

COM 441 – Spring 2010  
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### **Ethical Issues in Communication**

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” – Plato

“...the critical examination of our values can contribute significantly to the quality of our lives,” – James Jaksas and Michael Pritchard

#### **Course Objectives**

To raise consciousness, suggest possible criteria for judgment, and stimulate critical thinking about ethical problems in communication within interpersonal, organizational, mediated, and public/political realms. The purpose is not to provide definitive answers to these problems or, at the other extreme, to create a state of immobilized uncertainty. Rather, students are taught to engage in thoughtful assessment of the communication behaviors of themselves and others. In order to achieve these objectives, students are exposed to materials that pursue at least one of the following three areas of emphasis: 1) the relationship between communication and ethical considerations; 2) summary of current theoretical approaches to communication ethics; 3) application of ethics-based theories and standards to specific kinds of communication situations and cases.

#### **In this course, students will:**

- **Stimulate their Moral Imagination**
- **Recognize Ethical Issues**
- **Develop a Sense of Moral Obligation**
- **Develop Analytical Skills**
- **Tolerate Disagreement**

#### **Textbooks**

Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life, Second Edition, (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1999). ISBN: 0-375-70528-7

Richard Johannesen, Ethics in Human Communication, Fifth Edition, (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002). ISBN: 1-57766-211-3

#### Additional Readings:

To be announced and available through library reserves

## Assignments

**Oral Discussion Topic Introductions:** These will be five minutes apiece and you will do 2 of them, presenting at least one of them during the first half of the semester. The oral presentations serve as a kind of opening statement to stimulate discussion on the particular topic you have chosen from the options provided in this syllabus. In your presentation, you **MUST** take a stance of some kind, backed by examples and the application of a specific theoretical perspective(s). Dates and topics will be chosen during the first week of class. **NOTE: Discussion topics and assigned readings do not always correspond – you will need to do additional reading and research on your topic.** A complete assignment description including grading criteria is attached to this syllabus.

**Post-discussion position papers:** These papers provide an opportunity for you to respond to class discussion by examining one of the daily discussion topics in greater depth. You should draw from in class discussion, class readings and at least one external source in developing your position. You are required to do two of these papers during the semester, one during the first half of the course (**March 4** is the last date to turn the first one in) and one during the second half of the course (the last date to turn in the second is **April 27**). Post-discussion position papers should be no less than five pages in length and are due within two weeks of the in-class presentation and discussion for the topic you wish to examine. A complete assignment description including grading criteria is attached to this syllabus.

**Final Exam:** The exam is a take home, essay test given out the last day of class and due the Thursday of exam week, May 6, 2010 by 3:00pm. **NO LATE EXAMS WILL BE ACCEPTED.** You have the option of choosing to do a **research paper** instead of the final exam. If you are interested in this option, please contact me **before** spring break to discuss the particulars.

**Quizzes:** It is essential to your learning in this class that you keep up-to-date on assigned readings. As a result, I reserve the right to administer pop quizzes intermittently throughout the semester to encourage you to keep on top of this important part of your class preparation. Quiz grades will be included in your class participation and attendance grade.

## Evaluation

Oral Discussion Topic Introduction – 2 @ 25 pts. apiece	50 points
Post discussion position paper I	75 points
Post discussion position paper II	75 points
Final Exam or Paper	150 points
<u>Participation and attendance</u>	<u>50 points</u>
TOTAL	400 points

**Grading:** Final grades will be assessed using cumulative point totals applied to the following scale:

A+ = 97-100	B+ = 87-89	C+ = 77-79	D+ = 67-69
A = 93-96	B = 83-86	C = 73-76	D = 63-66
A- = 90-92	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	D- = 60-62
			F = 59-0

**General Guidelines:**

**Papers:** ALL papers should be typed and carefully proofread (including the final take home exam) and turned in when they are due as indicated by the instructions above.

