

# Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

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Volume 2013 *Proceedings of the 71st New York State  
Communication Association*

Article 11

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2014

## We Don't Want to Talk About It: Communication Strategies for Teaching Less Popular Subjects

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### Recommended Citation

Stassen-Ferrara, Heather M.; Geyer, Christine A.; Livermore, John M.; and Louis, Maureen M. (2014) "We Don't Want to Talk About It: Communication Strategies for Teaching Less Popular Subjects," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2013, Article 11.

Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2013/iss2013/11>

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# **We Don't Want to Talk About It: Communication Strategies for Teaching Less Popular Subjects**

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Some subjects are the unloved: the required course in academic writing, the required course in public speaking, the course in communication theory, the course in basic mathematics. This paper brings together perspectives from professors in Communication Studies, Mathematics, and Writing to consider the critical connection between communicative practice and learning, applying a networked perspective of interconnections.

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Teaching a course dedicated to material which students dislike and, at times, fear can be a difficult task for even the best teacher-scholars. Attempting to mitigate resistance to material while reaching learning objectives undoubtedly requires consideration of myriad variables including realistic learning outcomes and functions behind student beliefs about given material or course. In this essay, four teacher-scholars in three disciplines (Communication Studies, Rhetoric and Writing, and Mathematics) explore communication rich pedagogical strategies for reducing student dislike and fear for material while attempting to reach academically challenging learning objectives. Specific discussions include building media literacy in the introductory public speaking course, engaging students in the register of mathematics in the required mathematics course, using social media to reduce fear of the academic form in writing courses, and demystifying theory in the communication theory course. Subsequent to the discipline and course specific discussions, three themes which cut across the curriculum are offered to illustrate the complexities and similarities in teaching less popular subjects. Overall, the strategies and overarching themes are derived from the notions that the classroom culture is unique and that socialization—in this case through common argot and communicative perspectives—is imperative for a successful classroom environment.

## **Media Literacy and Civic Participation in the Public Speaking Course**

In the basic course dedicated to public speaking, civic engagement is often designated as a learning outcome. However, media literacy is not as frequently identified as a learning goal for the basic course. Undergraduate students often claim that they “don't follow politics” or “don't worry about the news.” The habit of informed media consumption, while necessary for empowerment in civic engagement, may be difficult to initiate and maintain. This sense of disconnection between many young people and major public policy developments has been demonstrated time and again. Some students believed that the 9/11 attacks were brought on by Saddam Hussein. Just to name a few other examples, at the start of one recent term, many students could not find Libya on a map, did not know

the number of members in the U.S. House of Representatives, or the time or circumstances for the creation of the modern state of Israel. This is a problem of critical importance, as one of the goals of a college education is to prepare students for leadership roles and participation in civic life. “Don’t know, don’t care” is at direct opposition to this goal and students who are poorly informed cannot be powerful advocates. Overall, the lack of media consumption results in a lack of policy literacy, civic participation, and empowerment to engage with the system.

Consider coverage of the Olympic Games. Once every four years Americans take an interest in the luge, the biathlon, and other sports that do not receive routine coverage in the American media. It is hard for television producers to gain ratings for events that so few may know about, and potential viewers do not care because they have no background, no context. The viewer at home may not know the rules of the sport, the difficulty of the event, the participating athletes, or the countries from which they hail. The producer’s solution is Roone Arledge’s invention of the “Up Close and Personal” segment. So we learn about the figure skater who took up skating to conquer a major childhood illness, we learn about the Nordic skier whose father selects the wood from their forest to make his son’s skis. These insights build interest in the events. The context is the key. Interest builds from a sense of connection and an understanding of the bigger picture. The same is true of national and international news. Public policy is a complicated sport, and the rules and players are strange and uninteresting to the uninitiated. Disconnect is amplified if there is no sense of relationship to the lives and needs of the viewer. Ignorance is the fuel for lack of engagement.

