COMX491: Managing Difficult Interpersonal Conversations
Spring 2020

Instructor: Dr. Katlyn Gangi
(she, her, hers)
Class: Tu/Th 9:30am-10:50am | LA302
E-mail: katlyn.gangi@mso.umt.edu
Office: LA356
Office Hours: W 9-11am and by appt
CRN: 34820

Course Description:

Managing Difficult Interpersonal Conversations (COMX491) will explore theoretical knowledge that will help guide your understanding of and skill in communicating during difficult conversations, such as conflicts, situations involving uncertainty, or otherwise stressful events. It’s not a step-by-step guide, but rather a course that provides a number of different lenses for you to approach conversations with greater nuance. The course content falls into three broad categories: (1) why some conversations are difficult; (2) contexts where difficult conversations are enacted; and (3) the effects of our conversations on our relationships and health.

In this class, we will explore what’s going on in our heads before we even start talking, such as perceptual biases and attributions that affect what we pay attention to in conversations. We will also examine theoretical models related to the goals we have during conversations, such as uncertainty management and bolstering our social identities. Then we will discuss various contexts of difficult conversations, such as in providing social support, sexual intimacy, conflict, and intergenerational conversation – where we can examine how these theoretical elements apply.

Course Objectives:

By the end of the course, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. Why are certain conversations difficult? Why do some conversations feel unsatisfying or upsetting?
2. What are the problematic communication patterns we can identify in various conflicts?
3. How can we approach these situations with greater awareness and better strategy, guided by communication theory?
4. What new questions and hypotheses can we discover about interpersonal communication through exploration of our own experiences?
5. What are the impacts of poor communication/stressful communication on our health and wellness?

Course Materials:

You do not need to purchase a textbook for this course. For your convenience, ALL course readings (a combination of journal articles, book chapters, and podcasts) will be available to download from our course Moodle page (moodle.umt.edu). My strong suggestion would be to either: print out the course readings so you can highlight/take notes on them, or download them and read them through a pdf reader that allows highlighting. Think about your own learning style and how you best absorb/think about information as you read.
Course Requirements:

2 Celebrations of Knowledge (Exams): (200 points total, 100 points each). The material covered on the exams will be a combination of the texts/readings and class lecture/discussion.

Dear COMX491 Paper: You will write a response to one of your classmates’ difficult interpersonal conversations/situations. It should be written in terms of advice you can offer based on communication theory. This paper is worth 50 points.

Research Paper: You will write a research paper on the topic of your choosing. The paper will be worth 100 points.

Participation: Throughout the semester, you will be asked to complete short assignments – either in class or as homework. These are geared toward checking your understanding and applying course material. These may be announced or unannounced, and will typically be 10-15 points each.

Grade Distribution
There are a total of 450 points for this course. Your course grade will be based on accumulated points earned in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Midterm Celebration of Knowledge</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Dear COMX491” Paper</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Celebration of Knowledge</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Paper</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation (small assignments)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>450</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The grading distribution is as follows:

- A: 92%-100%
- A-: 90%-91%
- B+: 88%-89%
- B: 82%-87%
- B-: 80%-81%
- C+: 78%-79%
- C: 72%-77%
- C-: 70%-71%
- D+: 68%-69%
- D: 60%-67%
- D-: 60%-61%
- F: 59% and below

COURSE POLICIES:

Attendance Policy: Your understanding of the material depends on your attendance for class. Therefore, it is essential that you be mentally and physically present for each class period. I will not keep logs of your attendance, but consider that there is a strong relationship between class attendance and performance. If you miss class, you will likely miss one of the participation small assignments.

Academic Integrity: All students taking this course must adhere to the University of Montana’s academic dishonesty policy as presented in the Student Conduct Code (SCC). As noted in the code, students are expected to practice academic honesty. Any actions that include, but are not limited to, the following behaviors are reasons for pursuing academic and university sanctions: plagiarism, copying another student’s exam, allowing another student to copy from your exam or work, submitting false information (data, quotations, citations, etc.), representing someone else’s work as your own, representing work for other
courses you’ve taken as new work for this class, etc. Students will be charged with academic dishonesty for any breach of these standards.

The minimum consequence for engaging in cheating or plagiarism is failure on the related assignment, but this type of activity usually results in failure in the entire course. At worst, academic misconduct can result in expulsion, denial of your degree, and/or revocation of a degree that has already been awarded. See the Student Conduct Code for definitions and consequences of cheating and plagiarism. The unabridged student conduct code is located at: http://www.umt.edu/student-affairs/community-standards/Student%20Conduct%20Code%20FINAL%208-24-18.pdf

**Late Work and Incompletes:** The papers for this course must be completed and turned in at the beginning of class unless otherwise noted by me. Please always back up your work to avoid any last-minute problems. Late papers will receive a 10% penalty for each day they are late (2 days late max).

**Grading Option Changes**
As per departmental practice, you may not drop or change your grading option after the 45th instructional day except in the following situations: a) documentable accident or illness, b) no evaluation record for the course, c) documentable family/personal emergency, and d) documentable change in employment schedule that prevents completion of course.

