

**Faculty Teaching Certificate Program
Capstone Project**

**Redesigning a Course for Active Learning:
Strategic Communication Research**

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Redesigning a Course for Active Learning: Strategic Communication Research

I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.
– Chinese proverb

The purpose of this paper is to describe a method by which I plan to foster active learning in the mass communications course Strategic Communication Research. The course is required in the mass communications public relations emphasis and was introduced to the curriculum in 2003.

Although required, the course is viewed with some skepticism by mass communications students – as a group, they make abundantly clear their dislike for anything involving numbers, statistics or mathematics. Despite my assurances, students still tend to view this course with considerable trepidation. From its inception, I have been determined to make the course both invaluable to students' understanding of the profession of public relations and a place to conquer students' baseless fears. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to redesign this course for the capstone project.

I believe that professors are more likely to reach mastery and satisfaction in the teaching profession if they commit themselves to creating a rich teaching and learning experience, receive feedback from their students and encourage other faculty members to participate in learning opportunities.

Learner-centered learning reverses the traditional pedagogical structure of a teacher lecturing to a group of students. Learners have the opportunity to explore, gather and generate meaning from their educational experiences while the teacher acts as a guide, and a participating learner, in the new setting.

The Syllabus

The first step in developing the learning environment I envision is to create an effective course syllabus. Certain characteristics, I believe, are essential to this document. At the top of each syllabus I include the course name, number, classroom, meeting times, my name, office number, office hours, phone number and e-mail address. I intend to keep all of this material on my redesigned course syllabus.

Aspects of the course described on the syllabus include:

- a description of the course
- course objectives
- the full name and edition of the textbook and its author and publisher
- a reasonable accommodation policy
- a description of the factors that determine the final grade
- the forms that the exams, quizzes and post-exams will take
- an explanation of why there is no provision for extra credit (it's not fair to students who take heavy course loads, work or have family obligations)
- the attendance policy
- an academic honesty policy statement and
- a table showing course points and corresponding grade

I explain each element that receives a grade, including assignments, projects, mini-projects, exams, quizzes, attendance and professionalism.

My attendance policy and professionalism grade reflect my belief that, to engage students in material effectively, they must take responsibility for their learning. I cannot make a student learn; a student learns only by making it his or her responsibility. As part of the course grade, I include “professionalism” points that constitute one-tenth or less of the overall grade. How they are obtained is explicitly described in the course syllabus. An example:

Professionalism

70 points

Professionalism consists of attendance, punctuality, assignment completion and class and group participation. Late arrival, talking at inappropriate times, sleeping, eating, using electronic devices (such as cell phones, portable computers, PDAs, etc.), leaving – or preparing to leave before class is dismissed – or reading newspapers or magazines during class will be considered unprofessional behavior.

This is clearly a means of assessing a student’s behavior. An intended outcome for all of my courses is that the students demonstrate self-regulation or, as I like to call it, professionalism. It is important that students demonstrate that they can take control of their learning and function successfully within the constraints placed upon them. It is certainly applicable to the professional environment students will encounter in a career in mass communication. In short, I expect students’ work to be done on time and to meet whatever specifications have been established.

Self-regulation is monitored and assessed by keeping track of instances in which students fail to demonstrate self-regulation.

Students receive professionalism point reductions when they show self-

regulation problems. The number of professionalism points a student retains during the semester indicates the student's level of self-regulation.

Related to this is my attendance policy. The syllabus will explain that students are allowed two absences. A third absence results in a deduction of 10 points from their course total. With each subsequent absence, the deduction doubles. I ensure that students understand that after three weeks or so of cumulative absences, the deductions prevent their attaining a passing grade.

In class, I circulate attendance sign-in sheets that list the students enrolled in the course. The students are asked to sign their names after their printed names. Students who arrive late to class may sign in, but I indicate on the sheet that the student is late. At the end of the semester, I tally the absences and the degree of punctuality.

When I go over the syllabus on the first day of class, I explain that the professionalism aspect of the grade is similar to what they will experience professionally.