In view of this concern, an effective platform was sought to incorporate media education and discussion of public policy into the General Education curriculum. Through a pilot program, media literacy and civic engagement material was incorporated into the introductory public speaking course. As with all public speaking classes, the purpose of the course is to gain better understanding of communication in the public setting and to develop a related set of communication performance skills. However, the pilot project takes this further, interweaving a recurring public policy roundtable discussion, supported by media literacy instruction, and regular reading of the *New York Times* and a range of other news materials.

Regarding media literacy, students receive instruction in basic media analysis including examination of sources, objectivity, and overall quality. With regard to sources, students develop critical thinking skills to assess the strength of sources supporting news coverage. Instruction focusing on media ownership and the impact on coverage choices and allocation of resources to news entities help students garner an understanding of objectivity in the media. Moreover, students examine media mergers and concerns relating to an ever smaller pool of corporate ownership. Students also explore the difference between blogs, commentary, and other forms of news analysis, versus straight reporting in conformance with professional journalistic news gathering standards. Taking time to develop this toolkit of media literacy skills is of critical importance and sets the foundation for development of more sophisticated media consumption.

Following informational class sessions students are required to read a major newspaper and engage in other news consumption across a variety of media platforms. Students are

provided with copies of the *New York Times* as well as suggestions for further resources including news magazines such as *Time* and *Slate*, long form journalism platforms such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, news gathering sites such as *The Daily Beast* and *The Huffington Post*, and others. Students are also encouraged to use Twitter to follow various news sources and commentators, all in an effort to accumulate exposure and engagement. Instructors may also suggest that students watch news interviews of policy experts, public policy television shows, the Sunday morning political news shows, and web commentary to gain a feel for how experts and professionals participate in various forms of roundtable discussions. Where available, local roundtable shows can be of great value as the pacing is often more moderate and provides a reasonable model for student performance. In the greater Syracuse area, *The Ivory Tower Half Hour* has been of particular value in this regard. Building from this, students participate in public policy roundtable discussions on a regular basis throughout the term of the course.

The public policy roundtable discussions follow along the lines of other forms of impromptu speaking. Specifically, students are assigned to small groups. Discussion is commenced by the instructor, serving as moderator, asking a specific question of a specific student. The responding student should give a brief answer to the question followed by elaboration and support of their conclusion, drawing from the news coverage of the week. This initial response is often in a 30 second to one minute time frame. Following the lead student's initial response, other students are encouraged to comment and engage in the discussion. Demonstration of exposure to multiple media resources, ability to set the story in context, critical media literacy skills, and excellent communication performance skills are all major points for assessment.

Students are often anxious in their first experience of the roundtable. Since the pilot occurred in sections reserved for students in the Honor's program, the anxiety may reflect the reality that many high achieving high school students have honed their skills taking objective tests and are accustomed to focus on exactly what they need to know to earn a high grade. At least in the early rounds, instructors should not be surprised if some of the strongest students have difficulty with an activity that requires more open engagement based on knowledge that can only come from broad media consumption over a longer arc of time. Indeed, for many of these students this is a rare occasion of facing how much they do not know, and so the joy of learning and the long term benefits of engagement should be emphasized.

Public policy roundtable discussions occur periodically throughout the term of the course. While earlier sessions are not graded as separate elements but impact the course participation grade, the final public policy roundtables are graded as a major element of the course.

With each round, student policy discussion skills generally improve, as does comfort with engagement on current events subject matter. In the best cases this modeling of civic behavior enables students to grow as critical thinkers and astute listeners, capable of precision in their remarks, more able to assert a contrary point of view in a professional way, and to apply broader context gained from ongoing consumption of news.

Media literacy and civic engagement are inextricably linked (Norris, 2001). The ability and desire to consume news is fundamental to an informed and active citizenry. Delli Carpini (2000) utilizes news consumption as an indicator of the lack of civic engagement of young Americans. Likewise, Livingstone and Markham (2008) take note that media consumption and criticism have important impacts on civic engagement:

Media use significantly added to the explanation of civic participation as follows. In accounting for voting, demographic and political/social factors mattered, but so too did some media habits (listening to the radio and engagement with the news). Interest in politics was accounted for by political/social factors and by media use, especially higher news engagement and lower media trust. (p. 351)

While the assignments and structure of the course may not necessarily lead to greater civic engagement outside the classroom, research indicates that media literacy and media exposure increase ability and interest in civic participation.

