1991

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol3/iss1/11
The Interpersonal Communication Course

Joseph A. DeVito

The interpersonal communication course is one of the really great courses in the entire communication curriculum and, in fact, in the entire academic curriculum. It is relevant to just about everything you do — to your satisfaction with yourself, to your effectiveness on the job, to your success as a friend or lover. And students know this and quickly become involved and motivated.

Even the research is exciting — it addresses significant issues in truly imaginative ways and is always advancing our knowledge and understanding of interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships in important ways. It’s a great course to teach and a great course to write a textbook for. My task here is to look at the interpersonal communication course as a textbook writer as well as a teacher of interpersonal communication and describe the course — its purposes, structure, teaching methods, and problems. My last task — the most difficult but also the most challenging — is to speculate on the future of the course.¹

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSES OF THE COURSE

The introductory course in interpersonal communication is actually several different courses which, I think, can be indexed on two dimensions: a skills-theory dimension and a communication-relationship dimension.²
Any interpersonal communication course or textbook can, I think, be indexed in this two-dimensional space:

Of course, every course and every interpersonal textbook covers both skills and theory and both communication and relationships. So, it is really a question of emphasis. For example, I think Steve Duck’s *Relating to Others* (1988) would be most clearly in the theory-relationship quadrant. Mark Knapp’s *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships* (1984) would also be in this quadrant but would lean closer to both communication and skills than would Duck’s. I think my *Messages: Building Interpersonal Communication Skills* (1990a) would be in the skills-communication quadrant but would lean toward the relationship, whereas my *Interpersonal Communication Book* (1988) would be pretty close to the center of all four quadrants. (I want to resist classifying...
the other books for fear that I might do so in ways that their authors might disagree with.)

When you design your interpersonal course or select or write an interpersonal communication text, you probably ask yourself questions concerning the emphasis you want to give your course and the emphasis you want your textbook to demonstrate about skills and theory and about communication and relationships.

COURSE STRUCTURE

The course structure will vary depending on the specific orientation of the course along the skills-theory, communication-relationship dimensions.

1. **The theory-communication oriented course** seeks to explain the research and theory in interpersonal communication. For this kind of course — which would probably be a graduate or advanced undergraduate course — you would probably use Brain Spitzberg and William Cupach’s *Interpersonal Communication Competence* (1984) or their *Handbook of Interpersonal Competence Research* (1989). Your aim here would be to identify what is known about interpersonal competence.

   In this course, you might address such issues as how to categorize the functions of feed-forward, does protection theory or equilibrium theory best explain spatial behavior, what behaviors convey empathy, and how is agreement signaled.

2. **The theory-relationship oriented course** seeks to explain the theory and research in interpersonal relationships. In this kind of course — which again would probably be a graduate or advanced undergraduate course — your aim
would be to identify what is known about interpersonal relationships and especially about communication in interpersonal relationships.

In this course you might cover such topics as how accurately and completely does social exchange theory explain past and present interpersonal relationships, does equity theory work for cohabiting and married couples in the same way, do lesbian, homosexual, and heterosexual couples follow the same relationship progression in development, maintenance, deterioration, dissolution, and repair.

3. The skills-communication oriented course begins with the theoretical foundation of interpersonal competence research and theory (on the part of the teacher and textbook writer). It uses this foundation to teach those skills that will help the student communicate more effectively in a wide variety of interpersonal situations. This course is the interpersonal counterpart of our public speaking courses where we teach students how to prepare and deliver a wide variety of public speeches.

In the skills-communication course you might teach students how to communicate empathy, supportiveness, and openness, how to manage the communication interaction to the satisfaction of both parties, when and how to self-disclose, and how to selectively self-monitor their behaviors.

4. The skills-relationship oriented course is probably the most complex of all four orientations since its effective development must rest on the theory and research in both interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships. But, it must go beyond this to offer the skills for interacting in relationships — for developing, maintaining, repairing, and dissolving a wide variety of relationships.

In this course you might deal with how to become more effective in friendships, loves, and family relationships, how to express cherishing behaviors, how to be selectively open in
relationships, and how to communicate emotions in family situations.