**Discrimination and Harassment:** Every student will be expected to treat one another with respect and create an environment where learning is fostered and not hindered. Discrimination and harassment of others based on their race, age, gender, sexual preference, religion, opinions, and beliefs will not be tolerated. It is vitally important to be open to and consider the thoughts and ideas of others in class. No one experience or viewpoint is more important or more valuable than any other. Please be considerate of others’ feelings and experiences.

**Support for Students with Disabilities:**
If you have, or think you may have, a disability (including an ‘invisible disability’ such as a learning disability, a chronic health problem, or a mental health condition) that interferes with your performance as a student in this class, you are encouraged to discuss your needs and arrange support services and/or accommodations through the DSS office on campus (https://www.umt.edu/dss/). Please obtain appropriate documentation from the DSS Office and then see me to discuss what, if any, special arrangements need to be made. Please do so within the first 2 weeks of class in order to be effectively accommodated.

**Classroom Teaching-Learning Atmosphere:**
I will use a combination of lecture, class discussion, videos, and application exercises which contribute to your understanding of difficult conversations. My belief is that learning is facilitated best when the learner is actively involved in the learning process – so please, share your thoughts, ideas, and examples! We all learn from one another (and I learn from you). This kind of active participation will help you understand and experience ideas as they relate to your lives, rather than just remembering the facts. I believe this is how you can get the most out of the course. Please also provide me with any feedback (either face-to-face or via email) about the course. Your feedback will help shape the nature of the course and I’d love to hear any of your innovative ideas.

**A Note About Email:**
Feel free to email me with any questions you have about the course. However, please check to see if the answer to your question is in the syllabus or on the course Moodle page. If you miss class, please do not email me to ask “if you missed anything” – of course you missed something! It is your responsibility to obtain notes from a classmate and stay up-to-date on any course announcements. When you email, please be specific about your question, including what you already know/believe you know related to the answer. As part of your professional development, I expect to see complete sentences, punctuation, etc. in any email correspondence.
Counseling & Student Support
Please know that if you are struggling with interpersonal issues and are having difficulty coping, there are resources available to you on this campus.
The Student Advocacy Resource Center (SARC; [http://www.umt.edu/student-advocacy-resource-center/SARC%20Training/SARC%20Letter.pdf](http://www.umt.edu/student-advocacy-resource-center/SARC%20Training/SARC%20Letter.pdf)) provides free and confidential support to survivors of sexual assault, relationship violence, stalking, hate crimes, harassment, or other forms of discrimination. Their services include counseling as well as medical, legal, and academic advocacy. Call their office at 243-4429. Advocates are available on the 24-hour support line (406) 243-6559.
Curry Health Center is also available for counseling appointments ([https://www.umt.edu/curry-health-center/Counseling/](https://www.umt.edu/curry-health-center/Counseling/)) including urgent one-time appointments.

To Succeed in this Class:

- Come to class having completed the assigned readings for the day
- Ask questions when you are confused
- Share your relevant personal examples and ideas with the class
- Write down examples, not just definitions
- Brainstorm early for your papers, and outline them before writing
- Come see me in office hours to talk about your ideas
- Enjoy the class!
Course Schedule

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION / INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Tu 1/14   Syllabus, course introduction
Th 1/16   Interpersonal/relational communication overview


WEEK 2: INTERPERSONAL PERCEPTION

Tu 1/21
Th 1/23


WEEK 3: UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT

Tu 1/28
Th 1/29


WEEK 4: CONFLICT

Tu 2/4
Th 2/6


Gottman, J. https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/
WEEK 5: SOCIAL SUPPORT

Tu 2/11
Th 2/13 Submit “Dear COMX491” Letter
Guest speaker: Dr. Steve Schwarze (professor & cancer survivor)


WEEK 6: DEATH & DYING

Tu 2/18
Th 2/20 Guest lecture: Kendyl Barney (graduate student & grief researcher)


WEEK 7: AGING/AGEISM, INTERGROUP

Tu 2/25 Finish Death/Dying if needed; Aging
Th 2/27 Start Intergroup


WEEK 8: INTERGROUP/IDENTITY THEORIES

Tu 3/3 Midterm Celebration of Knowledge
Th 3/5


---

**WEEK 9: SEXUAL CONSENT**

Tu 3/10 *Possible guest speaker
Th 3/12 Dear COMX491 Papers Due


---

**SPRING BREAK: March 16-20**

---

**WEEK 10: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION & DECEPTION**

Tu 3/24
Th 3/26 *Library Research Day


*Selected chapters (these are short): 13: Eye Contact; 45: Culture and Facial Expressions of Emotion; 47: Deception/Lying; 53: Expectancy Violations Theory (Tues)