Encyclopedic knowledge of baseball has to start at some point and time. The soap opera is indecipherable on the first day, but becomes compelling over time. So too, the workings of our government: this subject matter is often not interesting to the uninitiated. Rather, interest grows through steady immersion in the news of the day, as savvy habits of media consumption and critical thinking are developed, along with knowledge of key players and contexts. Interweaving public policy discussion and media literacy instruction into the required introductory public speaking course will allow students to develop better advocacy skills and, ultimately, to engage effectively in civic life.

### **Learning as a Consequence of Communication in Mathematics**

Communication in mathematics is of the utmost importance. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) lists communication as one of the five process standards along with problem solving, reasoning and proof, connections, and representation (NCTM, 2014). Specifically, the NCTM (2014) places emphasis on communication across primary and secondary education:

Instructional programs from prekindergarten through grade 12 should enable all students to:

- organize and consolidate their mathematical thinking through communication;
- communicate their mathematical thinking coherently and clearly to peers, teachers, and others;
- analyze and evaluate the mathematical thinking and strategies of others;
- use the language of mathematics to express mathematical ideas precisely.

As students are asked to communicate about the mathematics they are studying— to justify their reasoning to a classmate or to formulate a question about something that is puzzling—they gain insights into their thinking. In order to communicate their thinking to

others, students naturally reflect on their learning and organize and consolidate their thinking about mathematics.

Students should be encouraged to increase their ability to express themselves clearly and coherently. As students age, their styles of argument and dialogue should more closely adhere to established conventions, and students should become more aware of, and responsive to, their audience. The ability to write and verbally communicate about mathematics should be particularly nurtured across the grades. By working on problems with classmates, students also have opportunities to see the perspectives and methods of others. They can learn to understand and evaluate the thinking of others and to build on those ideas.

According to Kotsopoulos (2007), for students, mathematics discourse is “like hearing a foreign language” (p. 301). As opposed to the common register, students’ everyday language, the mathematical register is highly specialized and includes mathematical jargon, symbols, and numbers. In some instances, the argot found in the mathematical register also can be found in the common register. Words such as table, cancel, column, average, altitude, moment, power, uniform, velocity, and slope can be found in both the mathematical and common registers although the meaning of these words varies across the two registers. However, some terms utilized in the mathematical register appear to be exclusive to the register including orthogonal, parabola, and centroid. When mathematics instructors deeply entwined in the mathematics register engage with students with a lack of knowledge in mathematics, several issues have the potential to arise. For example, interference is the gap between the mathematical language being spoken by the teacher and the common language of the students (Kotsopoulos, 2007). Teacher interference occurs when the instructor uses the mathematical register too much without providing significant comparison to concepts in the common register.

In contrast, student interference occurs when students use common register when communicating and as a result do not develop a sophisticated mathematics register. Moreover, a form of translational interference occurs when students attempt to use the math register when translating symbols into words. For example, students struggle to say:

$$\log_5(\sqrt[3]{25}) \log_5(\sqrt[3]{25}) \text{ or } \lim_{x \rightarrow 0} \left( \frac{2x^2 - 3x - 4}{x - 2} \right) \lim_{x \rightarrow 0} \left( \frac{2x^2 - 3x - 4}{x - 2} \right)$$

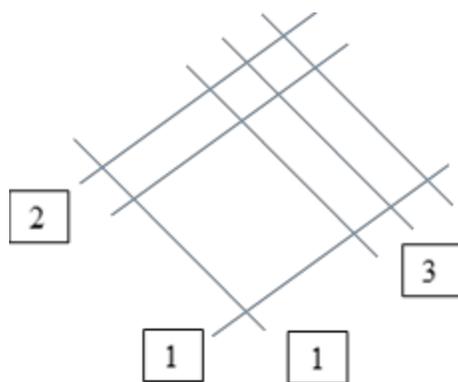
The difficulty students experience as they translate symbols to language may illustrate a lack of conceptual understanding of the mathematics. This confusion ultimately interferes with learning at a deeper level because students are trying to make sense out of the language at the same time as the mathematics. This more communicative brand of mathematics enables students to not just complete a mathematics problem, but to understand the processes, explain the results, and communicate the results to others. This new emphasis is in response to traditional classroom models that may have been based on memorization and lecture (Walshaw & Anthony, 2008).

