



# A Pedagogical Guide to Teaching an Interpersonal Communication Course

Jordan Atkinson and David T. McMahan

**Keywords:** interpersonal communication, pedagogy, relationships, teaching

**Abstract:** This forum article focuses on the instruction of an interpersonal communication course. Interpersonal communication courses are widely included in undergraduate communication curriculum and can be fundamental to student development. The authors provide foundational material and various content areas generally included in such a course. The authors also provide various applied assignments and issues to consider when teaching an interpersonal communication course.

Interpersonal communication is now among the courses most frequently included in communication curriculum, and the centrality of personal relationships is increasingly recognized in the study of communication (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Wardrope, 1999). Discussions of such concepts as types of social relationships and interactional rituals began fully appearing in scholarship in the early 20th century (e.g., Simmel, 1908/2009), with examinations of conversation appearing in communication journals by the late 1920s (e.g., Howes, 1928). Through the ensuing decades, interpretations, understandings, and values given interpersonal competence and effectiveness frequently shifted. Since fully emerging as an area of study in the communication discipline by the 1960s, the study and instruction of interpersonal communication has experienced continued scrutiny and reevaluation (see Borisoff & McMahan, 2017, for an extended review). In part due to shifting academic and cultural trends and in part due simply to individual approaches to its study among communication scholars, varying views of the characteristics, nature, and processes of interpersonal communication exist. Further, the types of relationships,

Jordan Atkinson and David T. McMahan, Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, MO

CONTACT: [jatkinson3@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:jatkinson3@missouriwestern.edu)

contexts, and topics that might be covered in an interpersonal communication course are expansive and continuously increasing and shifting. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish material and topics generally included in contemporary interpersonal communication courses.

In this article, we examine foundational material and content areas generally included in an interpersonal communication course. We then provide examples of applied assignments included in an interpersonal communication course. Finally, we discuss several issues instructors should consider when teaching an interpersonal communication course.

## Foundations

We begin by examining the foundational material generally included in an interpersonal communication course, specifically, those fundamental areas that are central to the course. These fundamental areas include (a) verbal and nonverbal communication; (b) listening; (c) perceptions, identities, and emotions; (d) culture; and (e) media/technology.

Through the exploration of verbal and nonverbal communication, students are introduced not only to fundamental uses and forms of verbal and nonverbal communication evident in interpersonal communication, but also can develop a deeper awareness that personal relationships are created symbolically. Here, students gain a foundational understanding that communication does not entail mere interaction, simply passing symbols back and forth. Rather, communication is transactional and constitutive. Something happens beyond a simple exchange of symbols; in this case, relationships are developed, maintained, transformed, and terminated. Ultimately, verbal and nonverbal communication can be recognized as creating personal relationships, while at the same time, relationships are influencing how people communicate verbally and nonverbally.

Discussions of listening introduce students to a vital yet unfortunately underexamined area of communication. Although instructors might differ in the theoretical and the practical focus of their respective courses, this area is especially inclined toward practical instruction, with students gaining knowledge specific to improving listening in their relationships.

Explorations of perceptions, identities, and emotions enable students to recognize how personal relationships influence and guide what they perceive, their creation of identities, and their understanding of emotions as well as how perceptions, identities, and emotions influence personal relationships. Students learn that *perceptions* involve selecting, organizing, and evaluating what is encountered and ultimately what meanings are assigned to those experiences, which greatly influences how people view and understand themselves and others. They further learn that aside from the obvious fact that some *identities* involve the specific enactment of a relationship, it is through interactions and relationships with others in which identities are learned or created. Finally, students learn that while *emotions* are biological reactions, they are symbolically recognized and understood. It is through personal relationships that such recognition and understandings develop, while emotions are greatly influencing interactions with others.

When students are exposed to the study of culture, they can fully realize the significance of culture on these aforementioned areas. Culture influences what is perceived, how things are categorized, and how things are evaluated; it also influences identity creation and how identity is understood and valued. Finally, culture influences meanings assigned to emotional behavior and their subsequent appropriateness. Yet,

students also gain an awareness of the inextricable connection of culture and personal relationships. Culture influences an understanding of relationships, how relationships are valued, and how individuals interact in relationships. At the same time, personal relationships are the places where culture is created, maintained, and transformed. Personal relationships provide a tangible example for students when dealing with the abstract nature of culture.