**Attendance:** Because this course and your success in it rely heavily on your active participation in class discussion, you are expected to attend every class period. However, if circumstances arise that make it impossible to attend class, you are granted two absences without penalty. For any unexcused absences beyond the allotted two, the professor reserves the right to significantly lower your grade. Per university regulations, excused absences must fall into one of two categories: 1) sanctioned anticipated situations and 2) document emergency situations. Anticipated situations (e.g., participating in official university functions, court attendance, religious observations, or military duty) **must be submitted in writing at the beginning of the semester or one week prior to the anticipated absence.** Emergency absences (e.g. student illness, injury, or death of immediate family member) **must be documented by the Student Organization Resource Center (515-3323) or an attending physician** within one week following the emergency. Make-up work will be allowed only in situations where the absences are excused. If you miss class on a day you are scheduled to make an oral presentation, you will receive a zero for that assignment.

Please consult the following web page for further information on university attendance regulations:

[http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic\\_affairs/courses\\_undergrad/REG02.20.3.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic_affairs/courses_undergrad/REG02.20.3.php)

**Academic Integrity:** Strict standards of academic honesty will be enforced according to the University policy on academic integrity found in the Code of Student Conduct. I expect that a student's name on any test or assignment means that the student has neither given or received unauthorized aid and that the student's work contains appropriate citation of ideas and materials that are not his or her own. Consult the following website for further details: [http://www.ncsu.edu/student\\_affairs/osc/AIpage/acaintegrity.html](http://www.ncsu.edu/student_affairs/osc/AIpage/acaintegrity.html)

**ADA Statement:** Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. In order to take advantage of available accommodations, students must register with Disability Services for Student. Contact information is as follows: 1900 Student Health Center, Campus Box 7509, 515-7653, [http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic\\_affairs/courses\\_undergrad/REG02.20.1.php](http://www.ncsu.edu/policies/academic_affairs/courses_undergrad/REG02.20.1.php)

**Department Equity Statement:** All persons, regardless of age, race, religion, gender, physical disability, or sexual orientation shall have equal opportunity without harassment in Department of Communication courses and programs. Any harassment should be reported immediately to either the classroom instructor or the department head.

### **Calendar of Reading, Topics and Assignments**

<u>Week 1</u>	<u>Course Goals and Introduction</u>
Jan 12	Discussion Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are your expectations for a course in communication ethics?</li><li>• To what extent do we begin every communicative interaction with an assumption of trust?</li></ul>
Jan 14	Read <i>Lying</i> , ch.1 & 2, <i>Ethics</i> , ch. 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How does an ethical issue differ from a question of taste or policy?</li><li>• Casuistic reasoning and case ethics</li></ul>
<u>Week 2</u>	<u>Exploiting Human Emotions and Frailties</u>
Jan 19	Read <i>Ethics</i> ch. 2 Discussion Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear of disease and death to aid in fundraising</li></ul>
Jan 21	Read <i>Ethics</i> ch. 3 and appendix, pgs. 249-268, 279-297 Discussion Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear of hell and damnation to get people to be virtuous</li><li>• Fear of danger to get children to take safety precautions</li></ul>
<u>Week 3</u>	<u>Exploiting Human Emotions and Frailties – Public Communication/Media</u>
Jan 26	Discussion Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear of communism, imperialism, fascism, religious fanaticism or other political ideologies to justify military expenditures, or to justify opposition to domestic policies such as healthcare reform.</li><li>• Use of nationalism and patriotism in war or crisis</li></ul>
Jan 28	Read <i>Lying</i> , ch. 3, <i>Ethics</i> , ch. 7 Discussion Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appeals to ethnic loyalties in political campaigns</li><li>• Ethnic jokes</li></ul>

- Week 4  
Feb 2 Exploiting Human Emotions and Frailties – Public Communication/Media  
Discussion Topics
- Racial and sexual stereotypes in political communication, media or school books/textbooks
  - Portrayals of violence on the internet, TV or in magazines
- Feb 4 Read *Lying* ch. 4, *Ethics* ch. 4  
Discussion Topics
- Sexual Appeals in Commercial Advertising
  - Sexual Appeals in Entertainment (TV, movies, magazines, internet)
- Week 5  
Feb 9 Exploiting Human Emotions and Frailties – Public Communication/Media  
Discussion Topics
- Celebrity endorsement of products or candidates
  - Public opinion poll results in political campaigns
  - Name dropping of authority figures
- Feb 11 Read *Ethics* ch. 5 – Discussion Catch up
- Week 6  
Feb 16 Deceptive Communication and Secrecy – Interpersonal Communication  
Read *Lying* chs. 5 & 14  
Discussion Topics
- Youth deception of parents re: drug use, living arrangements, dating habits in college, etc.
  - Parental deception of children re: Santa Claus, tooth fairy, adoption, divorce)
- Feb 18 Read *Lying* chs 8 & 15  
Discussion topics:
- Lying to the sick and dying about their illness
  - White lies as a social grace
- Week 7  
Feb 23 Deceptive Communication and Secrecy – Public Communication  
Read *Lying* ch. 12, *Ethics* ch. 6  
Discussion topics:
- Shading the truth in job interviews
  - Deceiving powerful institutions perceived as unjust
- Feb 25 Discussion topics:
- Public deception to avoid panic or riots

