# I. Preparing to Connect

## The Role of an Interpersonal Communication Instructor

I love teaching interpersonal communication. Teaching a course in interpersonal communication is a unique experience compared to most other courses on most college campuses, in that this class is so *directly* applicable to the lives of students. Indeed, although some of the material may seem straightforward and intuitive, the instructor has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to bring life to and apply scholarship in ways that may not be necessary (or possible) in other courses. It is the duty of the instructor to create an environment of engaged learning, where students pay attention during in-person or online lectures, read their textbooks, engage with online supplementary materials, and participate in reflective activities based upon course content. In doing so, the instructor of interpersonal communication is uniquely positioned to interest students in material that—once understood—those students can then go out and apply to their own lives that very same day. As an interpersonal instructor myself, I love getting to the point halfway through the semester when we may start off the class with a student commenting how they thought about a recently-covered theory during their weekend activities. While at first, some students may roll their eyes at what seems to be a speaker’s attempt to curry favor with the instructor, by the end of the semester, most students self-report having personally engaged course material during times other than studying or reading for class.

## Best Practices for Targeting Interpersonal Communication

Each campus teaches interpersonal communication at a slightly different level (i.e., lower division, upper division, graduate, or honors levels) and with a variety of curricula over the course of the student’s college experience. While some campuses introduce the subject of interpersonal communication briefly through an introductory communication course, some schools may first discuss relationships in a stand-alone sophomore-level interpersonal class. Still, other institutions may save the course for advanced undergraduates, scaffolding interpersonal communication as a necessary component of a human communication curriculum. As a result, *Interconnections: Foundations and Contexts in Interpersonal Communications* is intended to serve *each* of those unique contexts. An instructor teaching this course at the lower-division level may prefer to focus mostly on the first eight chapters, with lectures focusing on awareness and definition-based learning to ensure that students have the necessary vocabulary in future semesters. (A similar approach for the quarter system might see the first quarter of the course focusing on the first five chapters with extra attention to chapters one and two; the subsequent quarter would focus on chapters six through eleven with extra attention to interpersonal contexts.)

At an institution teaching this course to students at the advanced sophomore level through early senior-level, the course can be covered using *Interconnections: Foundations and Contexts in Interpersonal Communication* in its entirety. As the level of student learning progresses, additional readings may be incorporated—particularly if interpersonal communication is scaffolded to be taught mostly for graduating seniors, institutional honors programs, or graduate-level coursework. Since I teach this course at the advanced undergraduate level, I use the entire text while also adding in a couple topical readings that help students make a connection with their recent research methods class (see the section on “*Additional Readings*” in this section of the instructor’s manual).

Finally, it must be noted that this content can also be “exported” to an institution’s study abroad courses. I have had great success teaching foundational interpersonal information in both France and England by adding region-specific readings, and structuring the course to have a comparative focus. My Paris-based course “*Les Amours et Les Amis:* Friendships and Romantic Relationships in Modern France” has been enrolled to capacity in recent iterations. Open to students without prerequisites, this course covers basic interpersonal content covered in the first eight chapters of this book, but locates the materials within the unique context of Paris through readings and field trips.

## Differences from a Typical Classroom Environment

It is a great privilege to be able to teach interpersonal communication to students, particularly if students are hearing the content for the first time. If you are not familiar with the experience of teaching a course about relationships to undergraduate students, you might be surprised at the differences that you may experience in your classrooms as compared to most other traditional courses. Students laugh, students cry, students overshare, and students make us do each of the same ourselves. The course can become a significant part of the student’s college experience; more than once, I have had students bring in their romantic partners to a particular class saying “I brought my boyfriend/girlfriend here today because I really think he/she needs to hear this from an expert.” While I don’t recommend using teaching content as a way to settle arguments in relationships, it must be noted that the instructor needs to pay particular attention to what they say as an instructor and how students use that information.