Another important component of an effective syllabus is the course outline. I include a detailed schedule of topics, readings, assignments, quizzes and exams in the syllabus. A list of assignments is provided earlier in the syllabi, but in this part the assignments are posted by class meetings. I explain to students that I consider the outline something of a contract and will try to follow it as closely as possible.

First Day of Class

I plan to use some of the first-day tactics described in the Faculty Teaching Certificate Program this year. Because I have seen benefits from asking students to explain the meanings of their full names and how their parents chose them, I plan to continue this strategy in Strategic Communications Research. Not only does it use time I once wasted on the first day of class (after going over the syllabus and introduction), but it served to break the ice, introduce students to each other and, to my great surprise, actually helped me to learn their names. Never able to remember names easily, I found that after hearing students' full names and how they were decided upon, I could recall the stories sufficiently that remembering their names was fairly easy.

Lectures

There are several new lecturing techniques that I plan to apply to Strategic Communications Research. I have traditionally lectured with overheads and have occasionally handed out summaries of the lectures, assuming that because the students used multiple senses, the lectures were effective.

I will continue to lecture, but I plan to shorten them significantly – perhaps to no more than 15 minutes. I will provide handouts to cover some of the more complex concepts, but put blanks in some of the statements that students are to fill in while listening to the lecture.

These handouts allow students to concentrate on the concepts, yet require them to pay enough attention to catch the phrases I have left blank. They will also realize that the handouts are not available for all lectures and should not mistakenly assume the handouts will provide all of the information covered on the exams. Moreover, if I announce that some of the gaps and exercises in the handouts will be the subject of test questions and then keep my promise, the students will even read the handouts – and perhaps even the textbook – at least after the first exam.

I also plan to use significantly more in-class exercises to support the lecture. There are several opportunities for this. For instance, when the topic is oral history, students can read sections of transcripts from oral history projects. When content analysis is introduced, I will bring copies of newspapers to class and ask the students to respond to various questions, and we'll record the results on the blackboard. This spontaneous example of content analysis will allow students to be part of the process of conceptualization and of analyzing newly created data. Newspapers are familiar items in mass communication and students readily recognize the explanations for the outcomes of the exercise.

I intend to spend class time only on the most critically important and conceptually difficult parts of the material covered in the book, leaving the students to cover the rest themselves. This should yield literally hours of additional class time for active learning exercises. The class is

more likely to be lively and effective, and I can include topics I never had time to cover before.

I will invite students to ask questions in the redesigned course. I have found that students are reluctant to display their ignorance, despite my frequent reference to the Chinese proverb: He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever.

I have found that deliberately misspeaking or making an error can provoke a student (especially one who is naturally talkative) to speak up to correct me. Students almost always recognize the setup once they have fallen into it, and the humor is good for everyone.

I have found that honesty about my teaching techniques is well received by students. I sometimes confess to students, for instance, that the quizzes they are required to take are merely tricks to get them to read the chapters. I've never heard a student express dislike for my approach – it's obvious anyway – and I believe they appreciate the frankness. As a result, I'll try to persuade the students from the outset that my teaching methods are known to help students learn more and understand material better. I can reinforce the point about the effectiveness by offering the following observations:

- We all know it's hard to sit still and keep our minds focused on one thing for more than a few minutes. In lectures, your attention drifts, first for short intervals, then for longer ones, and by the end of an hour or more, you're probably getting little of what's being

said. Doing something active substantially increases the amount of information you actually get. And it cuts way down on the boredom.

- You've all sat through a good lecture, believing that you understood it, and then later, when you tried to do the assignments, you realized that you hadn't gotten it at all. By putting you to work in class, I'm giving you a jump start on understanding the material and being able to do the assignments.

Mini-Assignments

Another technique that I plan to use in Strategic Communication Research is what I call mini-assignments. These will be six or so assignments that are to be done out of class and are due in 2 or 3 days (at the next class session). These practical applications of research concepts will focus on information gathering or data synthesis.

