

COMM 3000-001: Talking About Hard (Difficult) Topics

Fall 2010

M, W: 1:25-2:45 ~ OSH 138

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Office Hours: M 12:00 – 1:00 & W 2:45-3:30, or by appointment

Course Description and Objectives:

Talking about Difficult Topics is designed to be an upper-division course with two primary objectives.

1. To research what are difficult topics to talk about in our contemporary society and the communication practices often associated and missing in these conversations.
2. To practice talking about these topics in ways that will allow us to strengthen our communication skills and repertoires.

In order to research what are the difficult topics to talk about in our society, we will begin by analyzing what makes talking about a topic difficult (or more difficult than others). For example, we may consider difficult topics, such as: political correctness, identity politics, secularism, morality, equality, or social welfare. We will consider how difficult topics are present in our shared culture. We will look for examples in various forms of media, and we will likely start very close to home: the University of Utah campus, our classrooms, and our communities.

Identifying what topics are difficult to talk about, however, is really only a minor part of this course. We will be spending a significant time studying, observing, and reflecting on the communication used in this talk at its most micro level. We will be looking for common communication strategies and behaviors used in conversations about difficult topics; and we will question what may have been missing. For example, we may be considering the ways in which these topics are introduced and consider common reactions. We may be looking for similar phrasing and paying attention to the nonverbal responses that are frequently used. We will become intensely curious about what may have happened if different things were said or done.

In order to engage in this research, we, as a class, will have to talk about these topics. To gain more knowledge and increase our conversational skills, we will read contemporary and historical research (both in and out of the field of communication). Doing so will allow us to better understand the multiple contexts in which this talk has and is occurring. Simultaneously, our research will also help us to gain a firmer grasp on the common rhetorical tools that have been and are frequently used when these difficult topics have been and are discussed.

Through in-class discussions, we will practice talking about topics that oftentimes we have limited public opportunities to discuss. This will likely be hard for many of us. However, through analyzing our own discussions in rigorous reflection exercises, we will be building our knowledge about communication strategies and our own communication repertoires in ways that will help us to become stronger communicators in difficult conversations.

University of Utah Policies

American Disabilities Act: The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in this class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Olpin Union Building, 801.581.5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations.

Drop/Withdrawal Policy: The University's drop/withdrawal policy is available on the University's website and from the Registrar's Office. Briefly, you may drop a course during the first ten calendar days of the semester without tuition charges and withdraw (with a "W") during the first nine weeks. After that, withdrawal is possible only "in cases of compelling non-academic emergencies" through petition to the dean of your college.

Academic (Dis)Honesty: The *Student Code* spells out specific rights of students in the classroom (<http://www.admin.utah.edu/ppmanual/8/8-10.html>). The code specifies proscribed conduct, including cheating on exams, collusion, and plagiarism. *Plagiarism* is submitting someone else's work as your own, quoting others without given credit, falsifying sources, etc. Academic misconduct in any form is taken very seriously in this course and a grade of "E" will be given to any student who commits any of the outlined cases of academic misconduct spelled out in the student code.

Curriculum Accommodations: Curriculum accommodations take two forms: *schedule accommodations* and *content accommodations*. I make schedule accommodations only for those who have a conflict with religious/spiritual observances, University-sanctioned activities, and personal or medical-related emergencies. Documentation must be provided, and when possible in advance, of the conflict. This course is designed so that other absences will impact your grade.

I will not provide content accommodations for this course. Course material has been carefully selected to meet the pedagogical needs of this course. All readings, visuals, movie clips, and other texts are necessary in fulfilling the course objectives. Some media may have received a rating of "R" from the MPAA, the articles, images, and music can be frank and mature. You are responsible for thoroughly reviewing the syllabus and readings and speaking with me as your instructor as soon as possible to determine if this is a course you wish to take. The University's Accommodation Policy can be found at: <http://www.admin.utah.edu/facdev/accommodations-policy.pdf>

Maintain and Update Your Email Address: Each student is required to update and maintain a current email address on the university Campus Information System (CIS). This will allow me to send class or individual emails through CIS regarding assignments, cancelled classes, changes in schedule or syllabus, and other notices of importance. To update or add your current email address, go to the CIS login page (<http://gate.acs.utah.edu>), sign on with your uNID and password, and click on "Change Email" in the "Update Student Profile" box.

