

## **COM 310 Family Communication**

I would like to offer three perspectives on this course: 1) the “official” perspective from the bulletin; 2) my perspective of what I hope students accomplish and gain from the course; 3) students’ perspectives including their comments about the course and evidence of what they have learned.

### **The Official Perspective**

COM 310: Family Communication, Cr. 3.

P: 114. Application of theories of interpersonal communication to family life. Emphasis on feedback, empathy, and trust as contributing factors to effective communication with families. A case study approach is used.

### **My Perspective**

General Description:

An Internet course emphasizing not only understanding family concepts but their application and analysis both in case studies and in students’ own families.

Objectives:

1. To comprehend various theoretical approaches to understanding family relationships and behavior.
2. To be able to apply family theory and concepts to gain greater understanding of specific family situations
3. To comprehend the diversity of family structures and organization.
4. To be able to effectively create mediated communication messages (email, discussion forums, webpages)

To accomplish these objectives, I employ a variety of individual and small group pedagogical methods including readings, quizzes, small group discussion forums and webpages. The readings and quizzes introduce the concepts and be sure that students have a basic understanding of important ideas. The discussion forums allow online students to gain from collaborative learning opportunities. Students have the opportunity to study family communication and to talk about it with their virtual “families” through a series of discussion forums on topics such as role expectations, family rituals and stories, conflict in relationships, stress in families, the role of government in marriage, social/cultural influences on the family, and talking with children about challenging topics (violence, sex, drugs etc.). In creating the discussion forums, I have tried to use what the research shows about effectively creating collaborative learning experiences, i.e., individual and group accountability – students are required to read and take a quiz over the material before the discussion begins, and they are graded both on the individual participation and on the final, group product. All groups do the same problem with simultaneous reporting; groups cannot “peek” into other groups’ forums but the entire class has access to the “Final Answers” forum so everyone can read the final posted answers for all groups. Groups are randomly generated to yield the greatest chance of diversity (allowing students to choose their own groups generally leads to more homogenous groups).

These discussion forums are combined with assignments which must be posted to their webpages: a family definition and analysis which is added to with each unit, an analysis of a fictional family (from television, movies or literature) as a final project, and the results of their family research project. Each assignment is intended to allow students to explore and apply family concepts from the text to help them understand family communication in more depth as well as to begin to apply these ideas to their own families. More indepth explanations of all assignments can be reached from my website at: [speech.ipfw.edu](http://speech.ipfw.edu).

## Building Community

A primary focus, for me, of this internet course is to make students feel as “connected” to the course as possible. I believe online courses have to consciously strive to build community. I do this in a number of ways: 1) their first assignment is to create a webpage which does a simple analysis of their own families, this also introduces them to each other; 2) their second assignment is to create a name for their virtual families within the discussion forum which gives them an identity within the class- these families will operate the entire semester, with discussion forums active for most of the sixteen (or six in the summer) weeks; 3) I work hard to communicate with them on an informal level with several emails sent to the entire class or to one family at a time early in the semester, individual emails sent to each student as I grade their assignments, and I always try to answer their emails within 24 hours (unless it’s Sunday, which they know). When they send a message “out there” I want them to feel like someone is listening and not have them be in limbo. The webpages and discussion forums help them connect with each other, my weekly postings on the homepage and emails (as well as postings to the discussion forums) help them connect with me and the course. In this type of course, such community building is essential. This is not an independent study course. Given the learning objectives as well as my objective of building community, the course has undergone considerable change over the semesters. I will discuss these changes and how they were made to better serve the students based on their feedback and my own reflections about the course and their learning.

## Evolution of the course

I have made many changes to this course over the semesters based on student feedback. For instance, one of the most frustrating things about the course for students was learning how to create and upload a webpage. As a communication professor, I firmly believe that every student should be able to create and upload a webpage. In this day of information technology, this is a basic and valuable skill, one often used to communicate with family members. Therefore, I did not want to take the assignment out (any more than I would take out a speech or a paper because students found them difficult to complete). I did, however, want to reduce their frustration with the process so they could both enjoy their new skills and concentrate on the family concepts rather than the technology. Therefore, I created a “How to construct a webpage” webpage. This webpage walks them, step by step, through the process of creating and uploading a webpage. Last year I was able to add short (2-3 minute) quicktime movies to this page so it also shows them how to create and upload their webpages. Since I have added this to the resources for the course, there have been fewer questions for me to deal with and less frustration on the part of students (assuming IPFW’s technology is working correctly, of course). To further help students with this process, which can be somewhat daunting when done the first time, I have added (based again on a comment from a student in the course survey) an optional live workshop on creating webpages. For this workshop, I schedule a couple of times in the first week of classes that I will be present in a closed computer lab. I work with whomever shows up on whatever course related technology problems they may be having. If they simply want to show up and create their first webpage during this time, they can do so.

