

COMM420: Theories of Group Discussion
Fall 2007
University of Maryland, College Park
Department of Communication

Professor:	Dr. Torsten Reimer
Office Location:	2114 Skinner Building
Office Phone:	(301) 405-0873
Email:	treimer@umd.edu
Office Hours:	Wed 5-7 p.m., and by appt.

1) Class meets ...

When? Mon Wed 3:30 – 4:45 p.m.
Where? Francis Scott Key Hall 0126

2) Course Description

When was your last committee or group meeting? The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2003) estimates the number of meetings held per day in the U.S. at more than 25 million, and many executives spend as much as 40-50% of their professional time in meetings (Monge, McSween, & Wyer, 1989). In fact, meetings play a key role in today's world of business and politics, in which many decisions are formed by work teams and committees. Yet, meetings often have a bad reputation. "Meeting's over, let's get back to work"—who has not heard or made such a comment at the end of a session? Participants in meetings often report that too much of the time during their meetings is wasted. Typical complaints include that meetings are often called in with too short notice, that they last too long, and too often end without concrete results (Romano & Nunamaker, 2001).

The overarching aim of our class is to gain a better understanding of how groups and teams function. What factors affect communication in groups? What are major potentials and pitfalls of teamwork? How can communication and decision making processes in groups be improved? We will survey theories and concepts from diverse areas in psychology and communication that can help us better understand group interactions and discussions. Topics include the structure of groups and of group tasks, social identity and group cohesion, groupthink, information aggregation rules, group diversity and information sharing, majority and minority influences, leadership and authority, transactive memory and metacognition in groups, and motivational issues. Readings combine classic approaches and theories with recent findings in group research. A final session is devoted to the discussion of new directions in research on interacting groups.

3) Course Objectives

1. To foster understanding, critique, analysis, and integration of recent theory and research related to group processes.
2. To encourage the application of group research in order to explain and understand the role of communication in everyday group situations.
3. To practice and develop skills related to collaborative group work.

4) Readings

a) Textbook

Forsyth, D. R. (2006). *Group dynamics*. Toronto: Thompson Wadsworth.

b) Additional Readings

Required readings are marked by an asterisk. All marked readings will be available on class Blackboard at <https://elms.umd.edu>. Instructions on how to access Blackboard will be distributed in class. Unmarked readings (i.e., readings that might be of interest to you but are not required) can be borrowed from the library or from your instructor.

Arrow, H., McGrath, J. E., & Berdahl, J. L. (2000). *Small groups as complex systems*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Baron, R. S., Kerr, N. L., & Miller, N. (1992). *Group process, group decision, group action*. Buckingham: Open University Press. (*chapter 6*)

Brown, R. (1988). *Group processes*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Frey, L. R., Gouran, D. S., & Poole, M. S. (Eds.). (1999). *The handbook of group communication theory & research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Gouran, D. S., & Hirokawa, R. Y. (1983). The role of communication in decision-making groups: A functional perspective. In M. S. Mander (Ed.), *Communication in transition: Issues and debates in current research* (pp. 168–185). New York: Praeger.

Gouran, D. S., Hirokawa, R. Y., Julian, K. M., & Leatham, G. B. (1993). The evolution and current status of the functional perspective on communication in decision-making and problem-solving groups. *Communication Yearbook*, 16, 573–600.

Henningsen, D. D., & Henningsen, M. L. M. (2004). The effect of individual difference variables on information sharing in decision-making groups. *Human Communication Research*, 30, 540–555.

Hinsz, V. B., Tindale, R. S., & Vollrath, D. A. (1997). The emerging conceptualization of groups as information processors. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121, 43–64.

Hirokawa, R. Y., & Poole, M. S. (Eds.). (1996). *Communication and group decision making*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Kerr, N., & Tindale, R. S. (2004). Group performance and decision making. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 623–655.

Larson, J. R., & Christensen, C. (1993). Groups as problem-solving units: Toward a new meaning of social cognition. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 32, 5–30.

McGrath, J. E. (1984). *Groups: Interaction and performance*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

McGrath, J. E., & Hollingshead, A. B. (1994). *Groups interacting with technology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

*Messe, L. A., Hertel, G., Kerr, N. L., Lount Jr, R. B., & Park, E. S. (2002). Knowledge of Partner's Ability as a Moderator of Group Motivation Gains: An Exploration of the Köhler Discrepancy Effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82 (6), 935–946.