---

**WEEK 11: STRESS & COPING**

Tu 3/31
Th 4/2


WEEK 12: RELATIONAL AGRESSION / MICROAGGRESSIONS

Tu 4/7
Th 4/9


WEEK 13: OTHER INTERPERSONAL CONTEXTS/PROCESSES

Tu 4/14
Th 4/16 *Possible paper work day


WEEK 14: MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Tu 4/21 Research Papers Due
Th 4/23


WEEK 15: CATCH UP/CLASS TOPIC CHOICE – Readings TBD

Tu 4/28, Th 4/30

Thursday, May 7th 8:00am-10:00am: Final Celebration of Knowledge
DEAR COMX491 PAPER (50 points)

Part 1 – Submit “Dear COMX491” Letter

Spend a little time thinking about your own life, or perhaps someone else you know well. Recall an interpersonal situation that is currently or was challenging to navigate. You could label it as “difficult” because the context made it difficult – such as supporting someone through an illness diagnosis. Or it may feel (or have felt) “difficult” because of the nature of your relationship with that person, or the nature of how something was communicated, or for other reasons.

Then pretend you are writing in to an advice column (like “Dear Abby”) and describe the situation in as much detail as you can to someone who doesn’t know you. Give your letter a signature that will be used to identify your conflict, but that isn’t your name (e.g. “Confused in California”). Bring this letter to class without your name on it. (You will receive credit for turning it in.)

*Please note: If your letter is selected for analysis, I will change all names/identifying information. We will use selected letters for this assignment and possibly for class discussions.

Part 2 – “Dear COMX491” Response

First, read the selected “Dear COMX391” letters and select one that resonates with you. Then it is your job to respond with your “social scientist” hat on: What advice can you offer your classmate on how best to handle this conversation? Or how might they handle it differently in the future? Utilizing theories, models, and course concepts, write a thoughtful response to your classmate.

The introductory paragraph should include a clear thesis statement that encapsulates what theories, models, or course concepts will be the foundation of your response in the body below. In the paragraphs that follow, support your thesis statement (the primary ways you would advise your classmate) with evidence-based solutions. Your response should include at least 4 APA source citations (at least 1 of which is outside of course readings).

Feel free to be creative in your ideas about how they might handle the situation – as long as you have support to back up your claims. You may even offer more than one way of approaching it.

Requirements:

1. Length: 3-4 pages (1” margins, 12 pt. font, double-spaced, not including cover page and references page).

2. Apply at least 4 APA (American Psychological Association) source citations (1 or more outside of course readings).

3. You must clearly and directly apply class concepts to your response, as outlined in the assignment specifics. To receive a grade in the range of 90-100, your analysis must be outstanding and your conceptual insight must go well beyond expectations. You must bring new insight into your analysis of the experience/insight that goes beyond what we discussed directly in class. A grade in the range of 80-89 is given to entries that exceed expectations in terms of insight or analysis. Meeting all requirements at the expected high levels will produce a grade in the range of 70-79, and failing to meet the requirements of rigor, insight, or analysis will produce a range of 50-69 (e.g., turning in sloppy or incomplete work).

4. Print paper and submit as a hard copy in class.
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE PAPER (100 points)

Your final project is one that involves applying what you know about a particular topic to individuals that are having difficulty. This topic may be one discussed in class, but it may also be one we haven’t focused on. You need to review the literature and become an expert in this topic area and write a paper that would assist those facing the issue (e.g., romantic partners dealing with invisible illness; parents with children navigating divorce; microaggressions in friendships, etc.). Your project should include a literature review of outside scholarly articles stating what we know about the topic (approximately 3 double spaced pages). Then, it should be followed by a section for things that individuals could do or practice to make the experience/situation easier, less painful, etc. (approximately 2 double spaced pages). Try to “think outside the box” on this project. What might be some innovative ways for people in interpersonal relationships) to resolve this problem that is communication based?

Thus, the GOAL of your project is to (1) identify a common problem or issue that interpersonal relationships face, (2) understand the literature on this topic or issue, (3) provide various activities or exercises (or program) that you could recommend for individuals to engage in to help them better communicate with one another about this issue, and (4) provide a rationale for why you think this program would be effective.

Structure of the Paper:
(1) An introduction where you outline the purpose of your paper.

(2) A preview of how your paper will progress (one sentence usually at the end of the first paragraph).

(3) A section where you review of some of the outside scholarly literature (a minimum of seven outside scholarly sources) related to this topic.

(4) A section where you link the literature to practical activities that could be implemented (backed up with a rationale) to help better manage this issue—which needs to be communication related in some way.

(5) A conclusion.

(6) A reference page in APA style.

Requirements:
(1) Length: 6-8 pages (1” margins, 12 pt font)

(2) You must apply a minimum of 7 outside (in addition to course material) scholarly sources for this assignment. Use proper APA (American Psychological Association) format for citations and formatting.

(3) The overall organizational pattern of your paper should be obvious, logical, and clearly move from point to point. Be sure there is a clear introduction, purpose statement, preview, body points, conclusion, and transitions throughout.

(4) Proofread your paper. Points will be taken off for grammatical and spelling errors.

(5) Print paper and submit as a hard copy in class.