In light of the various levels of interference in conjunction with the importance of students garnering the language of mathematics, several pedagogical strategies entrenched in communication have been developed for integration into college mathematics classrooms.

One strategy for attempting to mitigate inference involves a language centered curriculum with a focus on problem solving with written and spoken language while making connections between algebra and geometry. This is done by creating opportunities for students to actually speak the words and insisting that they use the language while being transparent about the need for language to be used. Moreover, there is a need to establish a classroom environment where students are willing to communicate. Strategies utilized for encouraging communication in the classroom include de-emphasizing grades, focusing on successes rather than failure, emphasizing classroom communication over textbooks for learning, persistently calling on students and asking them to explain their answers, and asking students to defend or explain wrong answers.

Two specific preliminary exercises utilized to enhance students' communication skills in mathematics include "Why Keep-Change-Flip?" and "Spaghetti Math." "Why Keep-Change-Flip?" encourages students to question their understanding of fundamental mathematics. Students use Keep-Change-Flip to divide fractions but they often do not understand why they do so or why this procedure works. The Keep-Change-Flip procedure is used when students are dividing one fraction by another. The student "Keeps" the first fraction, "Changes" the operation from multiplication to division and then "Flips" the second fraction. In this way, a problem in division is transformed into an easier multiplication exercise. In "Why Keep-Change-Flip?" the students explore and discuss the procedure from an algebraic perspective. As the discussion progresses students can come to realize that many mathematical procedures are learned without the students gaining a deeper understanding of the topic. This also serves to demonstrate the difference between procedural and conceptual understanding and emphasizes that quality learning is more important than test scores.

Similarly, the "Spaghetti Math" exercise requires students not just to solve a problem, but to also explain why the process works. In this exercise, students use spaghetti to model multiplication by angling the noodles in such a way that the intersections can be counted to formulate a product. Here is an example:  $21 \times 13$



Students count the intersections to formulate the product. To the far left there are two intersections (so there is a 2 in the hundreds place), then seven intersections in the two middle groups (a 7 in the tens place) and finally three intersections in the far right group (a 3 in the units place) so the product of  $21 \times 13$  is 273. Students are generally able to figure

out the procedure rather quickly but when asked to explain why this works they often find themselves writing “how” it works. Class discussions then explore the difference between the procedure which is easily grasped and the deeper concept. Thus students are again given the opportunity to discuss and explore the difference between procedural and conceptual knowledge of the mathematics that they have learned.

The exercise encourages deconstruction of basic mathematical principles, such as multiplication, and focuses on engagement with the mathematical register while allowing students to organize their understandings of mathematics with their common register.

In addition to preliminary exercises, more advanced pedagogical strategies include having students explain why certain procedures work, asking students to re-write theorems in the common register, and tasking students to explain relationships between theorems. These strategies create the opportunities for students to examine their understandings and use language to clarify them.

Initial assessment of these tactics reveals a significant increase in student comfort level when participating in their math class. Moreover, evidence suggests that the communicative pedagogical strategies are increasing student learning. The measure of quantitative literacy utilized shows a steady trend of positive outcomes in mathematics. Going forward future research is needed to further clarify the role of communication in mathematics courses, but language based mathematics may be an important way to teach college level mathematics.

### **Teaching the (Required) Writing Course in the Age of Social Media**

First Year College Students write more than ever. Tweets, texts, Facebook posts, blogs and even e-mail constitute a significant portion of their written communication practices. Yet when these students enter the required first year composition classroom, many of these same frequently writing students complain that they “hate writing” or feel incompetent or intimidated by the formalities of the academic form. Bridging that gap has been the focus of an increasing body of scholarship within the field. The Council of Writing Program Administrators has attempted to address the advent of technology in its Outcomes Statement for First Year Composition, which was modified in 2008 to include a set of outcomes for Composing in Electronic Environments. Digital Writing, Multi-Media Writing and New Media writing became the focus of both course design and scholarship over the last decade. Instructors remain concerned, however, “that technology has hijacked the composition classroom,” that the fascination with technology overrides the course learning outcomes (Palmerino, 2013). At the same time, new scholarship focuses on adapting to new digital practices while maintaining focus on rhetorical skill and composition process pedagogy (Arola & Wysocki, 2012; Hawisher & Selfe, 2012; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012).

