
“Our most basic instinct is not for survival but for family. Most of us would give our own life for the survival of a family member, yet we lead our daily life too often as if we take our family for granted.”

—Paul Pearshall

CST 460-01: Family Communication
Fall 2007
Curry 332
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:30-4:45 p.m.

Professor

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Department of Communication Studies Mission

We research, teach, and practice communication to cultivate the ethical voices of people that speak in critical, constructive, and transformative ways to identities, relationships, and communities.

Philosophy of Scholarship: We believe that communication is formative and foundational to human identities, relationships, and communities—and that ethical and strategically effective communication can be the means of critiquing, constructing, and transforming identities, relationships, and communities. We engage in communication scholarship in the form of research, teaching, and service that:

- Integrates dialogue and other approaches to communication as the foundation for scholarly inquiry and application to the world
- Cultivates diversity and respect for differences
- Promotes change that leads to more democratic, just, and peaceful relationships and communities
- Engages creative partnerships of faculty, students, and other stakeholders in addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities for improving communication

Course Description

Lynn H. Turner and Richard West (2006) define family as: “A self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions with others; a family may include both voluntary and involuntary relationships; it creates both literal and symbolic internal and external boundaries; and it evolves through time: It has a history, a present, and a future” (p. 9). In this course, we will explore the strange and complex contours of communication in today’s families. We will examine definitions, theories, practices, communication patterns, and dynamics of family, with an eye toward coming to grips with the

stories, roles, rules, conflicts, power relationships, intimacy issues, stress, social influences, cultural differences, and challenges that shape and reflect our images and practices of family in contemporary culture. In particular, we will engage in examination, interpretation, and performance of family stories as a way to enter into deeper exploration of the meanings and nuances of family communication practices. Students will explore their family history/genealogy, examine current stories and traditions within their families, and look closely at the traditions, practices, and stories of another family (one that has distinct differences in culture, ethnicity, or composition from the student's own).

Course Purpose

The purpose of this 400-level course is to develop and expand your knowledge, understanding, and application of Family Communication theories, principles, and practices. Your own family communication experiences will serve as an open laboratory for deepening your understanding and appreciation for family communication dynamics.

Student Learning Outcomes/Course Objectives

You will:

- Build, use, and define key terms from the scholarly vocabulary of family communication studies;
- Develop a richer understanding—and appraise the value of—important theoretical and practical engagement in family communication studies;
- Read, interpret, and apply key family communication theoretical frameworks to your own and other families;
- Develop an appreciation for—and learn to interpret, write, and perform—family stories and rituals;
- Analyze family problems, challenges, stressors, and influences, and learn ways to manage them;
- Learn and practice various approaches to mediating/resolving family conflicts;
- Appreciate and appraise various family forms and cultures across a range of possibilities (i.e., comprehend, discuss, and write about the dynamism and diversity of family structures, cultures, and forms of organization);
- Develop and practice strategies for researching family communication, family histories and family genealogies, and family stories;
- Assess the changing family and consider the future of the family;
- Construct a theoretical and practical appraisal of your own family and compare it to other families; and
- Apply family theory and concepts to gain greater understanding of specific family situations, storylines, and challenges.

Course Requirements

- **READING:** Reading is an **essential** component of this course. **YOU MUST READ IN ORDER TO SUCCEED!** The readings will form the springboard for our class dialogues. All reading **MUST** be completed prior to the day for which it is assigned on the syllabus.

- **Attendance:** Since classroom learning is an integral component of this course, **ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY**. You will earn penalties for missing class. You may miss no more than two class sessions before penalties accrue (your "free skip" days). Each missed class session beyond the first two will earn you a penalty of 50 points. If you do the math, you will realize that this penalty, when combined with missed participation points, will result in a substantial "ding" to your grade. *Do the math before you ditch.* The only exceptions to this policy are University-sanctioned "**excused absences**" (death in the family; fire, flood, famine, pestilence, enrollment in the witness protection program, illness, etc.). You should contact me in advance—or as soon as you know—if you will miss class due to one of these reasons.
- **Participation:** Our class will be an active, interactive space for learning about the dynamics that animate family communication, and for learning theoretical constructs and explanations that will help us to understand the vibrant world of family communication. Your active participation is vital. Speak up! Offer your insights, ideas, conjectures, critical evaluations, responses to questions, and so on, as we engage in discussion. Offer relevant examples from daily life, the media, the arts, etc., to spur discussion; think and respond actively and creatively. By attending class regularly and actively participating, you will not only be better prepared for your writing assignments and for successful completion of this course, you will also help make this course a more valuable and enriching experience for us all!
- **IN-CLASS BEHAVIOR:** Please, no cell phones, side conversations, newspapers, lunches, or dinners in class. Water bottles with lids are acceptable. **Please arrive on time**, and do not leave the classroom except during our regular breaks. On the first day of class, we will have a discussion about further parameters of in-class conduct.
- **WRITING:** You will construct a "family book" as your major research and writing project for the semester. This project will be completed in phases, with due dates spread across the semester. Please refer to the "Course Success Guide" (on blackboard under "course documents") for detailed instructions, and to the course schedule (below) for due dates.