The Fall, 05 iteration of this particular course will be somewhat different as I intend to change books. I do not believe that this present text incorporates enough racial, family configuration and sexual orientation diversity to be effective. Many of my students are from the northeast Indiana area and have not been exposed to much diversity in their lives. Part of my mission is to open their minds to other ways of viewing the world, including other ways of configuring families. It is not my mission to determine their opinions on these alternatives but to make them aware, from the research done, of the unique strengths and obstacles that each type of family faces so the students can make well informed choices. Thus the new version of the course will include more of these kinds of issues although I have already added some of these to the course. In this latest iteration, I have also included more opportunities for them to analyze their own (or another) family. Each unit will require a reading, quiz, discussion forum (often over a case study) and, the most recent addition, regular postings to their family analysis webpages which will help them see how the concepts can be used in “real life” situations. The

differences between the “old” course and the “new” one can be seen by looking at the Summer, 05 versus the Fall, 05 syllabi accessible from <http://speech.ipfw.edu>

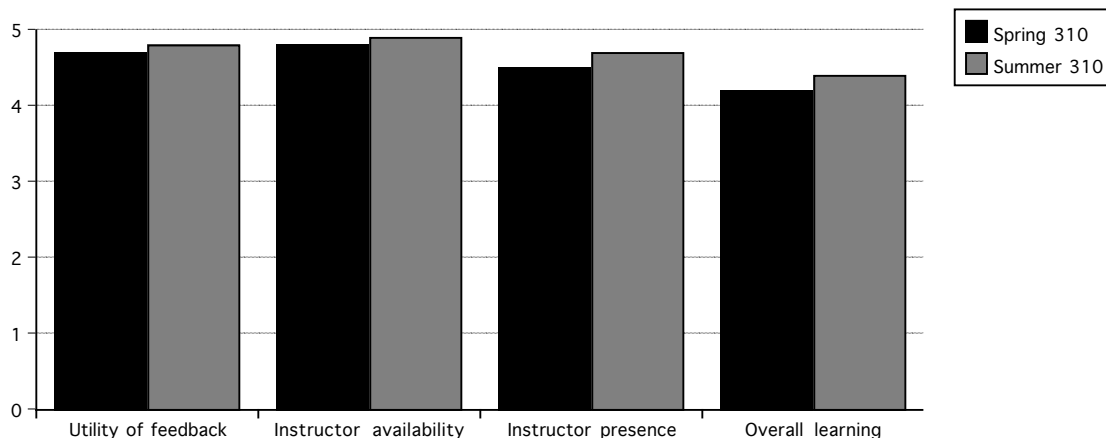
### Students’ Perspectives

There are two reliable ways of gaining information about student learning in a course: 1) ask them and 2) look at their work. The following takes advantage of both of these to ascertain what students may have learned in COM 310 Family Communication.

#### Student feedback

Two unsolicited comments speak to how much these students believed they learned as well as to my objective of building community within the course. Student one, in a thank you card she sent me, states: “I wanted to “Thank you” for a great semester! I have to be honest that I was really worried about your class at first since I have never taken an internet course before – but now I am so glad I stuck with it! This class has taught me so much about life, especially my own. It was also really great to create a whole new family where none of us knew each other and to grow our family as a whole by the end of the semester! Thanks again for everything!” Student two states, “Professor Dixson, I want to let you know how much I enjoyed your class this semester. It was informational, enlightening (and sometimes painful). I have already begun the process of employing conflict resolutions strategies in my family (which has also—already—enabled me to have a decent conversation with my husband’s “x”). But I think most importantly, the family research project (both the one I started and the one I changed to) was a HUGE eye-opener. . . . Additionally, I gained a lot of insight into the mechanics of my family-of-origin. . . . Lastly, but certainly not least, I really appreciate the “one-on-one” communication with you. It helps replace that somewhat impersonal feeling one occasionally gets in Distance classes. . . . Great open lines of communication and assistance, thorough instructions and smooth flow of course curriculum, thoughtful responses, and exceptional feedback!”

Besides these kinds of specific responses, I also gather more systematic information in the form of a course survey. In this class, I ask very specific questions regarding how helpful students find specific assignments (i.e., discussion forums, quizzes, webpage assignments). This allows me to make helpful and meaningful changes in the course (such as the ones I mentioned above). I also gather information about how much they feel they have learned and whether I have fulfilled my role successfully. Below is a graph of just four of these questions for the last two times I taught the course. These questions gauge how useful my feedback to them was, whether they felt I was “present” and available in the course as well as their perspective of their overall learning. All questions are on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest score.



#### Evidence of their learning

The last way of assessing how well a course is going is to look at the actual learning occurring in the course. To that end, I have had students write a conclusion paper. This assignment requires them to choose a topic, talk about what they have learned about the topic and why it is important to educate families about this topic. Topics include such things as: marginalized families, diversity in families, how technology has changed family communication, and how communication can cause problems within families. Several students in my spring and summer, 2005 classes have given me permission to share all or part of their papers with you. I am always impressed by what they take away with them from the discussions they have participated in and the readings they have done. While some of this may not be profound, it is extremely practical and, I believe, can make important differences within family life:

Female student, spring, 2005: "I have learned that technology has caused a great hindrance in our communication among each other in the family. Between television, the computer, and video games it is hard to find time to communicate. It is very important to me that I sit down with my son everyday away from all the distractions to talk. It is important that people realize that modern day technology should not be used as a babysitter. "

Female student, spring 2005: "It is important for the public to know about the diversity in families and to realize that not all family types have the same opportunities."

Male student, summer, 2005: "Without the recognition by family members that change is occurring they will not support each other and be a resource when needed for each other. This will allow stress to build within the system and eventually create a break in the family unless proper communication and stress relief occur through dialectic systems including open / private, novelty / predictability, and autonomy / connection. Recognizing change and changing times will also allow for good communication about the external environment in regards to other family systems and structures such as single parent and homo-sexual couples. This gives children the tools they need as they grow and mature to recognize and embrace change rather than hate and bigotry."

These excerpts reflect students' learning to recognize threats to the family (technology and prejudice) and ways to analyze the family (systems theory, dialectics, stress, daily quality communication) that can help to strengthen family relationships. The absolute applied and practical nature of this course is what often draws students to it; I hope they take away ideas and skills that are immediately useful to this important relationship system.