Of course, all four orientations intersect and no course is likely to concentrate on any of these four extremes. The four general types are merely intended to illustrate the directions in which you might go or the emphases you might consider in developing a course in interpersonal communication. This typology might also prove useful in identifying some of the possible changes that this course might go through.

TEACHING METHODS

The teaching methods will vary widely on the basis of class size and, of course, teaching goals and course orientation.

Interpersonal communication courses in most places are offered in relatively small sections — say 30 or so students. In some cases — my own, for example — the course is a large lecture course with three or four hundred students. When this large lecture format is imposed — without any laboratory sections — there is little chance for working on interpersonal skills in any way that would prove meaningful. The opportunities for personalized feedback or for modeling, for example, are at best rare. These courses will often be forced to focus on theory (DeVito, 1986 & DeVito 1990b). When the class is relatively small, there is greater likelihood that skill development will be emphasized. The structure of the course dictates, to some extent, its function. Were administrators really concerned with educating students, function would dictate structure. 3

The method of teaching can vary from lecture (perhaps mediated) through discussion through experiential. Again, it is likely that the course structure will influence the method.
used. Generally, the greater the theory component, the greater the emphasis on lecture; the greater the skills component, the greater the emphasis on experiential methods.

**PROBLEMS OF THE COURSE**

There are many problems facing the interpersonal communication course that are shared by lots of other courses — the low reading scores of students, the lack of funds to offer individualized instruction, the large rewards given for publication (and the small rewards given for teaching) that force teachers to put most of their time and energy into publication rather than teaching.

The most glaring problem that I see — and this may not be typical throughout the country — is the tremendous diversity in student competencies. Some students can read and write with great ease and style; they have developed considerable analytic abilities and have experienced (with awareness and mindfulness) a great deal. To them we owe fairly sophisticated concepts and in-depth analyses of research and theory. Other students have trouble reading a really elementary textbook — say one that is written at a 10th grade level — and have no idea what a grammatical sentence looks like. They lack analytical skills and are relatively naive about communication and about relationships. To these students we owe a more carefully designed developmental sequence that begins at a basic level of competence and raises this to as sophisticated a level as possible. When these students are in the same class — as, it seems, they always are, we have to make decisions that will not be equally productive for all students. And it’s frustrating.

Another problem is that different students have different skill needs. Some students need very basic skills — how to open a conversation, how to recognize time cues, how to self-
disclose appropriately, how to ask for a raise. Other students need more advanced skills — how to express empathy to someone expressing a position you disagree with, how to gain compliance from a superior, how to break up a relationship and do as little damage as possible. Some, of course, want and need communication skills while others want and need relationship skills.

A third problem is that the research and theory is growing so rapidly that it is difficult to integrate these findings and perspectives into a meaningful whole, especially when that meaningful whole is skills-based. It is difficult and extremely time consuming, for example, to develop skill development exercises to reflect these new findings and theoretical positions. This problem — unlike the previous two — is actually a fun problem — it is a challenge which keeps us active thinkers. Another problem that is probably felt most acutely by the textbook writer is the religious and philosophical biases that vary from one end of the spectrum to the other and that people integrate into their courses — a bias that has nothing to do with the literature in interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships. Thus, for example, one reviewer wanted divorce described as “amputation” and wanted me to use very specific religious principles as the foundation for the discussion of relationships. These injunctions must be fiercely resisted because they will destroy the scientific foundation for an entire discipline. This does not mean that we cannot look at interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships from a religious or philosophical perspective. It does mean, I think, that we cannot teach a course or write a textbook in interpersonal communication or relationships and use it as a pulpit to advocate specific religious doctrine.
THE FUTURE OF THE COURSE

We can look at the future of the interpersonal communication course in terms of its movement on the theory-skill dimension, in terms of new courses, and in terms of the changes in focus that will revolve around the communication-relationship dimension.

The Movement Toward Skills

As I see it, the interpersonal communication course — at least as a general service course that meets university requirements for arts or humanities — will move in the direction of increased skills orientation. I see this happening for a number of reasons.

First, I think that a skills emphasis is easier to justify to administrators and university committees than a theory emphasis. The theory emphasis — especially when coupled with a relational emphasis — would be difficult to separate from many a psychology or sociology course. It isn’t quite as unique as a skills emphasis course.