### *Creating a Safe Space –* Classroom logistics (e.g., course size, time of day, typical student courseload, fixed vs. movable classroom space) can often constrain the ways in which a course proceeds. Regardless of these matters, however, it is essential for an instructor to make a considered good-faith effort to create a safe environment in their classroom. I recommend that instructors begin the semester reminding people that personal information that may be discussed in class should only be made public if the individual would also be comfortable posting that same information on the bulletin board in the residence halls. Much like social media feeds, students should self-monitor their classroom behaviors for their own privacy. At the same time, I caution recipients of such information (i.e., other students in the class) to treat that data sensitively because each person has different degrees to which they feel comfortable with self-disclosure. “What happens in the classroom… Stays in the classroom!” Creating a safe space that everyone agrees on is essential; I have even seen faculty successfully work with students to brainstorm their own standards of community for the course, in order to ensure that perceptions of a safe space are created.

In leading my own classroom discussions about difference, I like to start off the course reminding individuals of the diversity of thought and experience in the room. I remind students that we are talking about relationships, and relationships are often constrained or influenced by religious, cultural, and/or ethnic identities, and that we all have different standards for how we live our lives and have different experiences navigating both privilege and power. I also take a moment to remind people that choice of language is important; specifically, that offensive language and hate speech have no place in the academic environment, and I find it important to model the behavior myself and to exhort students to do the same.

In addition, while universities often seem to be a bastion of liberal thought, I remind the students that the entire continua of not only political but also ideological perspectives are represented in the classroom, and that inclusion and openness are among the highest standards for learning. While at this point some students’ eyes are likely a bit glassed-over, I feel it’s essential to have a community discussion to set boundaries for the classroom environment. Should a student violate the terms of the safe space, I find that I typically indicate to that student that we need to talk after class;I typically allow that student to (temporarily, at least) remain physically present, so that they can learn from the dialogue that others might have in response. Should anyone be offended by course content, or by the theoretical implications of research, or by a student’s in-class comment, I also encourage that those students also stay for the remainder of the class period in order to observe the classroom dialogue response; that being said, I find it essential to allow anyone to leave at any time without grading repercussions, should they feel it necessary.

### *Managing Sensitive Information* – In the interpersonal classroom, students may occasionally share information that they may not otherwise share in a public forum. While it is gratifying to know that I may have created a safe space in the classroom environment, it is also my responsibility to carefully ensure that student safety is of the utmost priority. In my interpersonal communication classroom, I have experienced a lot of student ”firsts” (e.g., a student’s first time revealing that they are gay, or a student’s first time revealing that they struggle with an eating disorder). In these scenarios, there are three things that I think are of the upmost importance to address. First, it is important to quickly connect with the student after class to thank them for their openness and offer any support. In some cases, that means walking the student over to the counseling center; in other cases, that connection might simply be an expression of solidarity or empathy. Second, it is sometimes important to determine your legal obligations with some types of sensitive information. For example, the Cleary Act and Title IX federal laws are written to highlight your role as a mandated reporter. While I encourage you to become familiar with both campus and government policies *before* these instances of disclosure occur, please know that you should contact your Human Resources office on your campus to determine the necessary legal response if a student describes being the victim of abuse, being the victim of a violent act on campus, or describes sexual aggression. While it may seem that students are *unlikely* to report such sensitive information in class or during office hours—or even write it in a course paper—an instructor of human communication (in particular) is often skilled at appearing to be an approachable faculty mentor, naturally making students eager to approach. Finally, if the disclosed content is particularly sensitive, I find it useful to contact one’s department chair (or if you are the department chair, I recommend going to a respected senior colleague or to the associate dean for faculty). While you need not necessarily divulge the student’s name or the specifics of their disclosure, it is sometimes useful to put the event on the radar of your immediate supervisor for your own safety and the safety of the institution.

### *Dealing with Classroom Conflict* – Dealing with conflict in an interpersonal classroom is challenging, but the instructor is well-equipped. Indeed, the course text includes specific strategies for conflict management that you can point towards, but the practical experience of classroom conflict often takes an instructor by surprise.

