

# SPCOM 475: Communication Ethics

Faculty of Arts, Department of Drama and Speech Communication, Winter 2015

Wednesday: 2:30-5:20, ML-117

## Professor Robert Danisch

**Office Hours:** Tuesday: 11:30-12:30, Wednesday: 1:00-2:00, Thursday: 11:30-12:30

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## Course Description:

This course examines the interplay between communication and ethics from historical and pragmatic perspectives. How ought we play our part in all of the interactions that we are a party to? In attempting to answer this normative question, we will explain how we create the sort of person we are through our communicative actions and interactions. We will also describe how an ethical communicator can act with integrity. To do this, we will analyze the ethical theories of a variety of thinkers and consider what they have to say about the topic of living and communicating with integrity. We will also investigate both personal and public case studies to enrich our understanding of individual thinkers. Finally, we will consider some of the central ethical concerns of communication acts. In other words, we will ask how communication practices can embody forms of ethical living.

This class is not just about the relationship between communication and ethics, but it is also about how to discover ethics within the structures of human communication itself. It is about working to develop ourselves as ethical communicators. This course is committed to a mixture of theory and practice. Some of our time will be devoted to dialogue and conversation about ethics in life, both experienced and observed. This means that we will work as closely as we can with ethics in our own lived experience in addition to exploring the theory and communicative grounds of ethics.

## Course Objectives:

- Promote students' ability to think critically, clearly and analytically. This means understanding the ideas and concepts raised throughout the course, their origins, strengths, weaknesses, and their relationship to larger themes in this class, in your education, and in your view of the world.
- To learn about a variety of communication ethics approaches and understand how they impact how we communicate.
- To use a variety of ethical frameworks to critically evaluate our own and other's communication behavior.
- To develop a concept of the person who lives and communicates with integrity, and to help students become more ethical communicators.
- Improve students' abilities to read and listen critically, to respond reflectively and reasonably to others, and to distinguish successful and unsuccessful arguments.
- To gain a conceptual and practical understanding of the background, elements, processes, and contexts of the major approaches to ethical theory.

## Course Policies and Procedures:

- *In the Classroom* – This class will be a mixture of lecture and discussion, but with the balance weighted toward discussion. During some class periods, I might deliver a small lecture on the topics outlined on the course schedule. However, that does not mean I expect you to be passive consumers. During more of the time, I will be asking you questions and I will expect you to ask me questions. In addition, I will ask you to provide examples of concepts we talk about in class, and so participation will be encouraged in a variety of ways. I expect this to be a lively class. The Philosopher Plutarch once said (and I happen to agree with him): “There are those who think that the speaker has a function to perform, and the hearer none. They think it only right that the speaker shall come with his lecture carefully thought out and prepared, while they, without consideration or thought of their obligations, rush in and take their seats exactly as if they had come to dinner, to have a good time while others work hard. Those people bite.” Also, please turn off all ringing electronic devices when entering the classroom. The sound of a cell phone (or any other device) is extremely distracting to your professor, and I assume to your fellow classmates, and it is rude and offensive. Since this is a class about communication ethics, we need to achieve a high standard of ethical communication in our classroom behavior and conversation. This goes for all of us, and includes, at a minimum: treating each other with care and respect, listening carefully to each other, and respecting confidentiality and anonymity.
- *Participation* – Students do not receive any direct marks for participation. However, I will ask everyone to bring into class a “case study” during the term. We will make a schedule early in the semester and for each Wednesday we will assign different students the task of preparing an ethical case study to share. You do not have to hand these in, but you must be ready to talk about them. A good ethical case study or personal/public ethical dilemma involves concerns over what one “ought” to do, where the answers are not easy or clear. These dilemmas occur in a variety of contexts – personal, family, work, romance, friendships, social, organizational, cultural, political, societal, global. Use of popular culture (music, books, films) or current events (politics, news) is welcomed, but ideally the case should be relevant to you personally and to the class. Be specific about your case. Some possible ideas: ethical dilemmas I have faced/am facing; good/ethical decisions I have made or poor/unethical decisions I have made; ethical issues in relationships (such as lying, disclosure, or conflicts of interest); ethical concerns over the kind of person you want to be, the kind of relationship you want to be a part of/construct, or the kind of life you want to lead; ethical issues over the kind of society we want to live in, projects our government should pursue, laws that we ought to uphold or do away with, etc.
- *Attendance* – Your presence in class is mandatory. However, I will not be taking attendance, and there will be no way for me to be absolutely certain that you are attending regularly. But you should be aware that the best way to do well in this course is to show up to every class, prepared and attentive. Inevitably, at the end of the semester, students who missed classes do poorly, while students who show up consistently do well. I do not post lecture notes on the Internet, nor do I respond to emails that say “what did we talk about in class on Wednesday.” We cover lots of material in class and for that reason it is critical that you attend in order to do well. Attendance also means refraining from playing with your cell phone, reading the newspaper, surfing the internet, using other electronic devices or doing other coursework

