

CMN 598: COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY AND TRANSFORMATION

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This course addresses the issue of community and change. We will explore how we unwittingly participate in a wide array of communities and how our participation helps and/or hinders sustainment of very particular kinds of communities.

Each of us is deeply immersed in multiple communities (family, school, friends, clubs, athletics, arts, civic, political, religious...the list is endless). Yet one thing we rarely ponder is how our own activities work to create the identity and thus the norms and practices within each community. In this course, we will explore this aspect of communication and community. Specifically, we will examine – through a wide variety of readings and discussions – how our traditional notions of language and social activity (e.g., communication) position us in ways that divide or exaggerate differences rather than in a manner that works toward building ways of going on together. This is not to suggest that differences or divisions are bad or evil. It is simply to illustrate that we do have at our disposal many, many different ways of relating together. One central point of this course is to elaborate how the standard tradition of debating in our culture and our communities which focuses on determining who is “right” and who is “wrong (or, alternatively put, which “truth” is “really true”) is only one choice....*not* a necessity. To this end, we will explore the differences between monologic and dialogic approaches to social action and community construction. The potentials and limits of each will be explored, particularly within the context of community transformation.

Our theoretical frame, social construction, emphasizes dialogue yet it does not demand or even suggest a repression of monologic traditions. Social construction centers on *forms of practice* that acknowledge meaning as a *relational construction*. Readings and discussions will address both philosophical and practical questions. Philosophically, we will explore the concept of the person (self, identity), the concept of relationship, and the nature of knowledge. More pragmatically, these issues will be used to address significant topics in the realm of community transformation such as our ability to work with incommensurate meaning communities (where viewpoints and ways of acting are incompatible and even mutually exclusive). A key question for us is, *how do we move a community from forms of practice that have the potential for fragmentation, alienation, and annihilation toward forms of practice that allow differences to co-exist and, more important, allow participants to respect each other and thus work together?*

The course readings explore our cultural entrapment within an individualist, monologic discourse where we credit individuals with abilities, motives, beliefs, desires, and (basically) the power or lack thereof to be effective in the world. One central aspect of this course is that we will step outside of the “right/wrong” dichotomies our tradition invites. Instead, we will discuss and examine our ways of acting and evaluating (i.e., making sense of) the social world as *discourses* or *ways of talking* rather than as unquestionable truths or facts. Thus, to talk about the individual

as having possession of his or her cognitive abilities, values, ethics, moralities, etc. is nothing more than that: talk. It is a way of talking and in as much as it is a way of talking, it is a way of inviting others into particular kinds of relationships.

What happens when we start talking about a philosophical stance that centralizes individuals as the locus of all activity (and power), as a *discourse* rather than a *truth or fact*? Well, first, we become curious to explore what alternatives there might be. Second, in our exploration of alternatives, we begin to notice that *different* ways of talking about people and the social world create *different* realities about people and the social world. So, when we talk about individuals as self contained, we begin to **judge people** as either *normal* or *abnormal*, *good* or *bad*, *right* or *wrong* every time they do something. Additionally, when we talk as if all that makes a person is contained inside him or her, the tendency to blame that person for anything that does not conform with social standards (whether on a small or broad scale) is heightened. If we do not blame another person for acting in ways we do not like, we at the very least pathologize or stigmatize him or her.

All this is to say that our traditional ways of relating, in and of themselves, are not bad, wrong, or useless. The point we are trying to make is that it is a ***discursive option*** and as such has certain implications. The alternative that we will spend the semester discussing is a relational philosophical stance. Here we talk about all that is meaningful, all that we take to be good, bad, just, true, etc. as emerging out of what we do together. Meaning – that is, significance in the social world – (and thus “reality”) is not ***there***, it is a byproduct of people relating. Social realities (that is, meaning) are social constructions.

What are the implications of this way of talking? First, we begin to attend more to ***processes of relating*** rather than to any particular outcome or product. We suspend a diligent focus on “progress” and place our diligent focus on what people are doing together that create the tangles, the difficulties, the incommensurate world views that we all would like to transcend.

These issues, as we saw last semester, have an enormous impact on how we ***go on together***. This really is the issue at stake for us. In this global economy we live in, how are we to *go on together* when there are so many disparate views, value systems, beliefs, social practices to coordinate. We no longer live in a world where the person in power can simply say, “We’re doing it my way and that’s that!” We see this approach failing across the globe today. Thus, in exploring in detail how a relational sensibility can help us engage in transformative dialogue, this course, hopefully, will give each of us practical tools for coordinating the multiplicity within which we operate. By focusing your attention on one particular community that you would like to facilitate through a transformative dialogue, the hope is that you will become facile practitioners. The ultimate aim of this course is to encourage each of you to engage in practical scholarship; that is, scholarship that transforms social life. As indicated above, our key question is: *How do we move a community from forms of practice that have the potential for fragmentation, alienation, and annihilation toward forms of practice that allow differences to co-exist and, more important, allow participants to respect each other and thus work together?*

READINGS

The following books are available at Durham Book.