Some examples of mini-assignments:

- For historical research. Students must locate and print the first two pages of three corporate history Web pages. The three examples must represent three of the categories discussed in the textbook of ways to use an organization's history in public relations.
- For case studies. Students must examine an English organization called Plain English Campaign, found at www.plainenglish.co.uk/. Students must describe the organization's research problem, its objectives, target publics, strategies, tactics, campaign's timetable and how the results of its campaign can be tested with formal research methods.

- For content analysis. Students must choose at least 12 recently received e-mail messages and determine the total number of e-mail messages, the number of authors, the number of messages per author, the number of messages versus replies (did you reply to every e-mail chosen for this study?), the subject headers of each message, the day of the week each e-mail was sent, the time of day each was sent, the first word of each message (after the salutation), the last word of each e-mail (before the sender's name) and the primary topic of each message. Students must use tables to display their data and briefly analyze their e-mails. Students must also attach the first page of the e-mail messages used for this assignment.
- For descriptive statistics. Each student will receive and open a package of M&Ms. The data from each student will be collected in class and tabulated on the blackboard. Students will then fill out four worksheets with charts and calculations of the mean, mode and median of the class' collection of M&Ms, the colors in their own packages and its mean, mode and median and then the percentage of each color in their package. Part of this mini-assignment will be done in class, the rest out of class.
- For Polls and Surveys. Students will locate news stories from four news organizations (such as the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, ABC, CBS, CNN, BBC, FOX and ESPN) on the Internet that focus on opinion surveys or opinion poll results and then answer seven questions (on a handout) about the proper way to report polls and surveys. Students attach copies of the four news stories used for this assignment.
- For RFPs. Students will find four organizations in Minnesota that do social science research, using resources described in their textbooks. Students will describe the type of research each organization claims to do, and the name, address and phone number of at least one contact person.

The mini-assignments will be discussed thoroughly on their due dates. Students will be asked to describe what they found, and this can be used as the basis for reiterating concepts or broadening the discussion. Students will have greater insight into the areas covered by the mini-assignments and are likely to have questions that can be discussed in class.

In-Class Quizzes

In the weeks when students don't have mini-assignments or exams, I intend to give in-class quizzes. I will direct the class into groups of two or three students to take a quiz at the end of class on the designated day. The group membership will change from quiz to quiz, allowing students to get to know each other, preventing the often-destructive politics common in small groups, and avoiding group dependency on better students. This is similar to group assignments they will encounter as professionals, and it allows them to do what they do best – socialize. The work necessary to assign students to new groups each time a quiz is given is minimized with the use of a spreadsheet.

Students don't seem to mind group quizzes nearly as much as they do individual quizzes. Allowing students to use their textbooks and notes makes the quiz easier and it requires them to be familiar with the material.

When I grade the quizzes, I will mark on the key a slash next to each question when it is missed. At the next class meeting, I will hand back the group quizzes and go over them, projecting the key onto the screen to allow the class to see which questions were missed most often. This not only helps the students recognize the concepts with which they had trouble, but serves as a means of assessment for them.

I will tell the students at the beginning of the semester (and in the syllabus) that group quizzes cannot be made up. This encourages

attendance and adds to the slight sense of competitiveness – only those who attend and participate in the group quizzes will earn those points.

The Major Project

Students in Strategic Communication Research will be required to conduct a major content analysis project with either a partner or a designated small group (depending on the class size). I have discovered from other courses that groups of two or three students work well together. In general, the larger the group, the more likely problems occur. Groups with four or more usually have one student who simply sits back and lets the others do the work (a “hitchhiker”), assuming that he or she will get by without notice or punishment.

To help deal with this problem, I will hand out copies of “Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams” (see Appendix A), and ask students to write and turn in a half page essay on how the Hitchhiker paper relates to their experiences. Writing the essay ensures that the students actually read the handout and helps them process what they have read. I won’t grade these essays.

There are important steps to this assignment. Groups will be allowed to choose their topics – with my approval. I will encourage them to choose topics that are truly of interest to them. A thorough content analysis can take weeks to complete, and if the group members don’t like

their subject, they'll get bored. If students care about their topic, they're apt to be driven with at least some curiosity.