while in the classroom. If I notice you engaged in some activity that does not pertain to what is happening in the class, I will ask you to leave. This course is designed for courteous, motivated students who attend each class, do all the reading, and ask questions when they don't understand something. If you miss class, you are responsible for getting materials we covered from a classmate. Students who fail to meet these basic and reasonable expectations can assume that their performance on assignments will suffer.

- *Academic Integrity* – I expect that the work you complete for this course will be your own, which is to say that cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Any written assignment that borrows from other sources without giving proper credit or that is plagiarized in whole or in part from another source (including other student's work) is grounds for an "F" on the assignment, or depending on the severity of the crime, is grounds for an "F" in the course.

### **University Policies on Academic Integrity:**

**Academic Integrity:** In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility.

**Discipline:** A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for his/her actions. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course professor, academic advisor, or the Undergraduate Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under Policy 71 – Student Discipline. For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students should refer to Policy 71 - Student Discipline, <http://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-71>

**Grievance:** A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of his/her university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances, Section 4, <http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/student-grievances-faculty-guidelines/policy-70>

**Appeals:** A student may appeal the finding and/or penalty in a decision made under Policy 70 - Student Petitions and Grievances (other than regarding a petition) or Policy 71 - Student Discipline if a ground for an appeal can be established. Read Policy 72 - Student Appeals, <http://uwaterloo.ca/secretariat/policies-procedures-guidelines/policy-72>

**Academic Integrity website (Arts):**

[http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic\\_responsibility.html](http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/arts/ugrad/academic_responsibility.html)

**Academic Integrity Office (University):**

<http://uwaterloo.ca/academic-integrity/>

### **Accommodation for Students with Disabilities:**

The AccessAbility Services (AS) Office, located in Needles Hall, Room 1132, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with the AS Office at the beginning of each academic term.

## Required Texts and Readings:

I like books - I like buying them, I like reading them, I like keeping them on my bookshelf, I like talking to people about them. Reading makes you smarter. You should read a lot. I wish I could assign a book a week, but that doesn't seem to be the culture anymore for undergraduate students. During the first class I will ask all of you to write down your email addresses, and afterwards I will construct a class list. What I'm going to do is email the class, each week, a set of pdfs of the following week's readings (or potentially a url link if there is an electronic resource). You should print the readings out or bring some electronic device to class that allows you to read them off a screen. I expect students to access all readings regardless of their location. I will ensure that the readings are available at least one week prior to when we will discuss them in class. BUT. And this is a big BUT. If you are a fantastic student, super bright and eager you should really consider buying the following books: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Habermas's *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Levinas's *Ethics and Infinity*, Buber's *Between Man and Man*, Held's *The Ethics of Care*, Mill's *On Liberty*, Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Peters's *Speaking into the Air*, and Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*. All of these books are on Amazon.com as paperbacks or used. You should buy them and read them, cover to cover. We will read sections from each but you should really read them all at some point if you are seriously interested in mastering the content of this class. If you buy the books, then just bring the books to class – you'll look smarter at least. In any case, I believe that reading a lot is good and so we will try to read a lot this semester.

## Assignments:

- 1) **Think Questions** – You are required to complete the readings prior to each class session – class discussion and class content will build upon the readings assigned for that particular day. The quality of class discussion and your experience will depend on your having made an attempt to read and understand the articles assigned each week. On FOUR occasions throughout the semester I will ask you to write a 1-2 page, single-spaced response to a specific question I pose about the readings. I will ask the question at the end of class about the following week's readings, and the following week you will turn in your answer. The due dates for the think questions are: January 28<sup>th</sup>, February 4<sup>th</sup>, March 4<sup>th</sup>, and March 18<sup>th</sup>. Collectively, the think questions are worth a total of 20% of your final grade.
- 2) **Position Paper** – For this assignment, you will write a 3-5 page assessment of a particular case that you choose. This essay will answer the following questions: What is the ethical issue of the case that you think is important? Why is this the important ethical issue? Then you will apply one of the normative theories of ethics that we will have discussed in order to provide a judgment about the morality of one of the actions possible given the ethical issue identified in your case. You need to argue that one course of action is more moral than another, and justify why this action is the right thing to do. You will use material from class to support your justification. This assignment will be worth 20% of your final grade and it will be due on February 25<sup>th</sup>.