The final foundation is media/technology, which admittedly is not one always included in an interpersonal communication course. Although interpersonal communication and media/technology have been historically and artificially separated in the discipline of communication, media/technology greatly influences relationships and relationships greatly influence media/technology. Media/technology is consumed and understood relationally. Relational knowledge and understanding are informed through media/technology, and relational processes take place through the use of media/technology. As media/technology becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, it becomes increasingly necessary to include its discussion in interpersonal communication courses.

## Content Areas

Having been introduced to the foundations of interpersonal communication, students then are able to examine key content areas. These areas generally include the creation, maintenance, and transformation of personal relationships, guided by central theories and informed by research derived from those theories.

Although each relationship is unique, certain processes have been recognized as commonly occurring through the course of personal relationships. Most often, the process of personal relationships is taught in chronological order, beginning with relational attraction and initiation, moving on to developing and maintaining personal relationships, and ending with relationship disengagement and termination.

Theories included in an interpersonal communication course will depend on such factors as course level, instructor preference, and instructor background. Whichever theories are included, ideally instructors first will select and highlight theories developed in the discipline of communication prior, and in preference, to those theories developed in other disciplines. At the same time, if appropriate, a given theory or any line of research should not be ignored simply because it originated in another discipline. Generally, those theories can be developed further and improved upon by taking a communication perspective. Ultimately, evaluating theory or even arguing the merits of post-positivist, interpretive, and critical approaches are beyond the scope and purpose of this article. However, we can discuss general categories of theories from which instructors might select.

In the original edition of *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication*, Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) noted three categories of interpersonal communication theory: (1) individual-centered, (2) discourse/interaction-centered, and (3) relationship-centered. Individual-centered theories of interpersonal communication focus on the individual, specifically on how individuals think when managing uncertainty, producing messages, and communicating effectively. Examples of individual-centered theories include action assembly theory (Greene, 1984), imagined interaction theory (Honeycutt, 2003), and uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Discourse/interaction-centered theories of interpersonal communication focus on messages, specifically their form, content, and function. Examples of discourse/interaction-centered theories include

communication accommodation theory (Giles & Powesland, 1975), expectancy violations theory (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon, Stacks, & Woodall, 1979), and speech codes theory (Philipsen, 1975, 1992).

Relationship-centered theories of interpersonal communication focus on personal relationships, specifically how they are developed, maintained, transformed, and terminated. Examples of relationship-centered theories of interpersonal communication include affection exchange theory (Floyd, 1997, 2006), communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002), and relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Interpersonal communication courses frequently conclude with an exploration of specific types of relationships, such as friendships, romantic relationships, family, and workplace relationships. Exposing students to the study of these relationships enables personal and professional development and the potential for lifelong learning. Although each type of relationship will bring about different topics, issues, and concerns, it is possible for instructors to provide a common theme throughout their discussion. Specifically, rather than seeing each type of relationship as an existing structure, these forms of relationships are created symbolically, and their uniqueness is due to distinct communication through which they are developed, maintained, and transformed.

## Applied Assignments

Instructors can use several applied assignments that highlight the aforementioned foundational material and content areas. One such assignment is the analysis of a personal relationship. In this assignment, students are asked to apply an interpersonal communication concept or theory to one of their relationships or to a relationship they have observed. At the completion of this assignment, instructors are able to assess students' understanding of the concept or theory, as well as their ability to accurately apply the concept or theory to an actual relationship. Typically, instructors first will require students to describe the theory or concept and to synthesize its research findings. Next, students will describe a particular situation or behavior in the interpersonal relationship and apply the concept or theory to the situation or behavior. In this section, they address both the positive and the negative effects of the interpersonal situation or behavior and how it is enacted. Finally, students address the implications of how the concept or theory can be applied to the interpersonal situation. In this section, students address advice, practical strategies, or future directions of the relationship as it relates to the research, as this will assist students in handling various interpersonal situations using suggested communication behaviors. This assignment can be adapted to include relationships depicted through various media (e.g., movies, television).

A second applied assignment is a teaching demonstration. In this assignment, students select an interpersonal communication concept and create a short, in-class teaching demonstration about the concept. Sample teaching topics include uncertainty management, affection, identity, conflict, social support, attachment, attraction, forgiveness, self-disclosure, power, relational transgressions, or relationship termination. Students (a) describe the concept and its components thoroughly, (b) discuss the findings of three to five research articles about the concept, and (c) provide advice about the concept derived from the findings. To promote learning and engagement, students also should prepare and execute a short interactive activity during their demonstration. This assignment either can be a group or an individual activity, depending on the enrollment of the class; the length of the demonstration is left to the instructor's discretion.