Second, and this reason relates to the first, is that our students’ communication skills — in speaking and writing — seem at an all time low. It’s obvious to everyone in a college setting — at least most college settings — that these skills need to be strengthened.

To the extent that business and industry dictate our curriculum, the movement will be in the direction of skills. We don’t want our students to go unemployable and part of employability is the communication skills of our students. And so, we will teach to meet the need.
In a 1985 issue of *Playboy*, in their “Playboy Guide: Back to Campus ’85,” the editors advised students to take three courses: statistics, business writing, and public speaking (1985). In the next few years, interpersonal communication will no doubt be one of the three essential courses, whether *Playboy* recognizes it or not.

Students want success and they want us to teach them how to be successful. There are actually few courses in the college curriculum that teach students how to be successful — personally, socially, and professionally. Interpersonal communication is one of these elite courses. And students know this; they know that communication skills will contribute greatly to their success. And that is at least one reason why our courses are almost invariably oversubscribed.

Skills are teachable; we can see the results from our teaching of skills; it is difficult to see the results from our teaching theories. And perhaps as communication teachers, many of us have been conditioned to look at skill development as a measure of our instructional effectiveness.

Communication skills are also fun to teach; they require active involvement, are invigorating, and immediately satisfying to both students and teachers.

For these and for probably many other reasons, this movement to skills seems inevitable. Whether this is for good or ill, however, is not as clear in my mind. There is always the danger that in our movement to skills we will commit the same sin that our elocutionary counterparts committed and that was to offer specific suggestions for effectiveness without the necessary research base.

A second sin the elocutionists committed — at least as currently stereotyped — was in their concern for appearances rather than for content. Our own interpersonal skills training is unbalanced, I think, in the same way. While, I think, we do give some attention to content, we focus more on appearances. Thus, for example, we consider the nature of affinity-seeking and compliance-gaining strategies and how to use them but
we do not devote equal attention to when these are appropriate or to their ethical implications. We discuss power — powerful and powerless speech, for example — but we discuss much less the relationship that power bears to substance or the ethical and unethical uses of power in relationships. This concern for appearances is also demonstrated by the absence of the discussion of ethics in most of our interpersonal communication textbooks.

So, while interpersonal communication teachers will be pressured to offer skills training, we must only offer what can be scientifically supported. And we must subordinate appearances to content and substance and to the ethical implications of communication effectiveness.

The relationship oriented course will also become more concerned with relationship skills, for example, how to reduce loneliness, how to increase happiness, how to ask for a date, how to discuss relational problems with your mate, how to reduce interpersonal stress, how to discuss commitment, how to write premarital agreements.

New Courses

While the introductory service course will come to focus more and more on interpersonal communication skills, other interpersonal courses will be created. Three possible new courses — already implied in our four part typology — would be: interpersonal communication theory, interpersonal relationship theory, and interpersonal relationship management.

There will also emerge courses devoted entirely to or substantially to the application of interpersonal skills to a variety of fields. The “Interpersonal Communication in Business” course that already exists and for which there are suitable textbooks may serve as the prototype. “Interpersonal
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Skills in Counseling” and “Interpersonal Skills for the Teacher” are obvious additions.

Focus Changes

We will also see a variety of more specific changes, changes in focus. For example, listening will begin to focus more on memory — for information, for people. This will probably result because memory is an obvious social and business skill that is essential for effective interpersonal communication. Listening is also an area that has been recognized — and rightly so — for its centrality to all forms of communication, but it has been embarrassing in its lack of research and theory. But that should change in the next several years. We will see greater emphasis on the pragmatic-behavioral approach to interpersonal communication, on conversational management, on compliance gaining, or ingratiating strategies, on affinity seeking. This seems a natural outgrowth of the increased emphasis on skills.

There will be a greater emphasis on lesbian and gay relationships — an area where our courses, research, theory, and textbooks have virtually ignored. Interpersonal relationships are not always between Mary and John. The heterosexual bias that permeates our literature will, I think, be reduced and perhaps eventually replaced by a less restrictive focus. In a similar way, interpersonal communication will integrate more effectively and more extensively the literature and insights from intercultural communication. The hidden assumption that we communicate with persons from the same culture will give way to a more realistic assumption, namely that we are all culturally diverse and that our communications must recognize this.