Yankelovich, Daniel. (1999). *The magic of dialogue: Transforming conflict into cooperation*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Stone, D., Patton, B., and Heen, S. (1999). *Difficult conversations*. New York: Viking.

Folger, J.P. and Baruch, R.A. (Eds.) (2001). *Designing mediation*. New York: Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Participation (20%): You are expected to attend each and every class. You are also expected to be a full participant in the classroom discussions and activities. In the spirit of the course topic, we will work together to create a community that is inviting and comfortable for everyone. But you will be expected to demonstrate the ways in which you are contributing to our community. Beyond the day to day discussions we have in class, your participation will require you to report on observations you have made (in your own communities, that you hear of through newspapers, magazines, and television news stories, and on websites) of communities that are using what you judge to be dialogic approaches to transformation. Each of you will be assigned specific days on which you will be responsible for bringing your observations to class and discussing them with the class. These discussions are not simple “reportings” (e.g., “I noticed this and found it interesting.”). Your job is to *engage the class* in an active discussion where the concepts we are discussing together are applied to some observation you have made. Thursdays will be devoted to discussion of your observations. In addition, each of you will be responsible for summarizing the reads for the week and raising questions and issues that might facilitate our class discussion. These discussions will take place on Tuesdays.

To help you in your observations (as well as in your general classroom participation and required papers – see below), the following websites might be useful. Please feel free to share significant and relevant websites with the class and I will also add to this list throughout the semester:

<http://www.publicconversations.org>

<http://www.publicdialogue.org>

<http://www.taosinstitute.org>

<http://www.voicedialogue.com>

Papers (2 @ 20% each): Each week I will provide you with an issue, question, or topic on which to write. Each student will write one position paper during the first half of the semester (due between September 16th and October 21st) and one during the second half of the semester (due between October 28th and December 2nd). It will be your choice which week/question you want

to address, as long as you hand in one paper during the first half of the semester and another during the second. Questions/topics/issues will be distributed on Thursdays and your paper, should you choose to write on a given topic, will be due the following Tuesday. Specific guidelines for writing position papers will be distributed in class.

Course Project (40% - 20% for dialogue preparation and execution, 20% for final paper): By October 1st, each of you must identify a community that you would like to work with in designing and facilitating a dialogue (potentially a transformative dialogue). I encourage you to work in groups, although this is not mandatory. By this point in the semester, you will already be aware of many opportunities to work in different communities and you may choose to join in some of these organized projects. Alternatively, you might want to suggest a community of which you are part or with which you are familiar and work with this community alone or with some classmates who you invite into the project with you. You should start thinking now about a community that you feel really needs to move from a position of inactivity, hostility, or impasse toward a way of co-mingling the various ideas, views, beliefs, and practices that could be generative for all involved. I strongly recommend looking around UNH. What sorts of community transformation might be needed? What about the riots last semester? Is there some work that could be done there? What about dorm life? Or nightlife? Or relations between faculty and students? There are endless opportunities right here.

Once you have selected the community with which you want to work and decided whether you want to work alone or with others, your first task will be to write a description of how you (and others) see this community and the difficulties it is facing. From this point, you will begin to design a way of introducing transformative dialogue into that community. Many more details will be given to you as we move through this project. Your major project for the semester is to design and facilitate a dialogue that will take place in a specific community. The theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and pragmatic aspects of this design must be articulated in your final report.

COURSE SCHEDULE
(subject to adjustment if needed)

<u>WEEK OF</u>	<u>TOPIC</u>	<u>READINGS</u>
9/2	Introduction	Yankelovich, Ch 1
9/9	A Strategic View of Dialogue	Yankelovich, Chs 2-8
9/16	Strategic Dialogue's Potential	Yankelovich, Chs 9-14
9/23	The Details of Difficult Conversations (And how not to have them!)	Stone, et al, Chs 1-6
9/30	(Continued)	
10/7	Beyond the Difficult Conversation	Stone, et al, Chs 7-12
10/14	(Continued)	
10/21	From Truth to Transformation	Folger and Bush, Chs pp. 1-3
10/28	(Continued)	Folger and Bush, Chs 4-6
11/4	Transformative Practice	Folger and Bush, Chs 7-9
11/11	No Classes	
11/13	(Continued)	Folger and Bush, Chs 10, 11
11/18		
11/25		
12/2		
12/9	Project presentations	