Monge, P. R., McSween, C., & Wyer, J. A. (1989). A profile of meetings in corporate America: Results of the 3M meeting effectiveness study. Annenberg School of Communication.

*Moreland, R. L., & Myaskovsky, L. (2000). Explaining the performance benefits of group training: Transactive memory or improved communication? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 82, 117-133.

Moreland, R. L., Argote, L., & Krishnan, R. (1996). Socially shared cognition at work: Transactive memory and group performance. In J. L. Nye & A. M. Brower (Eds.), *What's social about social cognition? Research on socially shared cognition in small groups* (pp. 57-84). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Nelson, R. B., & Economy, P. (1995). *Better business meetings*. Burr Ridge, Illinois: Irwin.

- *Paulus, P. B., & Nijstad, B. A. (Eds.) (2003). *Group creativity: Innovation through collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Check Blackboard for relevant chapters.)
- Poole, M. S., & Hollingshead, A. B. (Eds.) (2005). *Theories of small groups*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Reimer, T., Bornstein, A.-L., & Opwis, K. (2005). Positive and negative transfer effects in groups. In T. Betsch & S. Haberstroh (Eds.), *The routine of decision making* (pp. 175–192). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Reimer, T., & Hoffrage, U. (2006). The ecological rationality of simple group heuristics: Effects of group member strategies on decision accuracy. *Theory and Decision*, 60, 403–438.
- Reimer, T., & Katsikopoulos, K. (2004). The use of recognition in group decision-making. *Cognitive Science*, 28 (6), 1009–1029.
- *Reimer, T., Kuendig, S., Hoffrage, U., Park, E., & Hinsz, V. (2007). Effects of the information environment on group discussions and decisions in the hidden-profile paradigm. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 1-28.
- *Reimer, T., Reimer, A., & Hoffrage, U. (2007). Information sharing and decision making in groups: How groups can solve the hidden-profile task. *Unpublished manuscript*, University of Maryland.
- Russo, J. E., & Schoemaker, P. J. H. (2002). *Winning decisions*. New York: Doubleday.
- Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The wisdom of crowds*. New York: Doubleday.
- *Winqvist, J. R., & Larson, J. R. (1998). Information pooling: When it impacts group decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 371–377.
- *Wittenbaum, G. M., Hollingshead, A. B., & Botero, I. C. (2004). From cooperative to motivated information sharing in groups: Moving beyond the hidden profile paradigm. *Communication Monographs*, 71, 286–310.

5) Grading

a) Marking System

The following symbols are used on the student’s permanent record for all courses in which he or she is enrolled after the initial registration and schedule adjustment period: A+ (100%); A (93-99%), A– (90-92%); B+ (89%); B (83-88%); B– (80-82%); C+ (79%); C (73-78%); C– (70-72%); D+ (69%); D (63-68%); D– (60-62%); F (below 60%); XF; I; P; S; and W. These marks remain part of the student’s permanent record and may be changed only by the instructor upon certification, approved by the department chair and the dean that an actual mistake was made in determining or recording the grade.

b) Assignment of Grades

Assignment	Maximum Points
Your best exam	60
Your second best exam	60
Individual paper	60
Group project I	40
Group project II	60
Class activities	20
OVERALL	300

Total possible points for the semester = 300 points.

The student's final course grade will be computed by dividing the total number of points earned by the total number of possible points and multiplying by 100 to obtain a percentage of points earned. The final course grade will then be assigned according to the grading scale above (see *Marking System*). Policy on grade appeals: Any appeals must be submitted in writing, within 7 days after the assignment/exam has been returned. My decision regarding your appeal is final and non-negotiable.

6) Course Requirements

a) Tests

There will be two exams during the semester and one final exam. Exams will cover the reading assignments, handouts, lectures, class discussions, demonstrations, and audio-visual materials used in class. Generally, exams will include multiple choice questions. Although there will be *three* exams, only your *best two exams* will count toward your final grade. *Do not intentionally miss one of the first two exams!* You may end up with an exam score that is unsatisfactory and cannot be dropped. However, if you are pleased with your performance on the first two exams, you may opt not to take the final exam. Make-up exams are *only* available in case of excused absences, which have to be provided in advance (in case of religious holidays or athletic events) or within three days after returning to class (in case of documented illness). If you miss one of the first two exams without a legitimate excuse or you choose not to take the final exam because the first two exams are good enough for you, you will end up with two exam grades, both of which will count toward your final grade. If you take all *three* exams, only the *best two* exams will count toward your final grade.

