

SPCOM 101: Theories of Communication

Faculty of Arts, Department of Drama and Speech Communication
Fall 2017: Wednesday & Thursday: 4:00-5:20, STP 105

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The function of communication does not exhaust the essence of language. Naturally, language communicates, transmits, and transports meanings, messages, and contents. But the effects produced by an act of language or writing cannot necessarily be reduced to the transmission of a piece of information or knowledge . . . When I say something to someone, it is not certain that my major preoccupation is to transmit knowledge or meaning; it is rather to enter into a certain type of relation with the other person, to attempt to seduce him or her, to give him or her something, or even to wage war. Thus, beyond the schemas of communication appear other possible finalities. – Jacques Derrida

Course Description:

We are all constantly communicating, even in our silence. If this is so, then our attempts to talk critically about communication are always already constituted by the very thing we wish to investigate (imagine a painter who could only reflect upon the practice of painting by producing another painting). This makes all theorizing about communication difficult. The basic form of the problem is this: We have two people, A and B. A does something that affects B in such a way that we say that “communication” between them has occurred. How is it that this “communication” between A and B ever takes place at all? This is the question that will help found our discussion in this course.

Theories of communication attempt to answer this question by explaining what we mean by the affect that A has on B. Such answers have ranged from the very simple, as with the “transmission model” of communication, to the very complex, as with the “mathematical theory”. Some theories are concerned with language, some with action and movement, some with expectation and intention, some with networks and solidarity, and some with cognitive cues and spatial arrangements. There is rational argument theory, symbolic convergence theory, uncertainty reduction theory, narrative paradigm theory, diffusion of innovation theory, decision emergence theory, image restoration theory, uses and gratifications theory, face negotiation theory, cross-cultural adaptation theory, expectancy violation theory, muted group theory, systems theory, information theory, and the coordinated management of meaning theory.

Questions about communication have haunted the western mind from at least the ancient Greeks until today, and all of this theorizing is an attempt to explain the problem stated above. Once one realizes that questions of communication imply questions about meaning, identity, subjectivity, freedom, reason, power, language, the soul and the body, one begins to realize that the problem of communication lies at the center of countless debates in the history of Western

thought. Given this far-ranging multiplicity of theories and the bewildering, complex, and pressing philosophical problems that such theories attempt to answer, we will read broadly and engage a number of traditions, themes and ideas that are found within, and adjacent to, the rather amorphous field of thought and practice called communication. As a first course in communication studies, it may not be what you expect.

Course Objectives:

- Students should become familiar with some of the varied intellectual traditions within contemporary North American communication theory.
- Students should gain a sense of the central philosophical and intellectual questions concerning the relationship between communication and culture.
- Students should have a working vocabulary of key theories of communication (working vocabulary means that you will have the ability to use these theories in practical ways as explanatory or interpretive tools).
- Students should develop the capacity to think theoretically and critically. That is, students should be able to explain particular phenomena by appeals to general ways of understanding and figure out how to explore ideas and the meaning of objects or events in a sustained, substantive, sophisticated, and insightful manner.
- Students will be introduced to and expected to read very difficult texts. Thus, students will be expected to improve their reading comprehension skills.
- Students will be expected to turn in polished, elegant writing that demonstrates a clear command of the readings, an individual, authorial voice, and a capacity for thoughtful reflection on complex ideas.
- Students will be expected to develop the 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 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 theories of communication.

Course Policies and Procedures:

- *In the Classroom* – This is primarily a lecture class. During each class period, I will deliver a lecture on the topics outlined on the course schedule. However, that does not mean I expect you to be passive consumers. At times 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 in lectures will be encouraged in a variety of ways. 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.

- *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 Thursday.” 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

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. Instead, I've produced a lengthy coursepack for you to buy. Doing the required readings before coming to lecture is the best way to do well in this course. Reading carefully, critically, and analytically is essential for your success. This is a humanities course, and, therefore, it requires careful reading of complex and sophisticated texts.