- 3) **Exegesis** – An Exegesis is a short explanation of a passage from a text. It involves the personal interpretation of a part of the reading, and an explanation of why that passage is important for the reading and for communication ethics. The style of the exegeses will differ from student to student but there are some general guidelines to follow that we will discuss in class. Your exegesis will be 4-5 pages long and due on March 25th. The exegesis will be worth 20% of your final grade.
  
- 4) **Critical Concept Presentation** – Early in the semester, we will form groups of students (ideally three in a group) who will work together on a “critical concept presentation”. This presentation is an oral exercise in brevity and clarity. After you are assigned a group, you will pick from a list of key concepts from the class. As a group, you will be responsible for the research, writing, and presentation of the meaning of the key concept that you pick. After you have researched your concept, you will then pick an ethical dilemma to help demonstrate how your key concept might make judgments or recommend solutions to your case. In other words, you will describe your example/case and then you will analyze that example in the light of the concept you explained. For your presentation, you will have exactly 6 minutes, and only 6 minutes. You should use 4 minutes to explain the concept and 2 minutes to explain the example. For example, you may be given the term “act utilitarianism”. Your group would begin research on the term, on its meaning, its relationship to communication ethics, on its central features and place in making ethical evaluations. Then you will find a sample case that can be analyzed in the light of act utilitarianism. Obviously you cannot do everything in six minutes – your job is to give the best, most understandable, and concise overview that you can manage. Dates for the critical concept presentations will be assigned in class. If you choose to use AV materials, it is your responsibility to make sure that your AV materials work properly, are queued up, etc. On the day of your presentation, you will submit a script of your presentation along with the bibliography you used (note also that your cover page should include the full names of the group members and the title of your presentation). This script will later form part of an archive that will be distributed to the class. Feel free to approach this as creatively as you wish. You will be graded on the overall quality of your presentation (organization, clarity, coherence, relevance, time, the quality of your research, and the completeness of your script). Your performance will be worth 20% of your final grade.
  
- 5) **Ethical Deliberation** – As a final project, you will participate in an ethical deliberation over some particular controversy. Working within the same groups assigned for the presentations, students will participate in writing a dialogic, collaborative paper produced electronically about some emerging ethical questions. You will be asked to rely on concepts and material from the course and respond/write directly to/against/with one another. This final project will be due on April 12<sup>th</sup> by 5:00PM. This assignment will be worth 20% of your final grade.

## Grades:

- *How are Grades Calculated?* - For each of the five assignments you will receive a score out of 100 points. Given that each assignment is worth 20% of your final grade, I will take the average of your five scores and that will be your grade for the semester. I do not like giving students numerical marks and I think it is an inferior system of grading. In my mind, I often

think in terms of a letter grade. So that you know, your number out of 100 points translates into the following letter grades:

90-100 = A+	73-76 = B	60-62 = C-	0-50 = F
85-89 = A	70-72 = B-	57-59 = D+	
80-84 = A-	67-69 = C+	53-56 = D	
77-79 = B+	63-66 = C	50-52 = D-	

- *What do the Grades Mean?* – Loosely translated the letter grades you earn mean the following: an A+ is truly outstanding and spectacular work that goes well above and beyond the normal expectations of an assignment and demonstrates a complete mastery of the subject matter. An A or an A- is excellent and exceptional work. A grade in the B range is good to very good work that demonstrates a solid grasp of the material. A grade in the C range is average work that demonstrates a satisfactory but incomplete grasp of the course material. A grade in the D range is unsatisfactory work of poor quality. And an F is failing work that does not meet the minimum requirements for the course. Because grades in the A range are exceptional and grades in the C range are average, A grades are rare and difficult to obtain.
- *Extensions* – There are no extensions for any assignment. Assignments are announced well in advance of due dates. If you know in advance that you cannot make a due date for an assignment, please discuss it with me beforehand. Requests for extensions after a due date has passed will only be granted in exceptional and unavoidable circumstances and must include (a) one typed, double-spaced page explaining the reason for missing the deadline, and (b) relevant documentation such as an official doctor's note. The written request for an extension must be in my hands within one week after the scheduled due date. I am under no obligation to accept late assignments; assignments that are accepted may suffer a significant penalty (2 points for each day late).
- *Negotiations and Missed Assignments* - I do not haggle with students over grades, nor do I listen to declarations about why a student deserves an extra point here or there. You and I will not be negotiating your grade for the class – you will be earning a grade based on criteria that are explicitly stated in class. In addition, after the final grades are posted for the semester I will not re-mark or re-consider any grade from earlier in the semester. If you do not understand why you got a particular grade or why you lost points on a given assignment, you should come to my office hours or make an appointment to see me and I will explain your grade. If you do not participate in, or hand in, the final exam or either of the collaborative papers you will receive an F for the course.