Academic Integrity First responsibility for academic integrity lies with individual students and faculty members of the UNCG community. A violation of academic integrity is an act harmful to all other students, faculty and, ultimately, the entire community. Specific information on the Academic Integrity Policy and obligations of faculty and students may be found on-line, on the UNCG website at the address: <http://deanofstudents.uncg.edu/>. Be sure to acquaint yourself with the student code of conduct and the academic integrity policy. It is your responsibility to know the rules and abide by them!

Meanwhile, know this: **Cheaters never prosper! And read this:**

http://www.buddhanet.net/bt_51.htm

Disability If you have a disability or special need that requires accommodation, please see me privately during office hours, or make an appointment.

Grading

Your major project for this course will be to develop a family book, which will include several chapters. Each chapter will be due on dates spread throughout the semester, with revised versions due in the final book you turn in at the end of the semester. You will be graded as follows:

Written work	Points
Chapter One: Who is my family?	75
Chapter Two: A story from my family	75
Chapter Three: My oldest living relative (an interview)	75
Chapter Four: My family tree (genealogy)	75
Chapter Five: Family comparison (an interview)	75
Chapter Six: Final reflection on my family	75
Final/revised version: My Family Book (includes all chapters)	100
Performative work	Points
Active participation	200
In class family simulation/facilitation/evaluation	150
Family story performance	50
Final presentation (open house participation)	50
Total	1000 points

930-1000 points (93%+) = A

900-929 (90-92%) = A-

870-899 (87-89%) = B+

830-869 (83-86%) = B

800-829 (80-82%) = B-

770-799 (77-79%) = C+

730-769 (73-76%) = C

700-729 (70-72%) = C-

670-699 (67-69%) = D+

630-669 (63-66%) = D

600-639 (60-62%) = D-

Course Materials/Reading

Turner, L.H. & West, R. (2006). *Perspectives on family communication* (3rd ed).
Boston: McGraw Hill.

Various **E-Reserve** Readings (links on Blackboard)

A 3-ring binder or scrapbook to assemble and hold your family book project

NOTE: ALWAYS BRING THE ASSIGNED TEXT/READING TO CLASS!

Course Schedule

August 21*Family Communication: Origins, definitions, stories...*

Activities:

- Introductions and course overview
- Definitions and openings
- Family stories, part one
- Forming our families

Assignment: Buy book and download/print e-reserve readings, syllabus, course success guide, etc.

August 23*Defining the family + The family communication perspective*

Read: Turner & West, pp. 1-19

Activity: Simple (?) communication skills

August 28*Sharing our stories: Family and early life*

Read: Turner & West, pp. 19-45

Activity: Opening family negotiations (guidelines) + Reflection

August 30*Theoretical frameworks (1): Overview*

Read: Turner & West, pp. 47-68

Activity: Mapping the theories

September 4*Theoretical frameworks (2): Some contemporary theories*

Read: Turner & West, pp. 68-81

Activity: Relational dialectics in families (1)

DUE: CHAPTER ONE (WHO IS MY FAMILY?)**September 6***Family Roles, Rules, and Variations*

Read: Turner & West, pp. 117-148

Activity: Consciously choosing rules and roles

September 11*Family and crisis (1): Remembering 9/11*

Read: Poulos, *The Death of Ordinarity* (this one's on blackboard under "course documents"!)

Activity: What would you do?

September 13

Family Stories, Traditions, & Rituals (1)

Read: Turner & West, pp. 83-115

Activity: Trading stories

September 18

Family Stories, Traditions, & Rituals (2)

Read: Jorgensen & Bochner, *Imagining Families through Stories and Rituals* (E-Reserve)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCES OF FAMILY STORIES!