Assignments:

- 1) **Quiz** – During our last class period together we will have a quiz. It's no big deal, and the quiz on the last day is not an official final exam. We'll discuss in class the nature of the questions on the quiz. The quiz will be graded on a scale of 0-100 and worth 25% of your final grade.
- 2) **Exegeses** – An exegesis (sing.) 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 theory. You will do three exegeses throughout the term, due on October 18th, November 1st, and November 22nd - each exegesis will be graded on a scale of 0-33 for a total score of 1-100 (you get a free point for completing all three). I'll hand out specific instructions for the exegeses in class. You should know that these papers are generally each 3-5 pages long. The exegeses will be worth a total of 25% of your final grade.
- 3) **In-Class Writing Exercises** – On five separate, unannounced occasions throughout the semester, we'll take ten minutes of class time to write a critical description and analysis

of a concept from that week's lectures. Each of these five in-class writing exercises will be evaluated on a scale of 0-20 for a total of 0-100 possible points. Students must be present during lecture to complete the assignment. These reports will be worth a total of 25% of your final grade.

- 4) **Deliberation** – Around the middle of the semester, you'll get a partner (or perhaps two partners) to complete the final assignment. Together you will participate in a deliberation about one of the key issues that we will be dealing with throughout the semester. Your "deliberation" is a sustained back and forth conversation between you and your partner (or partners) that unfolds over several weeks and in which the two (or three) of you think through some controversial issue and some examples of what we have talked about in class. At the end of your deliberation, you and your partner (or partners) will edit what you discussed and hand it in as a kind of paper. This assignment will be due on or before December 8th, and will be graded on a scale of 0-100. You will receive explicit instructions for the deliberation in class. This assignment will be worth 25% of your final grade.

Grades:

- *Is this Class Going to be Easy?* - The students in this class represent some of the best and most capable young people in the province. Accordingly, we will expect a lot from you. You will not automatically be given an A because you have made an effort or because you are accustomed to getting high marks. C is an average grade, and in order to do better than that, you will have to produce better than average work. This means that you will go the extra distance, do the extra reading, prepare for classes by taking notes and formulating questions, make thoughtful interventions in class, submit careful and polished assignments free from careless errors, etc. There are no easy A's and this is not an easy class.
- *How are Grades Calculated?* - For each of the four assignments you will receive a score out of 100 points. I will then average the marks based on the percentage weights listed above. 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 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. I'm telling you this so that you know that if you earn a 75 on an assignment it means that I think the assignment is good not excellent. If you earn a 95, it means it's one of the best pieces of work I've have ever seen for this kind of class.

- *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 (5 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:

September 7th –

Lecture: “Introduction to the Course: a Humanist Approach to Communication not a Technical Approach to Communications”

September 13th –

Lecture: “The Constitution of the Field of Communication Theory – A Multiplicity of Perspectives from the 20th Century”

Reading:

John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air* (University of Chicago Press, 1999): 1-31.

Key Questions: What, according to John Peters, are the dominant understandings of communication in the 20th century? Why does the word communication have so many different definitions?

September 14th –

Lecture: “The Constitutive Model of Communication Versus The Transmission Model”

Reading:

Reddy, Michael, “The Conduit Metaphor – A Case of Frame Conflict in our Language about Language,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd ed. edited by Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 284-324.

Key Questions: What are the implications of describing communication with the conduit metaphor? What other metaphors might we use?

September 20th –

Lecture: “The First Approach to Communication Theory that We Don’t Really Study: Information Theory and Cybernetics”

Reading:

Norbert Weiner, “Information, Language, and Society,” from *Mass Communication and American Social Thought, Key Texts 1919-1968*, edited by John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): 243-248.

Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (University of Illinois Press, 1964): 3-6 and 31-35.

Key Questions: What is the relationship between information and communication? What is the relationship between mathematics and communication? What are the implications of understanding communication in terms of information and mathematics?

September 21st –

Lecture: “The Second Approach to Communication Theory that We Don’t Really Study: Empiricism, Media Effects, and Mass Communication Research”

Reading:

Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action,” from *Mass Communication and American Social Thought, Key Texts 1919-1968*, edited by John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004): 230-241.

Key Questions: What effects can communication have on society? How does communication effect society?

September 27th and September 28th –

Lecture: “The Sociality of Language (or the reason we don’t study information theory and media effects)”

Reading:

Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Harvard University Press, 1999): 1-34.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958): 2-21.

Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1980): 305-321.

Key Questions: What is implied by the term “social construction”? What gives words meaning? How do we know how to use words? What is the relationship between community, meaning, and language? What constitutes an interpretive community for Stanley Fish? What makes one interpretation authoritative? Or, what makes one interpretation better than some other interpretation?

