking to collect survey data from group members, and c) informing the group that you will provide them with an "Executive Summary" of their group process as thanks for allowing you to observe. Please write this out formally and ask your contact person to sign this. Make a copy for both yourselves and the contact person.
4. Determine how you will observe the group. It is best if no more than three of you observe at any given meeting. *You must spend at least 4 hours per person in observation.*
5. Select four survey instruments to use with the group to enhance your observations. Use either the surveys posted on the course Moodle site, the surveys listed at the end of each chapter of the text, or any one of the surveys used in class. Select one survey to assess each of the following:
 - a. interaction of group members;
 - b. leadership;
 - c. group effectiveness/productivity;
 - d. group decision making and problem solving.
6. Prepare a short report (the Executive Summary) for the group where you identify and discuss the results of the surveys and your observations and the suggestions you have for improving the group's process. We will discuss how to write an Executive Summary during class.
7. Write your group a thank you note upon completion of your project and include it with the Executive Summary that you send to the group.

Part #2 - Write the Paper

Each group is to prepare a 15-20 page paper in which you provide the following information:

1. *A brief history of the group.* What is the group's purpose and charge as a decision-making group? How did you come to observe them? Identify the group members and their organizational (not their small group) roles (chair, treasurer, etc.). A simple chart works best to convey this information.

Paper #2: Group Observation Project

2. *The procedures used.* How did you observe the group? In dyads? Threes? Where did you sit in relation to the group? How often did you observe and over what period of time did you observe? How many total hours did you spend in observation? What did you look for, etc.?
3. *The surveys used.* What four survey instruments did you use for your analysis? Why did you select the surveys you did?
4. *Results.* Report the results of your observations and survey data for each of the four areas that you surveyed. Tabulate the data from each survey and report what you found.
5. *Interpret the survey results.* Use both your observations and survey results to discuss the group's communication in each of the four areas. For example, if you used the T-P Leadership Questionnaire, explain what you learned from the data in light of the small group leadership theories discussed in Chapter 9. If you used the Interaction Diagram in chapter 6, interpret that you found as it relates to the climate fostered by group interaction, etc.
6. *Interpret your observation results.* Based upon your observations, what task, maintenance and individual roles did you observe? How would you characterize the group climate? Who has power and what kind of power do they have?
6. *Recommendations.* Provide recommendations for improving communication to the group based upon your observations and the survey data. Focus here on small group practice. (For example, discussing how your data and observations fit within the Nine Core Small Group Competencies found in Chapter 1 might provide a good frame for your recommendations, although this is only one suggestion).
7. *Appendices.* Please include copies of your written permission, survey instruments, data summaries, thank you note, Executive Summary, and your group's PERT task diagram in an Appendix.

Step #3 - Class Presentation

You are also required to make a presentation to the class about what you observed. The best presentations are those that cover all of the above points, and are formally presented using PowerPoint. Make sure that you do the following in your presentation:

1. make sure that every person in your group is part of the presentation and dress as if you are giving a formal presentation;
2. talk for 20-30 minutes;
3. introduce all group members and provide an overview of what you will be doing;
4. discuss the points outlined above (procedures, surveys used, etc.);
4. end your presentation with a discussion of what you learned about small group communication while doing this group project.