Course Policies

Assignment Due Dates: I have a general policy concerning assignment due dates: *Assignments are due at the beginning of the class.* I will accept and evaluate late work; however, once evaluated I will deduct 10% from the grade for each day (24-hour period) that the work is late. Exceptions to the late-work policy will be made only in extreme cases, and then only with documentation. If you are going to miss a due date for a written assignment or an exam, my advice is to arrange to turn in the paper or take the exam early.

Grade Appeals: If you feel that you have been graded arbitrarily or capriciously – in other words, your grade does not reflect the quality of your work – you may submit a grade appeal within one week of the receipt of your graded work. Grade appeals must be in writing and provide a well-reasoned argument, with support drawn from the course concepts and linked to your graded work. I will determine whether your argument is persuasive and a change of grade is justified.

Class Climate: I believe that we come together in a classroom to engage in the enterprise of learning. Learning is often a violent act – although rarely discussed as such. Learning requires that we all risk, change, and make mistakes. If we already know everything before entering the classroom, then there is very little reason to be in school. Because risk and failure and change are part of the learning process, it is very difficult to create a classroom climate devoted to learning that feels nice and comfortable. A classroom, however, can be a space devoted to encouraging others to share their ideas and experiences; its members can work together to cultivate a respectful and open space whether or not they agree with everything that is being said and shared; learning can be a priority when we all come prepared having finished the assignments and when each of us has taken the necessary time to consider what and how we will contribute.

We will all experience times when we are learning that we feel frustrated, defensive, angry or afraid, I invite you to reflect about what is happening in these moments for you, to think about why you are having the reaction that you are and why others may not be reacting the same way, to listen to each other's stories and experiences, and challenge yourself to hear and validate each other's truths. When you consider that someone else's experiences or truths –that may be drastically different than yours – may have some validity that does not negate or in anyway deny your truth; however, it does provide you an opportunity deal with the complexities of life - as complicated and challenging as they may be.

Course Requirements, Due Dates, & Grade Distribution:

Required Texts:

Readings available on e-reserve through the Marriott Library.

Reaction/Reflection Opportunities: (150 points)

Throughout the course both in and out of class, you will be given opportunities to react and reflect about what you are learning in this class. Each one of these assignments will be worth 10 – 20 points. There will be 16 reactions/reflection assignment opportunities throughout the course. You will be expected to complete at least 12 of these.

No make-up reaction/reflection assignments will be offered; however, the way that I have structured this assignment, you will be able to miss 4 opportunities before your grade is impacted.

Forced Choices Assignment: (25 points)

On August 30, 2010, we will be doing an in-class activity called "Forced Choices." This activity is designed to give us an opportunity to begin talking about difficult topics. More importantly, you will observe communication practices when difficult topics are introduced in a classroom. After this activity, you will write a reflection (2 pages) about the communication practices you observed during this activity.

More information about this assignment will be available closer to the due date.

Elevator Assignment: (75 points)

This assignment will begin our exploration of qualitative communication research in this course. The assignment has two primary sections. In the first, you will individually conduct participant-observation research, write field notes (25 points), and a researcher reaction paper (25 points). In the second, you will work in in-class groups to share and analyze your observations and write a short group report of your findings, including individual reflections on the research process (25).

More detailed information about this assignment will forthcoming during the class.

Dialogue Facilitation & Reflection: (75 points)

In teams of four, you will facilitate a 20-minute classroom discussion on a difficult topic. Your team will be required to find a short 1-3 page reading about the topic and have it available for your classmates to read at least one-week in advance. As a group, you will be graded on the facilitation of your reading (25 points). Individually, you will write a reaction to your group's chosen reading and a reflection of your group's preparation to facilitate and facilitation process (50 points)

More detailed information about this assignment will forthcoming during the class.

Research Project: (150 points)

For the final project in this class, you will be using the skills that you have acquired in this class to conduct a communication research project about a difficult topic to discuss. Since research is conducted in various stages, this project will have a number of parts. You will have an opportunity to receive feedback on each of the stages of research that you conduct.

- *Picking a site and writing up first set of field notes (15 points)*
- *Analyzing of field notes (20 points)*
- *Reflecting on being a researcher (15 points)*
- *Final Paper - putting it all together (125 points)*

More detailed information about this assignment will forthcoming during the class.

In-Class Final (75 points)

The final for this class will be held December 15 from 1:00 – 3:00.