## Issues to Consider

One issue to consider when teaching an interpersonal communication course is that both instructors and students sometimes disclose personal information about themselves. If instructors open the discussion to students in their classes, then they must be equipped to effectively communicate about personal and sensitive topics. Clear guidelines regarding self-disclosure should be provided to students early in the semester. Instructors should adhere to institutional policies regarding Title IX, the Clery Act, and other federal and state laws and regulations. When instructors provide clear guidelines about self-disclosure to students, they can address issues of appropriate self-disclosure and how the self-disclosure should be relevant to the course topic.

Cultural sensitivity and diversity is another issue to consider and it is important for instructors to use examples representing diverse groups of people and relationships. For example, when teaching about dating relationships or marriages, instructors should be sure to address same-sex couples. Instructors should avoid utilizing heteronormative statements in their teaching and they should use images in their instructional materials that represent individuals of various ethnic, racial, and gender groups.

As with any course, it is important to stay current on the new directions of research in the field. Current trends in interpersonal communication research include, but are not limited to, the use of technology to communicate and maintain relationships, biological approaches to studying relationships, and the dark side of interpersonal communication (e.g., lying, sexual and emotional cheating, jealousy, interpersonal violence). Instructors should continuously update their instructional materials to include innovative research on these emerging topics.

## Conclusion

The interpersonal communication course is central to the discipline of communication studies and a core requirement for students in many communication programs. This article presented what students enrolled in an interpersonal communication course should learn by addressing foundations and content areas. Applied assignments and issues for instructors to consider when teaching an interpersonal communication course also were presented. The interpersonal communication course can be an incredibly useful experience for students, assisting with both the advancement and improvement of their interpersonal knowledge and skills as well as assisting with the positive development of their personal and professional lives.

## References

- Baxter, L. A., & Braithwaite, D. O. (Eds.). (2008). *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication: Multiple perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Berger, C. R., & Bradac, J. J. (1982). *Language and social knowledge: Uncertainty in interpersonal relationships*. London, England: Edward Arnold.
- Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research, 1*, 99–112. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1975.tb00258.x

- Bertelsen, D. A., & Goodboy, A. K. (2009). Curriculum planning: Trends in communication studies, workplace competencies, and current programs at 4-year colleges and universities. *Communication Education, 58*, 262–275. doi:10.1080/03634520902755458
- Borisoff, D. J., & McMahan, D. T. (2017). Charting the terrain of interpersonal communication and the landscape of social interaction: Traditions, challenges, and trajectories. *Atlantic Journal of Communication, 25*, 211–231. doi:10.1080/15456870.2017.1350680
- Burgoon, J. K. (1978). A communication model of personal space violations: Explication and an initial test. *Human Communication Research, 4*, 129–142. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.1978.tb00603.x
- Burgoon, J. K., Stacks, D. W., & Woodall, G. W. (1979). A communication model of violations of distancing expectations. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 43*, 153–167. doi:10.1080/10570317909373963
- Floyd, K. (1997). Communicating affection in dyadic relationships: An assessment of behavior and expectancies. *Communication Quarterly, 45*, 68–80. doi:10.1080/01463379709370045
- Floyd, K. (2006). *Communicating affection: Interpersonal behavior and social context*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Giles, H., & Powesland, P. F. (1975). *Speech style and social evaluation*. London, England: Academic Press.
- Greene, J. (1984). A cognitive approach to human communication theory: An action assembly theory. *Communication Monographs, 51*, 289–306. doi:10.1080/03637758409390203
- Honeycutt, J. M. (2003). *Imagined interactions*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Howes, R. F. (1928). Training in conversation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 14*, 253–259. doi:10.1080/00335632809379742
- Petronio, S. (2002). *Boundaries of privacy: Dialectics of disclosure*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Philipsen, G. (1975). Speaking “like a man” in Teamsterville: Cultural patterns of role enactment in an urban neighborhood. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 61*, 13–22. doi:10.1080/00335637509383264
- Philipsen, G. (1992). *Speaking culturally: Explorations in social communication*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Simmel, G. (1908/2009). *Sociology: Inquiries into the construction of social forms* (2 Vols.). Boston, MA: Brill.
- Wardrope, W. J. (1999). A curricular profile of U.S. communication departments. *Communication Education, 48*, 256–258. doi:10.1080/03634529909379173