Some instructors opt to take a restrictive stance toward these practices, limiting or even trying to ban student’s devices from their composition classrooms. At the other end of the response scale, some composition instructors attempt to build required first year composition courses around new technologies, with social media, new media, digital rhetorics, and visual forms such as zine or college projects as course projects. Both of

these approaches have limitations. Restrictive approaches are simply not practical (or perhaps possible) with students who have grown up with smartphones in their pockets. Attempts to embrace technology and social media in the composition classroom may limit students' ability to meet the learning outcomes for the course, typically focused on rhetorical skill, critical reading and writing, and academic conventions, or to adequately prepare them for the coursework that lies ahead of them (WPA, 2008). Yet, students will have technology, and it makes sense to embrace those tools in the composition classroom. It is equally important to distinguish between the pedagogical goals of an elective course in writing or written communication, and the required first year composition course. Too often, scholar-teachers in composition want to embrace new and interesting techniques without wanting to discuss the requirement, and the institutional needs and expectations behind it, that puts the students in the course to begin with. The solution lies in finding ways to use students' familiarity and comfort with their devices to help bridge the gap between their everyday world of social media and the seemingly artificial and often intimidating world for the formal academic essay.

There are a number of ways laptops, tablets and smartphones can assist the student in the writing classroom. Having textbooks in electronic form is one benefit. Taking notes in a form that can be easily built into written assignments is another. For every benefit to the student, however, there is a concern for the instructor, such as "if I allow the students to use their devices, how do I know they aren't on Facebook when they should be taking notes?" Scholars debate the effects of multi-tasking and digital overload on students' ability to concentrate or focus and, in writing, this concern translates into both a concern about reading focus and writing with depth and evidence of critical thinking. To address this concern, University of Washington professor David M. Levy created a project where students apply small amounts of dedicated time to specific social media tasks, whether e-mail or Facebook or other tools (Parry, 2013). The goal is to do nothing but that one task for the assigned time such as e-mail or checking Facebook. This helps the students realize how accustomed they have become to multi-tasking and the difficulty of staying on task even when the task is social.

Other pedagogical tactics for incorporating social networks and technology into the required writing course include students collaborating on projects; allowing the students to choose the online resources to create those projects (Hardison, 2013). Students seem to be much more in tune with different apps or free tools than instructors and can make excellent use of them when given the opportunity. During class discussions, it can be useful to direct students to look up information on the spot. For example, students can search for information about Thoreau or Emerson or Melville when these authors are mentioned in an assigned reading but are not recognized by the students. This also becomes a teachable moment, a place for the instructor to point out the academic benefits these students have when their research can be done in the palm of their hand. This also allows instructors to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of information saturation: the ease with which so much information can be instantly accessed, and the challenges of sifting through that information to find what is useful, or the challenges of complacency when such ease reduces any appreciation for the importance of knowing certain things over others.

Not all efforts to bridge social media and academic writing practices are successful. One such assignment given to integrate writing and social media asked students to complete a critical analysis of social media and social media use. The goal was for students to read articles in the media and the popular press about social media, consider their own usage habits, and to contextualize their practices in the discussion taking place in the media. But most of the students got so quickly and completely caught up in the critiques, and so defensive about those critiques, that their analyses turned much more to superficial rants. The critical distance needed to provide objective analysis or to create arguments related to the benefits and drawbacks of this written communication form was never achieved. This assignment might work better in an (elective) upper division class in communication or writing with a theme related to technology or social media in general. Both the elective nature of such a course and the ability to choose the course based on its clear intent to analyze social media and social media use would allow for more theoretical grounding before the self-assessment assignment, as well as allowing for more assignments related to analysis of social media practices of others (Palmerino, 2013), including celebrities and other public figures, which would provide more of the critical distance necessary for students to see how their writing.