- Fair housing testers; decoys on public transit vehicles, FBI informants, etc.

Week 8

Deceptive Communication and Secrecy – Public/Mediated

Mar 2

Read *Ethics*, ch. 10

Discussion topics:

- Legislator’s mail to constituents and similar false personalization of communication
- Ghostwriting speeches and/or press releases for public figures

Mar 4

Discussion Topics:

- Docudramas (e.g. Oliver Stone’s JFK, Nixon, etc.)
- Lawyers and debaters withholding evidence
- Paid product endorsers on websites

**Final day to turn in Post-discussion Position Paper I**

Week 9

Coercive Communication – Interpersonal

Mar 9

Read *Lying*, ch. 6, *Ethics*, ch. 8 & 11

Discussion Topics:

- Threatening to withhold affection to gain compliance
- Parental threats to cut off funds to gain compliance

Mar 11

Read *Lying* ch. 7, *Ethics* 12

Discussion Topics:

- Compulsory religious education and participation
- Threats of sanctions from bosses or teacher to secure conforming behavior

Week 10

SPRING BREAK – RELAX AND ENJOY!

Week 11

Coercive Communication – Public and/or Mediated

Mar 23

Discussion topics:

- Subliminal persuasion and product placement in the media, e.g. American Idol and Survivor
- Social pressures (e.g. passing the plate in church, listing names of donors to good causes, publicizing names of boycott breakers or clients of abortion clinics or prostitutes or “deadbeat dads”, etc.)

Mar 25

Discussion topics:

- Religious cults
- Economic boycotts to promote political or social causes (boycott of Nestles', California Grape Growers, Disney World, etc.)

Week 12      Intrusions on Privacy – Interpersonal

Mar 30      Read *Lying*, ch. 9 & 11

Discussion Topics:

- Tattling, squealing, and informing
- Gossip

Apr 1      Spring Holiday – NO CLASS

Week 13      Intrusions on Privacy – Interpersonal

Apr 6      Read *Lying*, ch. 13, *Ethics*, ch. 319-332

Discussion Topics

- Listening in on phone conversations or reading mail, email, journals or diaries of other members of household
- Professionals' (doctors, ministers, lawyers, counselors, etc.) revealing confidences of clients to spouses or employers

Apr 8      SSCA CONFERENCE – NO CLASS

Week 14      Intrusions on Privacy – Public/Mediated and Web-based

Apr 13      Read *Lying* ch. 10, *Ethics* ch. 12

Discussion topics:

- Whistleblowing by employees of government or private business
- Media coverage of sexual preferences or other private behaviors)

Apr 15      Discussion topics:

- Media coverage of personal tragedies
- Ambush interviews, rummaging through garbage for personal information

Week 15

Apr 20      Discussion topics

- Data mining/Information sharing
- Spyware
- Public Surveillance

Apr 22      Organizational Ethics  
Read *Ethics*, ch. 9 & Challenger and/or Disney Case  
Discussion Topics: Questions at the end of the Challenger case as assigned

Week 16  
Apr 27      Organizational Ethics  
Film, *The Corporation*  
**Last Day to submit Second Position Paper**

Apr 29      Course Wrap-up; **Distribute Take Home exams**

Week 17  
May 6      **TAKE HOME FINAL EXAMS**  
**DUE BY 3:00pm (No late exams accepted)**

## COM 441

### Formal Assignment:                    **Oral Discussion Topic Introductions**

Assignment Goal: To stimulate discussion about the topic the student has chosen to present by applying class readings and lectures to a brief analysis of a particular communication practice and advocating a position regarding its ethicality.

