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Small Group Communication as an Introductory Course

John K. (Jack) Brilhart

It took considerable temerity for me to write a paper about an introductory course in small group communication. Although I have taught basic small group courses throughout my career as a college teacher, I have never had the opportunity to teach where a small group course was an option among introductory communication courses from which most or all graduates were required to choose. So I projected from my experience in teaching and coordinating multiple-section hybrid, interpersonal and public-speaking courses. Mostly I have drawn on my experiences in teaching small group courses at the sophomore and upper-class levels, my experience in conducting noncredit workshops, and my research for writing small group communication textbooks.

I. THE INTRODUCTORY SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION COURSE

An introductory course in small group communication should be designed to serve students from all major fields of study, not just communication, sociology, psychology, education and/or business students. Futurists such as Naisbitt and Theobold have forecast that competencies as members of small groups will become increasingly important to Americans in the 21st century; human experience in recent years gives credibility to these forecasts. Today virtually
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everyone needs at least moderate competency in small group communicating.

An introductory service course should blend both theories about small groups and communication within and involving them, some applications of the theories to the world of work, and limited training in specific small group techniques. This course will not be about interpersonal communication per se; that is dealt with in interpersonal courses, and there is not enough time to deal with it in a small group course. Nor would it be a course in group dynamics, which is the study of the nature and functioning of groups in general rather than being focused on communication. And although I have been certified as a T-Group trainer for college students and have participated in and facilitated many “experiential” groups involving encounter, therapy, confrontation, gestalt methods, and more, I would not put these theories or methods into a basic small-group service course. For the most part, such group techniques deal with more general interpersonal relations than with small group communication as such, and call for highly specialized competencies on the part of the instructor.

The introductory small group communication course I propose would first focus on small task (secondary) groups as entities or organisms, from the perspective of general systems theory. Within that framework, a small group is just as real an entity as is a human being, a nation, a corporation, a solar system, or a universe. Students must be taught to perceive groups as entities (not mere collections) with observable input, throughput, and output characteristics, invariably embedded in larger social systems. Just as a bee has little meaning apart from a colony, so does a human apart from groups of humans.

Almost everyone needs to learn how to work in teams with people who are have drastically different backgrounds and training: engineers with psychologists, designers with scientists, chemists with food processors, public relations
practitioners with physicians, ranchers with city dwellers, and so on. Diverse people need to learn how to communicate to achieve consensus on a course of action that will reflect their collective wisdom in decision making. Otherwise, we may experience more and more disastrous decisions like that which led to the launching of Challenger when the weather was too cold.

Such an introductory course will deal only to a limited extent with short-term groups which hold one or very few meetings; its focus should be on groups which have time to develop a culture of norms, roles and statuses, procedures, networks and other group level variables. In my judgment, only brief attention (if any) should be given to primary groups such as the family, to one-time conferences of representatives, to one-show panel groups, and none at all to such assemblages as symposia or colloquia. Whether or not I would devote much class time to learning groups would depend on the career objectives of students. More of my views on this matter can be found in my texts Effective Group Discussion and Communicating in Groups.

The instructor and instructional materials should make a clear distinction between individual-level and group-level variables. Individuals are components of groups; just as you cannot build good cars of inferior parts, so deficient groups are often composed of deficient people. Our teaching should partly be aimed at helping people become better group components. But stress should be on the group-level variables, and what can be done when a group-level characteristic is poor because of inferior member(s). Sometimes a group can improve its members, and thus the group is also improved. In addition to conceptualizing individual and group variables, students need to understand how small groups function as components of larger systems called “organizations,” and how a group’s structure is related to how it functions.
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We Americans have developed an individualistic culture, based on the frontier mentality reflected in such mythic heroes as the Lone Ranger, Annie Oakley, Daniel Boone and the mountain man. An individualistic culture contrasts with a collective or group-oriented culture, in which individuals perceive themselves primarily as parts of a group, giving priority to group goals over self. Students need to understand how the values of Japanese, Tiawanese, Korean, some Scandinavian, and other collectivist cultures have contributed to their relative success in international competition. They need to know about the training in teamwork that is done in such corporations as IBM, Ford, and Saturn. One source book of special value for this is Larson and LaFasto’s Teamwork. Managers of tomorrow come from all major fields; all need at least a Theory Z view of management as we move into a century of economic competition which will determine our relative place in the world.

II. PURPOSES OF AN INTRODUCTORY SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION COURSE

The perspective sketched above suggests the instructional objectives and content of an introductory small group communication course. Objectives should be stated as observable/measurable student responses, whether those responses are given on tests, on a variety of questionnaires and scales, in essay, or as a participant in groups. For example, on completion of such a course the student should be able to:

1. Describe the major characteristics of an “ideal” problem-solving group.
2. Demonstrate competency in perceiving specific group characteristics, such as decision-making and problem-solving procedures, leader functions, communication procedures, and agenda setting.