Grades

A	550-511 (>93%)	B-	455-440 (>80%)	D+	384-374 (>68%)
A-	510-495 (>90%)	C+	439-429 (>78%)	D	373-346 (>63%)
B+	494-484 (>88%)	C	428-401 (>73%)	D-	345-330 (>60%)
B	483-456 (>83%)	C-	400-385 (>70%)	E	329-0 (<59%)

Course Schedule

Aug 23	Welcome Introduction to Course and Expectations	Review Syllabus
Aug 25	Discuss: Chapter 1: <i>Igniting the Fire of Moral Conversation</i> – Nash, et al. (pp. 3-34) (reading will be handed out in class)	
Aug 30	Forced Choices (in-class activity)	
Sep 1	Discuss: <i>Introduction to Qualitative Communication Research</i> – Lindlof & Taylor (pp. 1-28) (reading will be handed out in class) Introduce: Elevator Assignment	Due: Force Choices Reflection
Sep 6	LABOR DAY – NO CLASS	
Sep 8	Discuss: <i>Promoting a Spirit of Pluralism on College Campuses</i> – Nash, et al. (pp. 35-61). (reading will be handed out in class)	
Sep 13	Discuss: <i>Introduction: The Problem, Simply & Chapter 1: How Biology Refutes Our Racial Myth</i> – Graves (pp. xxv-18) (reading available on e-reserve)	
	*** Spike Lee on Campus ~ September 14	
Sep 15	Discuss: <i>Complexion</i> – Richard Rodriguez (pp. 114-117) (reading available on e-reserve)	Due: Elevator Field Notes
Sep 20	Discuss: <i>Introduction: Class Matters</i> – hooks (pp. 1-9) (reading available on e-reserve)	
Sep 22	Discuss: <i>Ashlea and Gillian</i> - Sacks (pp. 11-36) (reading available on e-reserve) Introduce: Facilitation Assignment	Due: Researcher Reaction
Sep 27	Discuss: <i>“Night to His Day” The Social Construction of Gender</i> – Lorber (pp. 203-211) (reading available on e-reserve)	
Sep 29	Discuss: <i>Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity</i> – Kimmel (213-219) AND <i>Chapter 2: Stone Butch Blues</i> – Feinberg (pp. 13-26) (readings available on e-reserve)	Due: Article for Facilitation Assignment
Oct 4	Analyzing the Elevator Assignment (in-class activity)	
Oct 6	Discuss: <i>Opportunities, Risks, and Caveats for Moral Conversation</i> – Nash, et al. (pp. 174-204) (reading available on e-reserve)	Due: Elevator Assignment
Oct 11	FALL BREAK – No Class	
Oct 13	FALL BREAK – No Class	

F' 2010 Communication 3000-001: Talking About Difficult Topics
 MW: 1:25 -2:45 ~ OSH 138

Oct 18	Discuss: <i>Thinking in Print: The Uses of Research, Public & Private</i> – Booth, et al. (pp. 6-10) & <i>Research and Ethics</i> (pp. 255-259) (readings available on e-reserve) Introduce: Research Project	
Oct 20	Facilitation Groups 1 & 2 Mini Lecture: Site choice	
Oct 25	Facilitation Groups 3 & 4 Mini Lecture: Field Notes *** Reza Asian on Campus	
Oct 27	R&P – No Class - Get Researching	Due: Site Choice
Nov 1	Discuss: <i>Observing, Learning & Reporting: A Field Adventure</i> - Lindlof & Taylor (pp. 132-169) (reading available on e-reserve)	
Nov 3	Facilitation Groups 5, 6 & 7	
Nov 8	Facilitation Groups 8, 9 & 10	
Nov 10	Discuss: <i>Qualitative Analysis - Coding & Categorizing</i> (reading will be handed out in class) Practice Analyzing, Coding & Categorizing (in-class activity)	Due: Picking site & Field notes
Nov 15	NCA – No Class – Keep Researching	
Nov 13	NCA – No Class – Keep Researching	
Nov 22	Discuss: <i>The University Is Popular Culture, But It Doesn't Know it Yet</i> – Graff (pp. 17- 42) (reading available on e-reserve)	
Nov 24	Discuss: <i>Authoring and Writing</i> (readings will be handed out in class)	Due: Analysis & Researcher Reaction
Nov 29	From Analysis to Authoring (in-class activity)	
Dec 1	Final project feedback sessions	
Dec 6	Final project feedback sessions	
Dec 8	Preparation for Final Exam	
Dec 15	Final Exam: 1:00 – 3:00	Due: Final Project