Bridging the gap between students' everyday writing and the requirements of academic form means continually experimenting with different assignments, and experimenting within the expectations and requirements for the required first year composition course means always having a course within which to make this important effort. The required first year composition course still has an important place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal arts curriculum, and adapting to the tools the students bring with them can help it be more successful, and enjoyable, for everyone.

### **Pedagogical Strategies for the Communication Theory Course**

Although the aforementioned courses including mathematics, public speaking, and writing are generally found in a general education core, upper-division courses in Communication Studies may also not be the most desirable courses for communication students. This particular section focuses on pedagogical strategies for teaching a course centered on communication theory. The word theory has a tendency to create mental anguish for students, thus a course on communication theory can and does create anxiety for students—particularly those with a more technical focus within the field such as journalism, public relations, or production.

As Hickson and Stacks (1993) note:

While many teachers relish the idea of teaching such a course, students are less enthusiastic. Students often are as apprehensive about the very word, “theory,” as they are about giving a speech. These problems often produce frustrating experiences for both the instructor and the student. (p. 262).

Through several iterations of the course, three strategies have emerged for reducing anxiety and making theory more tangible and applicable for communication studies students. These tactics include humanizing theorists, interweaving of popular culture and

current events, and, in terms of a specific assignment, a brief theory application presentation completed by each student.

For many students, theory appears to be abstract and those who dedicated their careers to building a theory are often not of concern for students learning those theories. One approach to garnering student interest in communication theory is to humanize the theorists about whom they are learning. This strategy includes introducing the theory not by the basic components, but by exploring the theorists themselves—placing the theory in context within the time frame the theory was developed and crafting a narrative that may help students to recall the theory. For instance, when teaching Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, providing the narrative of Bakhtin’s arrest and subsequent exile because his writings conflicted with the Stalin administration, enables students to see the significance and controversial nature of Bakhtin’s writing. Moreover, students recall the overarching narrative— particularly for Bakhtin given the legend that he used his manuscripts as cigarette rolling papers when he was in exile. For more contemporary and seemingly less controversial theorists, providing the theorist’s educational background and current academic positions often appears to help students to situate the theory. For instance, when discussing dialectics in friendships, discussing William Rawlins’ early qualitative writings in an area and era dominated by quantitative research, illustrates to students the significance and uniqueness of Rawlins’ works. The background information on the theorists may seem outside the realm of importance initially, but exams show that students are able to create significant links between the theorist, the period in which they were writing, and the basic components of the theories. Additionally, after utilizing this method consistently for theories of primary focus in the course, student evaluations commented frequently to the background information helping them to understand and recall the theories.

In conjunction with humanizing theorists, current events and popular culture phenomena are also consistent utilized to help apply theories. Hickson and Stacks (1993) argue:

We find that students view the course much more positively when specific events dealing with their daily lives are used as examples. This can be done utilizing interpersonal examples for students or by using national public events such as political elections and campaign speeches. (p. 264)

Given that students have varying interests and the explosion of niche and personalized niche media outlets, students in the most recent version of the communication theory course were given a list of five topics on which they were responsible to stay informed and that would be used as examples across the semester (when a topic fell out of the media limelight, the class selected an alternative topic to add to the list). For instance, for the 2013 spring semester, students were assigned to be informed on the topics of Catfishing and online dating, the National Football League Super Bowl (which was then replaced by Major League Baseball spring training with a focus on the New York Yankees), the Syrian Uprising, Destiny USA construction (a Syracuse shopping mall and tourist destination), and *The Big Bang Theory* (the television program). Students had access to free copies of the *New York Times*, were able to use alternative news sources online, and were able to watch episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* as they aired or on Hulu.com. Some students also set alerts to ensure they received new information on the given topics. This initiative to create a common set of examples was in reaction to