Students will be required to write a report about their project, using charts and graphs to illustrate the data. I will give them explicit instructions about the content of the report, including sections that must be included and their significance. Students will be told that they will be expected to understand all parts of the project and that questions concerning the research process will appear on the next exam.

Students will see examples of successful content analyses conducted by professionals and other students. I will go over them in class to illustrate the sort of work I expect and suggest ways to make their reports even better. I believe modeling of this type helps students to understand the process they must undergo to improve their work. I'll bring the examples to every class meeting during the project period.

Students will be required to make an informal presentation of their projects. I believe this helps them in a variety of ways. Students can then learn of the studies done by their classmates, both satisfying their curiosity about what the other groups were working on and allowing them to consider other applications of content analysis. I also want students to make the presentations to give them practical experience in discussing research methods, and to put pressure on the groups to complete their projects on schedule and competitively. On the day of the presentations, I'll question all members of each group about some aspect

of the study. I will let them know ahead of time that I will do that, and all students will be graded on the quality of the answers I receive from each student. That should help students make sure that their group members understand the material.

I will encourage the class at the outset to tell me (via e-mail or in person) if a student in their group does not perform well. Although such a student would receive the same grade on the project as the other students, the student's professionalism points will be deducted appropriately. I will also consider students' peer assessments in this process (see Appendix B).

Exams

There are usually four major units to the research course, and I will administer an exam at the end of each unit. My exams are often multiple-choice, with some short answers. I generally write new exams for each class every semester. I find that I make changes to my courses and need to tailor exams to the material covered in class and the experiences of the students. I always grade exams by hand and encourage students to make notes, ask questions or otherwise indicate pleasure or displeasure with questions on the exam. At the beginning of the next class meeting, I show the class the overall grades – As, Bs, Cs, etc. – so they have an idea of how they did and they don't have to wait until the end of class to find out. This reinforces the slight sense of

competitiveness in the exam process and affords the students a means of assessment (once they realize where their grade falls among the class scores). I allow the students to keep the exams after they have taken the post-exams (see below).

Post-Exams

Professors generally overlook the exam review (going over the exam after it has been graded) as a learning opportunity. By having students retake the exam in small groups (open-book, open-notes), it becomes not only an enjoyable experience, but also a valuable learning tool. We know the routine: students cram, show up for exams, tap into their temporary reservoirs of information and leave. In the hallway after class, some of them compare answers. The textbook and notes appear and the correct answers to the most difficult questions are ascertained. When the exam is reviewed during the next class period, many students are absent or bored.

I will administer what I call post-exams to my research classes. I believe it makes a lot of sense and is a good example of active learning. In a relaxed setting, exam questions are recalled, students discuss questions, and textbooks and notes serve as resources. Having students retake the exam – in groups of comparable ability – and rewarding them for their efforts, creates an enjoyable and effective learning experience.

At the beginning of the semester, I will go over the description of the post-exams in the syllabus. I will explain that during the next class meeting after an exam, students will be assigned to small groups and asked to retake the exam they took individually. I'll tell them that there are no makeup group exams (to get credit, students must attend class that day). I'll tell them the amount of credit possible for a group exam (for example, 10 points for a 150-point exam). I'll also tell them that a group exam is not offered for the final exam. On exam day, I'll remind students to bring their books and notes to the next class meeting for use during the group exam. I'll then administer and collect the exams as usual.

Before the next class meeting, I'll grade the exams and record the grades. I then will rank order the exams by score and decide how many small groups to create for that class size. Groups may be as small as two and as large as four (group dynamics reduces the effectiveness of larger groups).

I will designate a tentative group number for each student on the rank-ordered list by counting first down and then up by the number of groups (e.g., 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, then 7-6-5-4-3-2-1 and again, until each student has a group number). I'll ensure that each group has a combined exam score similar to those of the other groups. Imbalances can be remedied by switching students from one group to another. The

goal is to make the groups as statistically similar as possible, so that students have similar chances to do well on the group exam.