October 4th and October 5th –

Lecture: “The Semiotics of Signs”

Reading:

Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” from *Mythologies* (Hill and Wang, 1972): 109-127.

Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertising* (Marion Boyers Publishers, 1984): 17-39.

Stuart Hall, “Encoding-Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson Press, 1980): 128-138.

Key Questions: What is a sign? What is the problem in interpreting signs? What is the difference between a signifier and a signified? How does the process of signification affect communication? How does the relationship between signifier and signified affect the constitution of culture and meaning?

October 11th and 12th – No Class Because of Thanksgiving

October 18th –

Lecture: “Discourse and Power”

Reading:

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Book, 1990): 3-13 and 77-102.

Key Questions: Where does power reside for Foucault? What is the relationship between power and discourse? What is the difference between discourse and language? What does power have to do with communication?

***First Exegesis Due.

October 19th –

Lecture: “Ideology and Power”

Reading:

Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” from *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971): 123-173.

Key Questions: What is the relationship between ideology and the state? How does ideology function in relationship to discourse? What gives ideology power?

October 25th –

Lecture: “Communication and Political Economy”

Readings:

Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, translated by Martin Nicolaus (Penguin, 1971): 41-49 and 78-106.

Key Questions: What is political economy and what does it have to do with communication? How does one “do” political economy? How do Marx’s notions of labor, capital, and exchange affect our understanding of communication?

October 26th –

Lecture: “The Mass Society vs. The Public”

Readings:

C. Wright Mills, “The Mass Society,” from *The Power Elite* (Oxford University Press, 1962): 298-324.

Key Questions: What makes the mass society possible? What role does communication play in producing a mass society? How does a mass public or a mass society alter our conceptions of democracy and the role of media as technologies of communication?

November 1st –

Lecture: “The Culture Industry”

Readings:

T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972): 120-167.

Key Questions: What is the relationship between industry and culture? Does alienation imply that communication is impossible?

***Second Exegesis Due.

November 2nd and November 8th –

Lecture: “Images: On Representation, Reproduction, and Simulation”

Reading:

Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” from *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 217-251.

Jean Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media,” from *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . Or the End of the Social* (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983) 95-110.

Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” from *Selected Writings* (Stanford University Press, 1988): 166-182.

Key Questions: What does Benjamin mean by “aura”? What happens to art when aura is destroyed or lost? What are the political implications of mass production of artworks? What do images communicate for Baudrillard? Why is simulation and why has meaning imploded in a simulated world?

November 9th and November 15th –

Lecture: “Coordinated Social Action: Meaning, Dialogue, and the Public Sphere”

Reading:

George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934): 68-82, 144-152, 245-260.

Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” from *Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader*, edited by Steven Seidman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989): 231-236.

Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2 Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1981): 62-76.

Leslie Baxter, “Dialogue,” from *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory*, edited by Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (Sage Publications, 2005): 101-109.

Key Questions: What is the relationship between thought and communication for Mead? Where does meaning come from? How does the community or social life affect the construction of individual identity? What is a public sphere? What is illocution and how does it affect our understanding of communication?

November 16th and November 22nd –

Lecture: “Communication as Techné: Rhetoric, Argumentation, and Deliberation”

Reading:

Thomas B. Farrell, "Rhetorical Reflection: Toward an Ethic of Practical Reason," from *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 51-100.
Jonathan Sterne, "Techné" and John Gastel, "Deliberation," from *Communication as . . . Perspectives on Theory*, edited by Gregory Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas (Sage, 2005): 91-98 and 164-173.

Key Questions: What is rhetoric? What does it mean to understand communication as a practical art? What is the relationship between reason and rhetoric? How do we decide to do one thing when we might do another instead? What affect does communication have on the decision-making process?

***Third Exegesis due on November 22nd.

November 23rd and November 29th –

Lecture: "Interpretation, Reception, and Experience"

Reading:

Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977): 128-135.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," from *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David Linge (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976): 3-17.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962): 203-210.

Key Questions: What does Williams mean by "structures of feeling"? What do these structures have to do with culture and communication? How is feeling structured? What is the hermeneutical problem and why is this problem universal? What is the relationship between subject and object implied in Gadamer's work?

November 30th –

Quiz in Class