3. Write an analytic description of the development, structure and throughput processes of a student project group.

4. Explain how to select inputs to initiate a new group for a defined purpose, and express a clear charge for almost any type of task group.

5. Demonstrate such personal values and competencies as open-mindedness to divergent information and ideas, responsibility for the success of any group of which s/he is a member, skills in critical thinking, willingness to communicate information that is relevant, skill in expressing information and ideas clearly and concisely, willingness to adjust self to group needs without violation of core values, rejection or rebellion against autocratic leadership by self or others, discovery of relevant information sources, and a high level of reflective thinking in contrast to unsystematic intuitive problem solving procedures.

6. Outline a group- and task-relevant problem-solving procedure modeled on scientific method and recent research by such small-group theorists as Hirokawa and Poole.

7. Demonstrate understanding of considerable terminology which has become relatively stable among small group and communication theorists, including such terms as group, small group, role, norm, rule, problem, problem solving, decision making, leader, designated leader, emergent leader, development, culture, cohesiveness and conflict management.
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8. Explain and/or facilitate a number of selected small group techniques, including at least brainstorming, the problem census, the nominal group technique, a quality control circle procedure, teleconferences, buzz groups, and leader mediation of conflict.

9. Serve a small group as a “reminder” or non-participant process consultant.

10. Demonstrate a modicum of skill in assessing contingencies to which leadership services and procedures must be adjusted, and a realization that more than just one way may be appropriate and effective.

The other face of instructional objectives is the content of the course. The educated young person leaving campus needs to know how small groups fit into modern organizations. Through reading and viewing, the course should include an orientation to groups in the modern world. Except for those who have been very active in student government and possibly such organizations as scouting and campfire, few students have experience in many such groups. Classroom groups are rarely so involving of self as are work teams, task forces, quality circles, etc.

Part of the content should be the student as a group member: what kind of member would I be now? how can I become a more flexible, competent group participant/communicator/leader?

The course content must include a model of ideal task groups, such as outstanding surgical teams, task forces, work crews, autonomous work groups, and committees so the student has a standard for evaluating what he or she is experiencing in groups, and attempting to improve group work.

The content of the course must include a transactional perspective on communication process and skills in listening.
to understand, evaluate, and recall. The amount of attention given to scientific method in problem solving may vary with the students’ backgrounds, but generally a systematic approach, the rationale for it, the research evidence supporting it, and specific applications belong in a service course.

How and when (contingencies) to provide various leadership services should definitely be part of every basic small group service course, including necessary administrative functions such as planning and keeping records, leading discussions, and group development. Every educated person is likely to be called on to serve small groups as a designated leader. Without training, many people are inflexible in the face of changing contingencies, and virtually ruin such groups. Emergent leaders all too often become tyrannical.

You may or may not need to include some guidance in doing library research. A brief orientation to interpreting and evaluating statistical data from surveys may be needed.

Finally, the content of such a course should include some introduction to observer techniques and tools in order to enhance the student’s perceptions and equip him or her to serve in an advisory capacity as both non-participant and participant observer to secondary groups.

III. COURSE STRUCTURE

The Syllabus

The syllabus should be adequate to distinguish between this course and both other basic communication courses and small group courses offered in such departments as psychology, sociology, and counselling. If students are assigned to sections of a service course taught by a variety of instructors,
one syllabus that details the course should govern all these sections, and be treated as a contract between the department (and college or university) and the student. The assignment to teach an introductory course is not a license, but a permit to teach within prescribed limits (I have been told that this idea has been established in courts). Adhering to the syllabus is a matter of personal responsibility to an ethical person. If she or he finds the syllabus unacceptable, the responsible instructor attempts to get it changed or refuses to teach the course. The personnel teaching a small group course normally could themselves function as a small group, or perhaps in an institution with a large enrollment, as an organization with several component small groups.

The syllabus should present the instructor’s philosophy for the course (including the objectives in terms students can understand), list required materials, be explicit about all attendance and performance requirements, outline the content and scope of the course, describe the kinds of assignments and classroom activities in which the student will be required to participate, define the bases and process of grading, and the nature of the instructor’s relationship to students. A copy of the syllabus should be distributed and explained to every student during the initial class meeting. Any student unsatisfied with the syllabus can then withdraw on an informed basis.