## **Course Schedule:**

### **Week #1 – January 7<sup>th</sup> -**

“Introduction to the Course: Communication Ethics and Moral Reasoning”

**Week #2 – January 14<sup>th</sup> -**

“Aristotle and Virtue Ethics”

Readings:

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I and Book II.

**Week #3 – January 21<sup>st</sup> –**

“John Stuart Mill and Utilitarian/Consequentialist Ethics”

Readings:

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861): Chapters 2, 3, & 5.

**Week #4 – January 28<sup>th</sup> –**

“Immanuel Kant and Deontological Ethics”

Readings:

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785): selections from sections I & II.

Immanuel Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy” (1797).

\*\*\*First Think Question Due on January 28<sup>th</sup>.

**Week #5 – February 4<sup>th</sup> –**

“Jurgen Habermas and Discourse Ethics”

Readings:

Jurgen Habermas, “The Principle of Universalization as a Rule of Argumentation,” from *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (MIT Press, 1996).

\*\*\*Second Think Question Due on February 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Week #6 – February 11<sup>th</sup> –**

“Emmanuel Levinas and Encounter Ethics”

Readings:

Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Duquesne University Press, 1985): Chapters 7 & 8.

Amit Pinchevski, *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication* (Duquesne University Press, 2005): Chapter 2.

**\*\*\*No Class on Febraury 18th – Winter Break\*\*\***

**Week #7 – February 25<sup>th</sup> –**

## “Martin Buber and Dialogical Ethics”

## Readings:

Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Routledge, 2002): Section 1 – “Dialogue” and Section 4 – “The Education of Character”

\*\*\*Position Paper Due on February 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Week #8 – March 4<sup>th</sup> –**

## “Communication as Ethics, Part I: Listening and Caring”

## Readings:

Lisbeth Lipari, “Listening Otherwise: The Voice of Ethics,” *International Journal of Listening* 23 (2009): 44-59.

Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2007): pp. TBD.

\*\*\*Third Think Question Due on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Week #9 – March 11<sup>th</sup> –**

## “Communication as Ethics, Part II: Speaking in Organizational and Intercultural Contexts”

## Readings:

S. Jovanovic & R. Wood, “Speaking from the Bedrock of Ethics,” from *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 37 (2004): 317-334.

R. R. Sims, “The Challenge of Ethical Behavior in Organizations,” from *Journal of Business Ethics* 11 (1992): 505-513.

Rebecca Meisenbach, “Habermas’s Discourse Ethics and the Principle of Universalization as a Moral Framework for Organizational Communication,” from *Management Communication Quarterly* 20 (2006): 39-62.

**Week #10 – March 18<sup>th</sup> –**

## “Communication as Ethics, Part III: Free Speech”

## Readings:

John Stuart Mill, “On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion,” from *On Liberty* (1859).

Thomas Scanlon, “A Theory of Freedom of Expression,” from *Difficulties of Tolerance* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Ronald Arnett, “The Practical Philosophy of Communication Ethics and Free Speech as the Foundation for Speech Communication,” *Communication Quarterly* 38 (1990): 208-217.

\*\*\*Fourth Think Question Due on March 18<sup>th</sup>.



**Week #11 – March 25<sup>th</sup> –**

“A Pragmatist/Situational Ethics for Liberal Societies”

Readings:

John Dewey, “Three Independent Factors in Morals” (1930) and “The Moral Self” (1932) from *The Essential Dewey, vol. 2*.

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999): TBD.

\*\*\*Exegesis due on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Week #12 – April 1<sup>st</sup> –**

“Cosmopolitanism, Reciprocity, Reconciliation: Some Final Thoughts on our Ethical Dilemmas”

Readings:

John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air* (University of Chicago Press, 2001): pp. 263-272.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (W.W. Norton, 2006): pp. 155-174.

\*\*\*Ethical Deliberation Due by April 12<sup>th</sup> at 5pm.