students not having the same knowledge base as the instructor or their classmates which hampered the ability to use extended examples while explaining specific theories. A broad range of topics were selected to help compliment different areas of communication theory. Catfishing and *The Big Bang Theory* were most relevant for discussions of interpersonal and group communication theory. The coverage of the New York Yankees spring training was initially intended as an example to discuss media, but became an interesting insight into organizational communication as the rhetoric surrounding Alex Rodriguez and his alleged steroid use demanded response from the Yankees organization. The Syrian uprising and the debacles in the creation of Destiny USA provoked discussion surrounding both media theory—in light of the way stories were portrayed across news outlets—and public culture. Overall, the examples proved to be successful although, as anticipated, not all students remained up to date on the selected topics. Moreover, students noted that the exercise provided them with incentive to remain more current on local, national, and world news.

A third tactic utilized to reduce fear and anxiety to communication theory came in the form of a presentation. At the start of each class, one student was assigned to give a very brief presentation on a concept related to the theory or theories for that day's discussion. Rather than cover an entire theory, students were asked to cover a single concept within a given theory. Students were assigned to offer a brief explanation of the theory and then to show the class a video clip, audio file, or image which they thought expressed or could be explained by the concept. Subsequent to their discussion and presentation of the artifact, students then led a discussion based on two or three discussion questions they had crafted and approved with the instructor prior to the start of class. In conjunction, students created a half-page reference sheet which was uploaded to the course's online classroom with three academic sources through which students could further explore the concept. Students reported this particular assignment to be very useful as each class discussion began with an artifact which could be referenced throughout the lecture, the artifacts made the theory more tangible, and the provided references served as the starting point for conducting substantial literature reviews for their term paper. Removing the instructor from control of the start of class allowed the instructor to clearly see areas where students were lacking clarity, and in some cases, where student knowledge exceeded expectations.

Overall, a course on communication theory is only beneficial to the extent that students can recall the theories, apply the theories, and understand how to garner more information on a given theory. Creating a more tangible representation of the theory through humanization of the theorists, consistent and shared examples, and student discussion enable learning objectives for the course to be more clearly understood and achieved by students.

### **Cutting Across the Curriculum**

Across the four discussions of pedagogical strategies for teaching courses deemed as less popular, three primary themes emerged. First, strategies for teaching these less popular subjects must be student-centered while giving students the tools to meet high standards. Second, consistent reinforcement is needed to alleviate student fears and reach desired

learning outcomes. Third, strong pedagogy is communication rich and, as such, teacher-scholars must break down disciplinary silos.

### ***Student Centered Pedagogical Approaches***

In each of the four discussions above, each teacher-scholar highlights the necessity to establish pedagogical strategies that are centered on students' abilities and disposition toward a course. Although each teacher-scholar has high expectations for student learning outcomes, each acknowledges that pathways must be established for students to meet those expectations. In the discussion of informed public speaking, assignments and instruction are based not only on incoming students' lack of knowledge on media industries and current events, but also on their inexperience navigating news sources. The fear of mathematics and lecture and memorization based mathematics in primary schools leads to students who are uncomfortable communicating about math and who may not be able to articulate their understandings. For writing courses, rather than punitive and restrictive stances toward technology, integrating technology and media are a way to reduce the students' bewilderment about the academic form. Finally, while teaching communication theory, building a common knowledge base is essential for illustrating the applicability of theory for students who see theory as abstract and, in some cases, irrelevant to their lives.

Teaching a disliked subject is a fearful enterprise for both students and instructors. While student fears may be more apparent—fear of failing, fear of not understanding—instructor fears are also of concern. Instructors fear student failure and as teaching evaluations are used a measure of faculty accomplishment, the fear of student dislike further complicates the instruction of less favorable subjects. Fear has consequences to the learning environment. As Palmer notes, “Fear is what distances us from our colleagues, our students, our subjects, ourselves” (p. 36). Parker further argues that “when my students' fears mix with mine, fear multiplies geometrically—and education is paralyzed” (p. 37). Embracing student and faculty fear through student centered learning in these four courses reduces uneasiness through creating a shared vocabulary and utilizing technological tools with which students feel comfortable. Understanding the baseline understandings and embracing the fears and dislikes of students taking courses in less favored subjects appears to be the first step in both reducing anxiety and achieving desired learning outcomes.