b) Individual Paper

Students are required to write an individual paper (see *Assignment of Grades*). The individual paper should be a short (700 to 1000 words long) introduction of a theory, concept, phenomenon, or approach of group communication. The layout of the paper should draw upon the "Contributor Guidelines" of the "Encyclopedia of Social Psychology." An adapted guideline will be distributed in advance.

c) Group Projects: Process Losses and Assembly Bonus Effects in Groups

Students will work in groups of 4 on two group projects during the semester. Research on teams indicates that groups have their characteristic strengths, but they also have predictable weaknesses: While, on average, teams make better decisions than individuals, some of the absolute worst decisions are also made by groups (Russo & Shoemaker, 2002). The two projects deal with these two sides of groups and teams—their potentials and their pitfalls. Whereas the aim of the first project is to demonstrate a process loss, the aim of the second project is to identify strategies that can improve group functioning. Details on the group tasks and the related assignments (group presentations, handouts, paper) will be provided in the third week of class when groups will be formed.

d) Participation / Class Activities

Students are expected to 1) read the assigned articles before class, 2) come to class prepared to discuss the reading assignments, and 3) actively participate in the class (e.g., respond to questions and comments posed by others, ask questions about the readings). Participating in class does not just mean talking. Good class participation involves volunteering answers to questions that are insightful, actively listening to others' contributions to discussion, and moving the discussion

along toward a shared understanding. There will be two assignments related to in-class activities, which will be worth 10 points each.

7) Policy

a) Incompletes

As reprinted from the University Undergraduate Catalog: The mark of "I" (Incomplete) is an exceptional mark that is an instructor option. It is given only to a student, whose work in a course has been qualitatively satisfactory, when, because of illness or other circumstances beyond the student's control, he or she has been unable to complete some small portion of the work of the course. In no case will the mark "I" be recorded for a student who has not completed the major portion of the work of the course.

b) Code of Academic Integrity

As reprinted from the University Undergraduate Catalog: The University is an academic community. Its fundamental purpose is the pursuit of knowledge. Like all other communities, the University can function properly only if its members adhere to clearly established goals and values. Essential to the fundamental purpose of the University is the commitment to the principles of truth and academic honesty. Accordingly, The Code of Academic Integrity is designed to ensure that the principle of academic honesty is upheld. While all members of the University share this responsibility, The Code of Academic Integrity is designed so that special responsibility for upholding the principle of academic honesty lies with the students.

Definitions

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: any of the following acts, when committed by a student, shall constitute academic dishonesty.

CHEATING: intentionally using or attempting to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise.

FABRICATION: intentional and unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise.

FACILITATING ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: intentionally or knowingly helping or attempting to help another to violate any provision of this Code.

PLAGIARISM: intentionally or knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exercise.

c) Responsibility to Report Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is a corrosive force in the academic life of a university. It jeopardizes the quality of education and depreciates the genuine achievements of others. It is, without reservation, a responsibility of all members of the campus community to actively deter it. Apathy or acquiescence in the presence of academic dishonesty is not a neutral act. Histories of institutions demonstrate that a laissez-faire response will reinforce, perpetuate, and enlarge the scope of such misconduct. Institutional reputations for academic dishonesty are regrettable aspects of modern education. These reputations become self-fulfilling and grow, unless vigorously challenged by students and faculty alike.

All members of the University community, students, faculty, and staff share the responsibility and authority to challenge and make known acts of apparent academic dishonesty. The University has a nationally recognized Honor Code, administered by the Student Honor Council. The

Student Honor Council proposed and the University Senate approved an Honor Pledge. The University of Maryland Honor Pledge reads:

I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination.

Unless you are specifically advised to the contrary, the Pledge statement should be handwritten and signed on the front cover of all papers, projects, or other academic assignments submitted for evaluation in this course. Students who fail to write and sign the Pledge will be asked to confer with the instructor. Given that assignments in COMM 420 are submitted electronically, this pledge will be distributed and you will be asked to sign this pledge in class on the due date of the assignment.

d) Attendance and Due Dates

Students are expected to attend every class. Students will be assigned to groups and there will be a number of in-class group activities. Group activities require that all group members attend and participate. Attending class regularly is necessary to enable the groups to perform well. The University recognizes four legitimate excuses for missing class: illness, religious observance, participation in University activities at the request of University authorities, or compelling circumstances beyond the student's control. These are the ONLY circumstances under which you will be allowed to reschedule an assignment due date or an exam. If your absence is due to any of the four types of excused absences listed above you must provide a letter signed by a person in a position to make authoritative determination regarding the validity of the cause of absence (e.g., a doctor in case of illness, university officials regarding campus activities). Permission to turn in a late assignment will be granted ONLY if requested at least 24 hours before the assignment is due. In the case of an emergency, it is your responsibility to contact the instructor as soon as physically possible or you will earn no points for this assignment.