As a result of this assignment, students will have:

1. Gained new knowledge regarding theoretical/ethical perspectives and their applicability to communication practice.
2. Enhanced their skills of analysis and advocacy by developing and arguing for a coherent ethical stance in regard to a particular communication practice.
3. Developed their commitment to ethical practice within a community by orally advocating a particular stance to their classmates.

Assignment Description: The oral presentation serves as a kind of opening statement to stimulate discussion on the particular topic you have chosen from the options provided in your syllabus. In your presentation you **MUST** advocate a stance (although your stance should not be overly simplistic), backed by examples and the application of a specific theoretical perspective or perspectives. Dates and topics will be chosen the first week of class. **NOTE:** Discussion topics and assigned readings for a particular class day do not always correspond – you may need to do additional reading or go back to materials covered earlier to adequately address your topic.

Grading Criteria: The oral presentation: 1) gives a clear and complete sense of the ethical issues involved (avoids being overly simplistic), 2) accurately applies at least one of the perspectives or theories from class readings and lectures to the topic, 3) presents a clear and well-defined stance on the topic, 4) gives current examples of the topic (drawn from newspapers, magazines, television, workplace scenarios, campus life, the web, etc.). 5) is well organized and successfully stimulates discussion.

## **COM 441**

Formal Assignment:

### **Post Discussion Position Paper**

Assignment Goal: To enhance student's commitment to ethical communication practice within a community by developing and arguing an ethical stance on a particular type of communication practice in response to class discussion of that practice.

As a result of the assignment, students will have:

1. Gained new knowledge regarding theoretical/ethical perspectives and their applicability to communication practice.
2. Further enhance their skills of analysis and advocacy by arguing for a coherent ethical stance in relation to their classmates'.
3. Further develop their commitment to ethical practice within a community of peers by responding thoughtfully to the stances and comments of their classmates.

Assignment Description: The post discussion position paper is a response to class discussion of ONE of the daily discussion topics indicated on the course calendar of readings and topics. Students should draw from and summarize class discussion, class readings, and AT LEAST one external source in developing their position. The external source(s) should be selected from the bibliographies in the Johannesen *Ethics* book (you are also encouraged to use the Communication and Mass Media Complete data base in your research). The paper should be no less than five pages in length and is due within two weeks of the oral introduction presentation and class discussion to which it is a response. You are encouraged to complete this assignment as early in the first and second halves of the semester as possible. Check the course schedule for absolute due dates.

Grading Criteria: The position paper 1) clearly and completely discusses the ethical issues involved, drawing from class discussion AND readings; 2) develops a clear position on the topic in relation to the issues raised in class discussion; 3) provides specific criteria and evidence for the position being espoused based on readings and lectures.

COM 441 – Ethical Issues in Communication  
Template for Discovering Ethical Issues/Assessing Behaviors

The goal of this template is to help guide your thinking as you prepare to participate in class discussions and prepare for your oral presentations and post-discussion position papers.

When you analyze an example of communication behavior to determine its ethicality, address the following questions (these mirror the grading criteria for each of your assignments):

- What are the issues involved? (see the bullet points below)
- Given that these are the issues involved, what perspectives have I read about or learned in class that might be appropriate?
- What are some relevant and/or similar examples that I can analyze by applying the perspective(s) to help me think through the issues?
- How can I use my analysis to develop a coherent stance and to determine alternatives to this particular practice?

What do we mean when we say, “what are the issues involved”? Consider the following questions:

- Relationships – Public? Social? Private? Close? Intimate? Political? Mediated?
- Situation – Crisis? If so which type, chronic or immanent? Normal Practice? Habit? Exceptional Practice?
- Primary character of the particular behavior or practice – Is it primarily coercive? Is it primarily deceptive? Is it primarily an appeal to human emotions or frailties? Is it primarily a case of withholding information or affection? Is it primarily an invasion of privacy?
- Secondary characteristics of the particular behavior or practice – what other characteristics from the list above are relevant to this topic?
- Standards – are we concerned with rights, duties, justice? What about care, maintaining relationships, showing love, being respectful? Is fairness important? What about universalizability? Reversibility?

Once you’ve clarified the issues involved, you should select a perspective or perspectives that speak to these issues. For instance, if you determine that the relationship is public and political, and the primary character of the particular practice is an appeal to human emotions or frailties, you would probably want to consider applying one of the political or human nature perspectives to get you started on the development of your stance.

