Communication and Culture

So why am I here and what exactly am I supposed to learn?

Although it may appear, at first glance, that the topics of communication and culture are distinct and separate, we shall find, throughout the semester, that the two are actually tightly linked together. In fact, it can even be said that communication is culture, and culture is communication.

According to Diana George and John Trimbur in *Reading Culture*, culture can be looked at as a way of life that characterizes a particular group of people at a particular time. "This view of culture offers a way to think about how individuals and groups organize and make sense of their social experience—at home, in school, at work, and at play. Culture includes all the social institutions, patterns of behavior, systems of belief, and kinds of popular entertainment that create the social world in which people live. Taken this way, culture means not simply masterpieces of art, music, and literature, but a people's lived experience—what goes on in the everyday lives of individuals and groups" (2). Raymond Williams, in *The Analysis of Culture*, goes on to define the theory of culture as "the study of all these relationships between the different elements in a whole way of life. The analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships" (52). But above all, culture is ordinary.

Communication, according to John Fiske, is an endless list of human activities, from the ways in which we spread information, what we see on television, our hair style, or even the way we dress and our facial expressions. He goes on to state that communication is central to the life of our culture, and without it, culture must die. Thus, if we are to study communication, we must also study culture within which communication is integrated (Fiske 2).

The goals of this class, then, are to explore this link between communication and culture. We will be doing so by exploring three particular topics; storytelling and narrative, style, and the news. Within these three topics in particular, will we come to a) understand the operation of narratives as cultural communication, b) explore how the styles we follow tell a story about who we are as individuals and as a culture, c) appreciate the complexities of culture and communication as seen in the news, and d) to examine the relations between culture and/as communication. By investigating these topics, it is my hope that we will come to a better understanding of ourselves, our fellow human beings, and the manner in which we exist together in this very big world.

What are the goals for this class?

The main purpose of this class, besides striving to better understand ourselves, our fellow humans, and the world we live in, is to walk away with increased communication skills. We will be practicing 3 modes of communication: oral, written and visual, and will be evaluating these modes via rhetorical analysis and criticism.
What kinds of assignments will be required for this class?

Assignments for this class will include multiple writing assignments, a video project, and oral communication in the form of presentations and discussions. Assignments may be given on a daily basis.

Do I need to buy books for this class?

Yes! We are going to be using Reading Culture 6th Edition (2004) by George and Trimbur.


It is likely that there will be other reading assignments that you will be required to download off the Revisions web page. You will need to bring these articles with you to class.

Reading assignments will be assigned at least one class period prior to when they will be discussed. You must complete the reading assignments prior to attending class as this will lead to more interesting discussions.

How are you going to grade us?

The following is a breakdown of how I will be evaluating your performance in this class:

Core writing assignments (which may include a final exam) – 50%
Oral assignments – 20%
Class participation – 20%
Group video project – 10%

Grading Scale

93-100 A 89-92 A/B 83-88 B 79-82 B/C
73-78 C 69-72 C/D 63-68 D 62-0 F

How are you structuring this class?

This class is similar to that of a graduate seminar class, that is, I expect you to participate in the class discussions and conversations. It is probable that you will hear, read, and view material that you don’t agree with, or are personally uncomfortable with. I encourage the expression of differing points of view in these situations, and expect that each member of the class will be made to feel comfortable in offering their own particular observations. Part of being a good communicator is learning how to negotiate in the face of differing beliefs and different ways of being in the world. Don’t take opposing viewpoints personally. What matters is how well you learn to communicate your feelings and beliefs in a rhetorically sound and persuasive manner.

What’s up with the class presentations?

You will be doing a lot of presenting in this class, most of it in a very informal manner. Each of you will pair up with a partner to lead a class discussion on a required reading.
While there is no particular format that needs to be followed, discussion leaders will be graded on their ability to understand and communicate the reading, as well as engage the class. If you need a TV/VCR/DVD/projector, you must let me know at least 1 week in advance. If there are any problems with getting these items, I will let you know immediately.

Course Policies

Attendance and active participation are expected and required. It is summer in the Keweenaw, and I understand that this will not always be easy. After the first two absences, 3% of your final grade will be deducted for each subsequent absence. Because readings may be assigned the day before class, it is essential that if you do miss class you have a way to find out what the assignment is. There will be a class list serve generated that will allow you to communicate with each other via email for this purpose. Do not count on me outside of class time or office hours to be available to give you the reading assignment if you miss class.

Promptness is expected as a general rule. If you are consistently late to class, your grade will be adversely affected. All assignments are due on assigned days. 10% of your work grade will be deducted for each day late. Documented illness or documented emergencies are the only exception to this policy. I know that life can be difficult at times, but work schedule changes, transportation, or family issues, unless documented, are not considered a valid reason for missing assignment deadlines or class meetings. If you find yourself in a difficult scheduling or life-jam, I encourage you to come talk to me.

If you have a cell phone or pager, either turn them off or set them to vibrator.

Plagiarism

In our western culture, plagiarism is considered cheating and is a serious academic offense. It is defined as “knowingly copying another's work or ideas and calling them one’s own or not giving proper credit or citation,” and it covers copying sections, major ideas, or entire papers from printed or electronic sources as well as handing in papers written by other students. If you are in doubt, quote. If you are quoting someone directly then you need to list the information within quotation marks and cite a page number. If you are paraphrasing, then you need to cite the person and a page number. If you have any questions, please talk to me or consult the Writing Center.

Is there really still a problem with harassment?

Yes, there really is. MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. If you have a disability and need reasonable accommodation for equal access to education and services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students (487-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, department chair, or the Affirmative Action Office (487-3310).