CAS 892 - Group Communication
Spring, 2011 – Syllabus

Professor: Gwen M. Wittenbaum, Ph.D.
Office Location: 559 Communication Arts Building
Office Phone: 353-8120
Email: gwittenb@msu.edu
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:15 - 3:15 p.m., and by appt.

Class Meets: Tuesday, 7:00-9:50 p.m. in room 173 COM.

Readings

Required readings are available on Angel (angel.msu.edu)

Course Description

Groups are a fundamental component of human life. We live in groups called families. We play with groups of people called friends. And, most organizations rely on groups to perform work tasks. Therefore, to understand group dynamics is to understand a variety of human experiences. An essential component of group life is communication. In fact, "groups are best regarded as a phenomenon that emerges from communication" (Frey, 1994). When people speak with each other, a group often is formed. Communication processes are relevant to everything that groups do, such as making decisions, generating ideas, leading members, and bonding with each other. Thus, by studying groups, we inherently study dynamics shaped by communication.

This course does not attempt a comprehensive coverage of the group communication literature. Rather, it will focus on contemporary areas of study in group communication. With organizations relying so heavily on the team concept, the area of group communication has received more research interest in the past decade. Three journals are devoted exclusively to group processes: Small Group Research, Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, and Group Dynamics. These journals (especially Small Group Research) reflect the interdisciplinary nature of small group research. Researchers who study group communication come from many fields, such as communication, social and organizational psychology, and management. As a result, the articles selected for the reading list come from various disciplines. However, in keeping with the quantitative focus of MSU's communication department, the readings are biased toward quantitative rather than qualitative methodologies.
The following topics will be covered:

- What is the status of small group research in psychology and communication?
- What are the various approaches to studying and analyzing group communication?
- How do individual differences (e.g., personality, gender, race) affect group dynamics?
- How does member closeness and friendship affect group task performance?
- How do members influence one another when making collective decisions?
- What kind of information do members share with each other when reaching decisions?
- Which communication factors affect leadership emergence and effectiveness in groups?
- When are groups most creative?
- How does computer-mediated communication affect group process and performance?
- When and why do organizational teams fail?
- Which interventions can be implemented to improve group communication and performance?

**Course Objectives**

1. To foster the understanding, critique, analysis, and integration of theory and research related to small group communication.
2. To encourage the application of group communication research in order to explain and understand everyday group situations.
3. To practice and develop skills related to collaborative group work.

**Grading**

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<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class Participation/Preparation</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Papers (4)</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Case Analysis</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics Analysis</td>
<td>20</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<td>186 - 200</td>
<td>93 - 100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>172 - 185</td>
<td>86 - 92.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>156 - 171</td>
<td>78 - 85.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>140 - 155</td>
<td>70 - 77.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>120 - 139</td>
<td>60 - 69.5%</td>
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**Class Participation/Preparation**

Students are expected to 1) read the assigned articles before class, 2) come to each class prepared to discuss the reading assignments, and 3) actively participate in the class (e.g., respond to questions and comments posed by others, ask questions about the readings). Participating in class does not just mean talking. Good class participation involves coming to class on time with 2-3 questions about the readings to share with the class, volunteering answers to questions that are insightful and provide contrasts and integration, actively listening to others’ contributions to discussion, and moving the discussion along toward a shared understanding. Comments about personal experiences can be helpful in discussion as long as a connection is made between the experience and the assigned readings. Class participation is worth a maximum of 40 points.

**Critical Papers**

Students are required to write four (4) critical papers. Students may choose which weeks to write the papers with the recommendation that at least two be written before Spring Break. Each paper should be a short (around 5-6 double-spaced, typed pages) critique, analysis, and/or integration of the readings for a particular week. The papers should not be mere summaries of the readings. Rather, they should reflect critically on the specified readings, integrating them with each other and past readings from the course. Critical papers should comment on the importance of the research and what it implies about small groups. Personal opinions or positions taken in critical papers should be supported with logical and compelling arguments, often obtained from the empirical literature. Excellent papers hang together around a theme or position and are well written and organized. Each critical paper is worth a maximum of 20 points.

**Group Case Analysis**

Students will choose a 3-person group in which to work on the group case analysis. Students will read the case: *Henry Tam and the MGI Team*. The case describes a team that is struggling. Your goal is to apply the course material to the case to 1) explain the problems and dynamics that the team is experiencing and 2) suggest interventions or changes to the team and its dynamics that will help to improve its functioning and performance. All aspects of the written case analysis should be grounded in the empirical literature rather than personal experience. Papers should be approximately 20-25 double-spaced, typed pages. The group case analysis is worth a maximum of 60 points and is due in class on April 19 – the day that we will discuss the case in class. No late papers will be accepted. All group members will receive the same group score on the paper (exceptions made based on group member evaluations). Full information regarding the group case analysis will be provided later in the semester.
**Group Dynamics Analysis**

At the end of the semester, students will write a paper analyzing the group dynamics within their group that worked on the case analysis. Use the course concepts, theories, and research to understand and evaluate the effectiveness and communication in your group. This assignment is to be completed individually without consulting fellow group members. Papers should be approximately 5-6 double-spaced, typed pages. Papers will be evaluated in terms of insight and ability to apply course concepts to your personal group experience. The group dynamics analysis is due in the final class on **April 26**. No late papers will be accepted. Full information regarding the group dynamics analysis will be provided later in the semester.

**Policy**

In general, late work will not be accepted. If circumstances should arise that cause you to turn in an assignment late then it is your responsibility to contact the instructor and make the request before the assignment due date. Acceptance of the request will remain at the discretion of the instructor.

Plagiarism is a serious offense. With the exception of group case analysis, all written work that you submit in this class must be your own, completed independently without the aid of past or present students. Each student is responsible for being familiar with the behaviors that Michigan State University considers to be academically dishonest (see General Student Regulation 1.00 in *Spartan Life* and the homepage of the MSU ombudsman for definitions and policies on cheating and plagiarism). Any student engaging in academic dishonesty will receive, at minimum, zero points on the assignment and may receive a “0.0” final grade per the instructor’s discretion.
Week 1 (Jan. 11): Overview of the course


Williams, K. D. (2010). Dyads can be groups (and often are). Small Group Research, 41, 268-274.

Week 2 (Jan. 18): Introduction to Group Communication


Week 3 (Jan. 25): Methods of Studying Groups


Wittenbaum, G. M. (in press). Running laboratory experiments with groups. In A. Hollingshead & M. S. Poole (Eds.), Methods for Studying Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives.


Week 4 (Feb. 1):  Group Composition and Individual Differences


Week 5 (Feb. 8):  The Relational Side of Groups


Week 6 (Feb. 15):  Group Decision-Making Exercises

Read two cases for in-class exercises (to be handed out in class):

Carter Racing
The Case of the Fallen Businessman
Week 7 (Feb. 22): Group Decision-Making and Influence


Week 8 (March. 1): Collective Information Sharing


Week 9 (March 7 - 11):  SPRING BREAK

Week 10 (March 15):  Leadership in Groups


Week 11 (March 22):  Creativity in Groups


Week 12 (March 29): Groups, Technology, and Time


Week 13 (April 5): Teams at Work and Play


Week 14 (April 12): Group Interventions


Week 15 (April 19): Case analysis


* Group Case Analysis due in class

Week 16 (April 26): The Romance of Teams


* Group Dynamics Analysis due in class