September 20

Narrative Performance Theory

Read: Langellier & Peterson, *Narrative Performance Theory* (E-Reserve)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCES OF FAMILY STORIES!

September 25

Family and crisis (2): Trauma, grief, and loss

Poulos, *The Ties that Bind Us, the Shadows that Separate Us: Life and Death, Shadow and (Dream)story* (E-Reserve)

Activity: Grief monitoring

DUE: CHAPTER TWO (A STORY FROM MY FAMILY)

September 27

Theoretical frameworks (3): Family Systems Theories

Read: Galvin, Dickson & Marrow, *Systems Theory: Patterns and (W)holes in Family Communication* (E-Reserve)

Activity: My family system

October 2

Theoretical frameworks (4): Relational Dialectics in Families

Read: Baxter (E-Reserve), *Relational Dialectics Theory*

Activity: Relational dialectics in families

October 4

Family Problems and challenges (1): The secret life of families

Read: + Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy, *Mucking Around Looking for Truth* (E-Reserve)

Activity: Family secrets?

October 9

Family Problems and challenges (1): The secret life of families (continued)

Read: Poulos, Family secrets, family stories (this one's on blackboard under "course documents")

Activity: Turning secrets into stories

October 11

Family Problems and challenges (2): Alcoholism and addiction

Read: Le Poire, *The Influence of Drugs and Alcohol on Family Communication* (E-Reserve)

Guest speaker: TBA

October 16

Family Problems and challenges (3): Stress and Stressors

Read: Turner & West, pp. 225-261

Activity: Stress management tools

DUE: CHAPTER THREE (MY OLDEST LIVING RELATIVE—AN INTERVIEW)

October 18

Family problems and challenges (4): Conflict

Read: Turner & West, pp. 151-168

Activity: Mapping family conflicts

October 23

Family problems and challenges (5): Power, control, and aggression

Read: Turner & West, pp. 168-188

Activity: Managing power

October 25

Family problems and challenges (6): Violence and abuse in families

Read: Anderson, Umberson, & Elliott, *Violence and Abuse in Families* (E-Reserve)

Activity: Managing abuse through structured dialogue

October 30

Family opportunities (1): Communicating Emotion

Fitness & Duffield, *Emotion and Communication in Families* (E-Reserve)

Activity: Healthy communication of emotions

November 1

Family Opportunities (2): Intimacy and opening up the field of talk

Read: Turner & West, pp. 191-223

Activity: Intimate talk

November 6

Societal Influences

Read: Turner & West, pp. 263-279

Clips: TV classics

DUE: CHAPTER FOUR (MY FAMILY TREE/GENEALOGY)

November 13

Societal Influences (2): Women's and men's movements, government, etc.
Read: Turner & West, pp. 279-302
Film clips: TBA

November 15

No class: Research day!

November 20

Difficult Dialogues: Religion, Sex, and taboo topics
Read: Turner & West, pp. 305-336
Activity: Taboo topics?

DUE: CHAPTER FIVE (FAMILY COMPARISON—AN INTERVIEW)

November 22

Other forms of dialogue
Read: Poulos, *Accidental Dialogue* (on blackboard under "course documents")+
Pearce* & Pearce: *Combining passions and abilities: Toward dialogic virtuosity*
(E-Reserve)
Activity: Accidental dialogue

November 27

Other Cultures, Other Forms of Family
Read: Turner & West, pp. 339-361
Film clips: *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *Mississippi Masala*, etc.

November 29

New Perspectives + Imagining the Future
Read: Galvin, *The Family of the Future: What do we Face?* (E-Reserve)
Clips: New TV families

December 4

Open dialogue: What have we learned?
DUE: CHAPTER SIX (FINAL REFLECTION)

* — Note: One of the authors of this paper (Barnett Pearce) will be visiting the UNCG campus in the spring semester of 2008, as part of UNCG's Harriet Elliott lecture series, sponsored this year by the Department of Communication Studies (see: http://www.uncg.edu/aas/Lecture_Series/Current_Lecture_Series.html)

December 6

No class: Research/prep day!

December 13 Final exam period (3:30-6:30 pm): Open House, Final presentations, and Family celebration!

DUE: FAMILY BOOK (REVISED EDITION, INCLUDING ALL CHAPTERS)

"The family is one of nature's masterpieces."

—George Santayana

"Friends are God's apology for relations."

—Hugh Kingsmill