If conflict occurs among two students, I recommend a required mediation after class where both parties establish clear boundaries and develop strategies for moving forward. If, instead, the conflict is between you (as instructor) and another student, I *strongly* recommend that you work out the conflict with a neutral third-party facilitator in the room. For some faculty, this might be a department chair or a departmental teaching mentor. For other faculty, they may prefer to use other campus professionals; the Dean’s Office or the Human Resources Department often are willing to engage in conflict mediation between faculty and students when needed.

In teaching our classes, small amounts of regular conflict are to be expected, as in most interpersonal relationships. As we discuss in *Interconnections,* refusing to engage in conflict episodes or pretending that conflict has not occurred will oftentimes result in an additional, more dramatic conflict episode(s). It is best to remediate conflicts between or among students (and/or yourself) at the earliest opportunity.

## Logistics of an Interpersonal Course

## Sample Syllabus

Sometimes it is helpful to see the syllabus of another faculty member as you prepare to construct your own. I have attached here my syllabus for the semester at the time of writing—Fall 2017. I included the entire syllabus, with no detail left unedited, in order that you get a sense of the formal structure for my own personal course. It includes a mix of my own course management techniques, university policy, and department policy. Please know that I appear strictest on paper, and therefore the most enforceable language is used. That being said, I believe in an instructors right to extend grace to students, as long as all students in the course have the same opportunity to receive that grace. Please note that the syllabus is also intended for junior-level undergraduates; most of these students will have already taken somewhere between seven and ten communication courses before they take my interpersonal course, although students minoring in Communication Studies may have had as few as three.

Interpersonal Communication

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Why Study Interpersonal Communication?

* Interpersonal communication is important to our everyday lives. With the rise of communication technologies like social media and smartphones, social change can occur at breakneck speeds. As the primary social process, interpersonal communication is uniquely positioned as a comprehensive way to understand how lives and cultures are impacted by the manner in which we not interact with each other as diverse individuals. Throughout the course, we will explore different aspects of interpersonal communication and the many ways that we create, engage, and evaluate the messaging and the interactions throughout your daily life. This class will be applicable directly to all interactions that will come your way, whether social or professional.
* By the time you complete this course you will have acquired a resource-base to:
  + Understand the concepts of interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationships
  + Approach the study of interpersonal communication within relationship contexts
  + Analyze your own self-presentation in interpersonal interactions
  + Critically engage and apply a wide range of interpersonal theories
  + Understand the role of relationship type in interpersonal interactions
  + Improve your ability to understand the interactions in your everyday life
* Please feel free to talk, ask questions, and interact during class.
* Finally, I want this class to work for *you*. If you have any special needs or if a situation arises that you want to discuss, please let me know. I respect your privacy, while at the same time I am more than willing to talk about how to better engage your learning experience.

Grading

* Mini-Midterm 50 points
* Midterm 350 points
* Final Exam 350 points
* E-Quizzes (11 total, 10 points each, drop the lowest) 100 points
* Final Paper 100 points
* Reflectives (4 total, 15 points each, drop the lowest) 50 points
* Classroom Participation & Pop Activities 0 points\*
* Extra Credit or Research Participation 0+ points

1000 points

*\* While discussion and participation is expected, and thus worth 0 points, you may lose up to 50 points by not*

*demonstrating an inquisitive and engaged intellect. Quality in-class participation may serve to “bump” close grades! Since you*

*are expected to keep up with course material, “pop” activities are worth 0 points. You may lose points. Expect at least one*

*“pop” activity based on the material covered in—or derived from—each of the scholarly journal articles.*

Grading Scale

*Grade Final Points Approx. Final % Grade Final Points Approx. Final*

A 950 – 1000 95 – 100% C 730 – 769.5 73 – 76.9%

A- 900 – 949.5 90 – 94.9% C- 700 – 729.5 70 – 72.9%

B+ 870 – 899.5 87 – 89.9% D+ 680 – 699.5 68 – 69.9%

B 830 – 869.5 83 – 86.9% D 630 – 679.5 63 – 67.9%

B- 800 – 829.5 80 – 82.9% D- 600 – 629.5 60 – 62.9%

C+ 770 – 799.5 77 - 79.9% F 599.5 and less 59.9% and less