Should you miss a regular class, you need not explain your absence. Occasionally, there will be extra credit activities offered in class. Students who are not in class on the day such opportunities are offered, will not be allowed to make them up.

e) Out-of-Class-Interaction with Instructor

I like to answer your questions through emails. *Please include "COMM420" in your subject headlines.* However, my past experience teaches me that questions related to class materials sometimes do not have short definite answers or require elaborated answers and thus answering questions through emails may sometimes create more confusion and new problems. So I prefer answering your questions in person. I will only answer emails that can be answered briefly.

f) Special Needs

Anyone that needs special considerations (i.e., student athletes, practices, games, travel etc.) must have their schedule approved by the third class session. In addition, any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her abilities should contact me personally as soon as possible so I can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and facilitate your educational opportunities. You should also contact the Services for Students with Disabilities area of the Office of the Dean of Students at 471-6529 as soon as possible. I will require an official letter outlining authorized accommodations.

8) Tentative Schedule

You are fully responsible for all information in the syllabus, including changes that will be introduced in class throughout the semester. In addition, all relevant pieces of information (including this syllabus, announcements, task assignments, and due dates), will be posted on Blackboard. It is your responsibility to check Blackboard regularly to stay informed.

This schedule is tentative, and is prone to change if the instructor deems it necessary.

DATE	TOPIC	READINGS	WHAT IS DUE?
Aug 29	<i>The potentials and pitfalls of teams</i> Introduction to class	Syllabus	
Sep 3	Labor day: NO CLASS		
Sep 5, 10, & 12	<i>I know something that you don't know</i> Group diversity and information sharing in groups & <i>Introduction of Blackboard</i>	P&N 5; WHB; R	Profiles in Blackboard
Sep 17 & 19	<i>A group, what's that?</i> The structure of groups and the structure of group tasks & <i>Introduction of group assignments</i>	F 1 & 9	Preferences for project groups
Sep 24 & 26	<i>I am because ... I am a member</i> Social identity and group cohesion	F pp 88-97 & 5	
Oct 1	<i>Reserved for group projects / questions regarding the exam</i>		Individual paper
Oct 3	<i>When everything goes wrong</i> Groupthink	F 10 (pp 352-366)	
Oct 8	First exam		First exam
Oct 10	<i>Let's vote—or shall we discuss this?</i> Social combination and social communication rules	F 10 (pp 325-352); WL	
Oct 15 & 17	<i>David and Goliath</i> Majority and minority influences	F 7	
Oct 22 & 24	<i>What if we are unable to find a solution?</i> Brainstorming in groups	P&N 6	Assignment group project I
Oct 29 & 31	GROUP PROJECT I Process losses in groups		Group presentation I
Nov 5	<i>We decided to do well—who was again in charge of implementing this decision?</i> Beyond group decisions: Innovation implementation	P&N 12	
Nov 7 & 12	<i>Who knows what and who knows what is known by whom?</i> Transactive memory and metacognition in groups	LC; MM	
Nov 14	Second exam		Second exam
Nov 19 & 21	<i>Wanna be the liked or the successful boss?—You want to be both?</i> Leadership issues	F 11	
Nov 26	<i>Many hands make light work</i> Motivation gains and losses in groups	MHKLP	
Nov 28	<i>What we don't know about groups</i> New directions in group research	RRH	Assignment group project II
Dec 3, 5, & 10	GROUP PROJECT II Assembly bonus effects in groups		Group presentation II
TBA	Third exam (final exam)		Third exam

F=Forsyth; P&N=Paulus and Nijstad

Additional **required** readings: LC=Larson & Christensen; MM=Moreland & Myaskovsky; MHKLP=Messe, Hertel, Kerr, Lount, & Park; R=Reimer, Kuendig, Hoffrage, Park, & Hinsz; RRH=Reimer, Reimer, & Hoffrage; WL=Winquist & Larson; WHB=Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, & Botero;