I'll make lists of the members of each group, scrambling the names in each group so students won't be able to tell who did well or badly on the exam. I'll take the original exams and put them into paper-clipped groups to hand out after the post-exam.

The next class period, I'll reserve the last 20 minutes of the class period for the group exam. I'll remind students that they have been assigned to small groups for the exam and then show them the list of groups. I will tell them that the groups are as similar as possible – that each group is likely to have someone who did very well on the exam, someone who did not do well and others whose scores were in between. I will also tell them that the names have been scrambled so it is impossible to tell which students did what.

The first person listed in each group will be asked to come forward to receive a new copy of the exam. I'll instruct the members in each group to sit together and retake the exam. They will be reminded again that the exam is open-book and open-notes.

When a group hands in its completed exam, the group members will receive their individual exams and see for the first time how they did. Students can then talk about the exams with their friends or group members (the correct answers are marked on their exams).

Before the next class meeting, I will grade the group exams. At the start of the next class meeting, I will display the scores – making the experience somewhat competitive. This benign form of competition will satisfy the most competitive as well as the least competitive students. I'll offer to answer any questions and return the group exams to the appropriate members.

I believe this method will reinforce the exams' correct answers, allow students to share their knowledge and opinions, interact socially, learn the names of their classmates (their names must be on the exams), and retain the subject matter for a longer time than usual.

In short, the exam review is transformed from a boring and dreaded class period (and inspiration for evasive action) to one that is rewarding and pleasurable.

Assessment

I plan to use the standard student evaluations at the end of the course, but there are other assessment methods I would like to use as well. One of these is to ask students, after a lecture or in-class exercise, to write down the clearest and the murkiest concepts covered that day. This immediate feedback will help me understand what I may need to elaborate on the next class meeting and how quickly students are grasping concepts.

I also plan to simply ask students what they think of their assignments. I think a relatively informal but controllable classroom is most effective and getting students to talk about their experiences with assignments gives me a sense of how well I've conveyed the information, how well they comprehend the material and how they're doing psychologically. There are times during the semester, such as when many students are ill or the weather is bad, that students' emotional makeup needs to be monitored. I believe the best solution to this is to casually engage students in small talk at the beginning of class. The give and play is valuable for everyone involved.

I believe students have a variety of ways to assess their success or failure in my course. Because my syllabus is detailed, students can easily keep track of their points earned. Should they lose track of their points, I'll offer to look it up on my spreadsheet for them.

I take pride in returning graded material to students at the next class meeting or, when that is impossible, as soon as possible. If material is returned immediately, we can discuss it further in class and I can make sure students have mastered the material before moving on.

Students are made aware of class scores after each exam, post-exam and quiz. Subtly competitive, this also serves as a form of assessment for the students.

Another way students can compare their work with their classmates is by listening to project presentations. Although the groups

have benefited from the same information, the final results vary significantly. Students are well aware of their own group's strengths and shortcomings after hearing the other groups' presentations.

Other Ideas

I plan to invite guest speakers to the Strategic Communication Research course. In particular, it would be valuable for students to hear from public relations practitioners how they deal with the RFP and bidding process. Besides giving the textbook and lecture material added credibility, it would give students contact with professionals and anecdotal evidence of the practical nature of the material covered in the course.

I would also like to invite a public relations practitioner to class to discuss the research process at his or her organization. Students are often greatly impressed by contact with professionals, making the information more memorable. Unfortunately, research is only conducted at about 5 percent of the public relations firms in this country and the number locally is much smaller.

Another plan I have for this course is to bring a computer printout of a research project to class. I have shown to classes research reports, parts of projects, including data samples, but I haven't managed to obtain a computer printout of data generated by a professional research

organization for a public relations client. Proprietary contracts make this goal difficult, but, perhaps, not impossible.

I would like to apply D2L to this course, but can only imagine implementing some of its resources now. I teach other courses that I think would benefit more fully from the technology and will reserve my introduction of it until I am comfortable with my course redesign.