### ***Dissonance to Discourse through Consistent Reinforcement***

As students move through courses in which the topics and subjects may initially be less desired than in other courses, we must be consistent in our reinforcement and engage in meta-teaching. Apparent in the four discussions is that students must understand the objective for assignments and learning exercises. To be more engaged citizens, be conversant in mathematics, use social media effectively, and apply theory to everyday life are all goals that ought to be sufficiently communicated and justified to students. Likewise, meeting these goals requires consistent effort for both students and instructors. As one of the author's has noted, this style of learning momentum can best be described as the “drip, drip, drip model.” Grand learning outcomes are not obtained through any single exercise, but require multiple and consistent efforts throughout a term (or academic career). Each

discussion above highlights multiple learning tactics that enable students of different learning ability and existing knowledge to garner the desired learning outcomes.

### ***A Call to Action***

Perhaps the most significant current across the four course specific discussions pertains not to students, but to teacher-scholars. This interdisciplinary endeavor illustrated to the authors the need and benefit from discussions of pedagogy across the curriculum. In each of the course specific discussions it became apparent that strong pedagogy is rich in communication, yet too few of these discussions are happening across college and university campuses. The silos crafted by fields and disciplines of study are reinforced by physical boundaries (buildings and offices), competition for resources in an economically challenging era in higher education, and the ever increasing number of demands on faculty in terms of service and teaching. We must work to create both formal and informal spaces for discussions of teaching such that we provide consistent reinforcement of learning objectives to students across disciplines and align our pedagogical strategies to reflect connections in curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

The ways in which teacher-scholars navigate the classroom environment are heavily influenced by the existing knowledge and habits students bring to a given course. Likewise, the ways in which students perceive a course and the level of interest they have in a given topic ought to ultimately influence the ways in which teacher-scholars derive lectures, exercises, and assignments. The key learnings across the four aforementioned courses including allowing students to work through their discomfort, developing a common argot, embracing technology as a comfort device, and garnering shared knowledge resources align with Simonds (2001) assumptions regarding classroom education and student behavior. Simonds offers two assumptions including that the “classroom involves a socialization process,” and that “the classroom is a unique culture” (p. 262).

Simonds (2001) indicates that each course requires a “secondary socialization” process. In other words, each class requires students (and faculty) to play a unique role (p. 262). She further posits that this socialization premise relies on the transactional model of communication in that students are “active agents in establishing, maintaining, and changing the conventions of the classroom” (p. 262). In each of the four courses discussed, the tactics utilized rely on students to be active participants in their understanding of course concepts. Engaging with media, being conversant with mathematics (in opposition to previous receiver based models of mathematics pedagogy), embracing students’ beloved technologies, and creating shared knowledge resources, only work if students engage in the socialization process for that course; students must take ownership of the course for these activities and teaching strategies to be successful.

Second, Simonds (2001) notes that the classroom environment is unique. Specifically, she argues that classrooms are unique in that “the teacher is the only one who knows, in advance, what the expectations for that particular classroom are” (p. 262). She notes that “if performance expectations, roles, and norms are not clearly defined, ambiguity will lead

to uncertainty” and the consequences of uncertainty, while varied, can lead to information seeking behavior and challenging the instructor. A common thread across the four courses is the use of guidelines to reduce uncertainty, and, hopefully, dislike and fear. Utilizing clear instructions, working with students in individual and group settings, and meta-teaching are all used to create clear expectations for students.

Teaching a less popular course ought to be seen as a badge of honor rather than a scarlet letter; teacher-scholars of less popular courses have the opportunity to flex their pedagogical muscles and be creative in their approaches to student learning. As a reflection of the initial research question—In what ways do we teach courses that are less popular?—a number of specific exercises are revealed. Moreover, broader approaches to teaching less popular subjects, including student-centered learning and the need to be consistent, demonstrate that good teaching cuts across disciplines. Furthermore, the process through which this paper was crafted revealed the growing need, and in our case, desire, to break down disciplinary silos to engage with scholars across the curriculum to further teaching excellence and reinforce academic goals for students across the curriculum.

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