Currently, we virtually ignore relationships among those with sensory deficits. For example, we say little about
communication in general and about interpersonal communication and relationships in particular with the blind or the hearing impaired. This should change and probably will change in the near future.

Oddly enough we have little to say about sex — about communication in sex, about sex as communication, and about the role of sex in interpersonal relationships — in attraction and in the developmental stages of relationships, for example. We say much less, for example, than our colleagues in sociology and psychology. I think this will change.

We will also, I think, devote more attention to temporary relationships — between teacher and student, customers and service personnel, employee and employer, and even client and prostitute.

We will also devote at least some attention to the role of the telephone in interpersonal communication and in interpersonal relationships. We currently ignore the telephone, although we would all probably agree that it plays a central role in interpersonal relationships. And we would also have to agree, I think, that telephone communication is different enough from face-to-face communication to warrant special consideration. Also, the popularity of the 900 numbers for self-disclosing, for exchanging fantasies, and for meeting potential partners will surely occupy some of our attention.

We will also give more attention to relationships in contexts other than the student dormitory and to subjects other than students. The fact that our literature on love — what love is, what it means, and the influence it has on our lives, on relational deterioration and dissolution, and on relational intimacy — is based on college student responses to questionnaires can only weaken the scientific foundation that we need for any interpersonal course. Relationships of the street, in the military, in prisons, and in hospitals, for example, will be given greater attention. And hopefully we will go beyond the college classroom for insight into interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships.

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Whether or not the interpersonal course will undergo these changes or others is of course impossible to predict. That the course will undergo changes in response to the needs of our students and to the theoretical and research advances that are sure to come seems much more certain. The course will surely continue to grow in both interest and relevance to students, to teachers, and to textbook writers. And that's a pretty exciting prospect.

NOTES

1I've been very fortunate in having so many professionals in interpersonal communication share their insights with me over what the nature of the interpersonal course should be, the main changes the course and the field are undergoing, the problems with the course, and so many other topics. So, in addition to the journal articles, the textbooks, and the convention papers, I've made extensive use of the reviews of my own books. Between The Interpersonal Communication Book and Messages: Building Interpersonal Communication Skills, I've had about 100 detailed reviews, spanning about 15 years, in which the very questions we're considering here were also addressed by these reviewers.

2Of course, the interpersonal communication course, like any other course, can also be indexed in terms of its difficulty level, interest level, real world v. philosophical world view, and so on. The skills-theory and communication-relationship dimensions are singled out because they are particularly relevant to the interpersonal communication as it exists today and to the changes that it is undergoing.

3Consider the same situation as it would occur in public speaking — if relatively small, the course becomes one in effective public speaking where the student prepares and delivers a variety of public speeches. If the course grows to several hundred without any small sections, the course becomes one in which the focus is on understanding the
theory of public communication and with the effects that public speaking has in the political and social arena.

4In my own courses where I try to integrate research on gay and lesbian relationships and try to avoid the heterosexual bias that permeates our scholarly and pedagogical literature, I invariably get notes stuffed into my mailbox — often written anonymously — that thank me for not ignoring the gay and lesbian students, for not making these students feel that a course in interpersonal relationships excludes them.

Compare, for example, Steve Duck’s comment, in his chapter on “Developing a Steady and Exclusive Partnership: Courtship,” (Relating to Others, 65): “For similar reasons [“space limitations and the relative scarcity of such research at present”], I shall confine my remarks to romances between opposite-sex partners; readers may have their own ideas about the degree to which what I have to say here applies to gay and lesbian relationships.” While I can’t argue with “space limitations” since each author has a right to define the scope of his or her own book, I would question “the relative scarcity of such research at present.” For a good start see John DeCecco, ed., Gay Relationships (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1988) and David P. McWhirter and Andrew M. Mattison, The Male Couple: How Relationships Develop (Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984). And, of course, the extensive study, American Couples: Money, Work, Sex by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (New York: William Morrow, 1983) covers relationships among heterosexual married, heterosexual cohabiters, lesbians, and gay men.
REFERENCES