**Assignments, Exercises, and Other Learning Activities**

Student assignments would, of course, include preparing for class sessions by studying assigned chapters or other reading materials, and writing short papers. I think that some assignments are especially important in a small group course. I cannot imagine myself teaching such a class without
a major group project, for which the students assume a high level of responsibility, maintain a personal journal or other record of observations about the group, and do a detailed written description, analysis and evaluation. The project can take any of many forms: a case study of some group or organization, a research project investigating a question or hypothesis about some aspect of small group dynamics, functioning as an advisory task force to some campus or community organization, creating an instructional program such as a videotape for training committee chairs, planning a quality control circle program for a local business, a handbook for committee members and chairs of a service organization, and so on. Such an assignment should be given early, so groups have time to form and function. The end product of the group must be real to the students, which means they actually sign and submit their recommendations to administrators or boards, show their videotape to appropriate audiences, submit the paper, or at least give a program to their classmates. Everyone in the group should receive the same grade for this output; each will receive an individual grade for the case study of the project group.

Other important assignments include planning outlines of questions for structuring problem solving discussions, detailed investigations and interpretations of problems, perhaps preparing for and participating in “Learning Thru Discussion,” observing meetings of small groups and writing analytical reports, writing minutes for classroom groups, preparing meeting notices and other written documents for small groups, and diagnosing self as a potential group member.

If you think the assignments I’ve described involve a lot of writing, you’re right! I’ve never figured out how to teach a small group or interpersonal course to my satisfaction without demanding a lot of writing from my students. For that reason, I’d prefer one prerequisite for a basic small group communication course: completion of a college-level composition course,
or demonstrated proficiency in writing essays. Personally, I’d prefer not to teach a small group communication course for college credit open to just any entering freshman, literate or not.

Students should have opportunity to participate in and lead numerous problem-solving discussions — problems that are real to them, about which they can make some difference. They can prepare for leading such discussions, practice observing them and giving advisory and valuative feedback, practice follow-up skills, and more. Students can prepare descriptions of problems affecting them personally or involving friends and family members. They can learn to present information needed by an advisory group in the form of briefings, fact sheets, case studies, and so on. They can also gain experience in systematic problem solving through discussion of published cases.

Although I would not turn an introductory small group course into an encounter group, limited and controlled encounter can be used to great advantage among members of a student group who have spent several class periods working together on a number of problems. Feedback comments can be directed to specific characteristics or perceptions members have of each other as members.

Examinations

Despite all the writing required for assignments, written examinations cannot be omitted as both valuative and instructional tools. Aside from the work of reading and grading them, I believe essay-type exams are far superior to short-answer exams for a small-group course, at least for the final exam. Only an essay exam can discover learning in the cognitive domain at the levels of analysis and synthesis. Probably the best I have done is to give students a long list of
essay questions very early in the course, then promise that all or most of their final written exam will be a sample of these questions. These questions can include problems one might face in a small group (such as how to respond to a problem member, what to do with a counter-productive norm, what to include in a training program, or a sequence for solving a case problem). Then you can encourage the formation of study groups to explore the questions. It seems to me that the outcome is usually enhanced cooperative relationships, and greatly increased learning of the more abstract and difficult concepts and skills. For brief intermediate exams or quizzes, one can justifiably resort to short-answer tests involving true-false and other choice questions, multiple-choice questions, completion questions, and even matching. One technique some of my colleagues have used is to give a brief quiz on the assigned chapter at the beginning of the class hour. Such a quiz can also include a question or two from a lecture given during the previous meeting.

Teams of instructors in a multi-section course could prepare such exams and quizzes. If the course format includes mass lecture followed up by lab sections with individual instructors, a common examination will be imperative.

**Evaluation**

An evaluation is needed of at least two major components of an introductory small group course: individual student learning; and learning by the class, otherwise stated as “How well did the instructor achieve the objectives of the course?” Written assignments, observations of groups working in lab sessions, and students’ answers on tests will tell an instructor how well cognitive objectives are being achieved. It is much harder to assess how effectively one is achieving objectives in the affective domain. I have used tests of authoritarianism,
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dogmatism, apprehension, assertiveness, leadership attitude, and other personality factors affecting group participation in before-versus-after designs as a way of appraising how well I've done as instructor in this regard. The occasional chance to talk with an alum can be enlightening if you ask a few questions about how the course may have affected the former student. And I expect almost all of us teaching introductory courses have some sort of scale we must give students near the end of the course on which they evaluate us as teachers, and perhaps place some judgment on the value of the course they are just completing. Though I've done a lot of study of such scales and helped in their design, I still have grave misgivings about their value in evaluating courses, instruction, or anything of importance to what I call education.

One method of evaluation that you may want to try because it has face value relevance to a small group course is to create a quality circle or two of volunteers in a class. Such a group, given a charge to make suggestions about how the course could be made more productive, can be a source of much information useful for evaluating how well one is doing long before the course has ended.

IV. TEACHING METHODS

For a multiple-section small group communication course involving graduate teaching assistants and other instructors with minimal background in the area, you may want to use a mass-lecture-plus-individual-lab-session format. All instructional staff would meet regularly to plan the course and work out details of activities, assignments, and examinations. All lab sections would then be doing the same activities at the same time. I have no personal experience with such a small-group course, but can readily sketch it out from the way we handle the basic interpersonal course at Southwest Missouri
State, and the way I saw the public speaking course handled at Penn State. Although I might chafe under the restrictions such a program would place on me as an instructor, as a professor or administrator I would much prefer it to having semi-competent instructors with a great deal of autonomy.

In most cases, instructors will have considerable freedom within the parameters of an institution-approved syllabus. With such freedom I would definitely opt for a variety of “delivery” methods: lecture about such ideas as groups systems, in-class planning sessions to learn how to apply the general model of science to problem solving, case problems such as “Lost On the Moon” to practice skills and techniques such as guidelines for reaching consensus, demonstrations such as an instructor-led problem census, the “Learning Thru Discussion” format for study of detailed theory, and lots and lots of practice in group participation, observing groups, giving valutative critiques, and attending to the administrative details for actual small groups. In short, this is a practicum course. It will take more contact hours than credit hours if students are to develop competencies which will enable them to function well in small task groups. That leads me to some of the problem you may encounter in an introductory small group communication course.

V. PROBLEMS IN THE COURSE

One of the biggest problems I have encountered at the four colleges and universities where I have taught small group courses is that many students have almost no experience participating in small secondary groups. They know a lot more about primary groups from families, peer groups of friends, etc. A few bring extensive experience in religious organizations, student government, theatre, and outfits like a boy’s club or girl scouts. I find it hard to impress
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students with little task group experience with the importance of much that I’m doing — indeed, I did not get interested in these things until I found myself elected president of a county teachers organization and secretary of a dog club (who really coordinated the club). A good textbook, interviews, guest presentations, some videos and films can help.

A serious problem, especially at commuter campuses, is finding times when project and other out-of-class groups can meet. This is growing worse all the time as students work longer hours to support themselves, pay college bills, and feed automobiles. I’ve had groups meet at 6:00 a.m. on Sunday morning — the members found that was about the only time all were free! Being aware that this is a problem can help students form groups that can find reasonable meeting times.

A lack of high-school-level writing skills handicaps any student required to do coherent writing. Such students are common on campuses where I’ve worked during the last 25 years. The more writing I do, the more this perturbs me. My suggestion, as stated above, is to require basic composition as a prerequisite. I’ve had almost no problem when enrollment was limited to sophomore and higher communication majors who had completed basic news writing courses.

Classrooms and equipment can be a terrible hassle. My students have frequently designed “ideal” facilities for their class; never have I had the pleasure of teaching in such facilities. Generally they design a large classroom (maybe 40 or 50 students in it) with a lot of small meeting rooms around it, or a large room with easily-moved sliding partitions. Each room is equipped with several audio recorders, and ideally a camcorder. Then each student can analyze recordings of discussions in which he has participated, especially when in the role of designated leader. All too often my classes are multi-ring circuses, with several contemporaneous groups creating a horrendous noise level that makes a recording undecipherable. Also, there would be at least one small room
VI. THE FUTURE OF SMALL GROUP COURSES

From the opening of this essay, you know that I believe the future will see an expansion of small group communication courses, provided we who write the textbooks and teach the classes continue to maintain contact with the working world. If what we teach serves the future members of corporate America well (whether that be government agencies, health facilities, research and development enterprises, General Motors and ConAgra, McDonalds, or educational systems), our business will grow. I say that because the future trend has been toward the past, when human work was basically done in groups, not as individuals. This is basic to what we are; we humans are like deer and sheep, which need others of their kind. We are not loners like grizzly bears, and our enterprises are too complex to work alone.

On the other hand, a lot of changes are coming, a few of which I think I see dimly, and many that I cannot imagine. But come they will. In the 40s, when an individual engineer could design a car engine and workers on assembly lines had no such thing as a team or autonomous work group, we began
teaching about panel discussions and round tables. Some of us got carried away in humanistic experiential groups; others thought we had to be strictly social psychologists of group dynamics. But the wise ones, like Halbert Gulley and Frank Haiman, never lost sight of their functions as social engineers, people who needed to understand communication in groups and how to improve it by what they taught students. The late Kenneth Hance, for example, virtually invented the quality circle in a U.S. Steel plant before anyone even thought of a name like “quality control circle.” So what may we need to consider as we teach group communication courses in the future? Maybe how computers can be a part of group communications (not the medium, not just computer conferencing). Maybe developing and maintaining small groups with international distribution of members (and all that implies in culture and space problems). Maybe how to re-civilize America, so it is a safe place to exist because people value society as much as self. But if we keep contact with the world around the academy, the small group course will be seen as a more fundamental part of the development of a twenty-first century person than it has in the past.