

Re-Writing Interpersonal Communication: A Portfolio-Based Curriculum for Process Pedagogy and Moving Theory Into Practice

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How does one create a class where the theoretical concepts emerge through classroom practice and engagement? This is the question that Mariaelena posed to herself when taking over the position of Director of the Interpersonal Communication course at the University of South Florida. In this essay we describe how we worked through a new way of teaching—and doing—interpersonal communication that captures Carey’s (1989) focus on the centrality of process over product. We did so by way of some important tools of what is alternatively known as critical or process pedagogy (e.g., Elbow, 1986; 2013): an interpersonal dynamic that includes ongoing grading, writing to learn, and the portfolio method. This semester-long, process-oriented portfolio assignment is effective and beneficial because it facilitates an important shift in the power dynamic of the classroom by disrupting students’ expectations for evaluation and shifting the learner’s orientation from product to process. We share our portfolio method because we believe it can be adapted to fit the unique cultures and needs of other humanities and social sciences courses, instructors, and institutions.

A few years before composing this paper, I, Mariaelena, found myself eliciting the customary beginning of semester introductions from my students. One declared himself “a graduating senior in interpersonal communication.” A mere heartbeat later, he reprised: “but...I don’t even know *what* that is” and, “no offense!” Once the elephant in the room was acknowledged, the next speaker took her chance to tame it: “Me too, I’m graduating in interpersonal...whatever that is, exactly.” I took no offense, but I certainly took note.

At that time, I was trying out my new role as supervisor for the Interpersonal Communication course. I considered how the Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), some of whom were second or third-timers teaching the course, had been no less polite (and just as frank) as the students in my class in voicing their lack of...*something*. This something, as I could best reconstruct it, had two components. The first was a way to teach interpersonal communication concepts as process rather than outcome, as emergent, fluid, and relational. The second component was a renewed focus on writing *as* interpersonal communication—something that would not end with a paper written “for” the instructor but that could be ongoing, dynamic, and an outcome of joint action or shared intentionality (Shotter, 1995). In his proposal for writing as relational and contingent, Thomas Kent (1989, 2) similarly argues for “paralogic know-how,” a hermeneutics of writing that cannot be reduced to a series of rule-bound conventions, but rather is dialogic, interpersonal engagement with others, which are:

. . . momentary, tentative, and tenuous resolutions that help us shift ground in our continual efforts to communicate with the other, even if the other is us. Only through these tenuous and fleeting resolutions

may we acquire the background skills necessary to know how to shift ground and how to reinvent our hermeneutic strategy in order to produce other dialogic interactions that will create different resolutions, more background knowledge, and, finally, what we hope will be more effective hermeneutic strategies. Through our dialogical guessing, we learn what it takes to get things done in the world.

This orientation demands a different approach to teaching interpersonal communication.

My own re-vision, and thus re-writing of Interpersonal Communication emerged from two pedagogical traditions. The first, communication social construction (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2008; 2009; 2010; Bartesaghi, 2012) conceives of communication as embodied and situated relational practice, where interpersonal communication theory emerges in the praxis of multiple, reflexive and ongoing conversations. Shotter (1995) calls this *knowing of the third*, a constantly shifting and mutable Wittgensteinian language game, where the objective is to keep playing: an intersubjective mutual awareness of “how to go on” (Wittgenstein, 1953). I wove a second thread into this fabric: that of process or critical pedagogy.

Process pedagogy emphasizes learning as ongoing inter-action, in which the instructor’s is one voice among many, and not the most important or loudest. In collaborative learning (e.g., Bruffee, 1999) writing is not for a grade, but the central link for connection among class peers. Using a variety of tools from writing pedagogy – especially peer review, workshop and consensus building – students are continuously accountable to *each other* while also coming to appreciate, by practicing it, the interpersonal basis of knowledge and its value as social capital (Freire, 1972).

I looked to improve writing by *writing to learn* (Elbow, 1986): writing that is not just for demonstrating learning, but as an ongoing, nonlinear and recursive process in working out ideas. At the same time, I developed a process-based curriculum where learning is ongoing and evaluated by consensus. Rather than look to the instructor for authority (and grades), students learn the value of looking to each other as a knowledge community (Bruffee, 1999; Kent, 1989). Writing becomes a way to communicate with each other in the course of learning, in terms of tools and strategies for the achievement of goals within the community (Flower, 1994).

Finally, the course I created is a way to learn about writing from within the discourses of interpersonal communication by practicing and naming its worlds (Freire, 1972), as active members in and of generative discourse communities (Kent, 1989) and not by learning a one size fits all skill set. By this I mean that writing assignments become opportunities for students to discover wor(l)ds, strategies and social implications of their writing within a discipline (as well as ways to enable them to invoke and test the disciplinary discourses), and, reflexively, to appreciate the forms of knowing these activities create. The semester-long portfolio-based project is thus a means to constitute and facilitate the as yet emergent collaborative, process-based curriculum described above. We, (Summer, Jennifer and Jim, as Graduate Teaching Assistants and Mariaelena, as Course Supervisor) have each incorporated this semester-long activity in our interpersonal communication classrooms and have seen that it indeed facilitates an innovative and collaborative learning space.

A Portfolio for Project Pedagogy

In this section, we discuss the portfolio project design and its key component: the hybrid grading contract. It is imperative that the contract be featured prominently in the course syllabus and that the instructor explain both the contract and the portfolio project to the class on the first day. The first day of class is also when instructors emphasize to students that their peers are essential to making every aspect of the class work and to achieving a better grade, for it is students who are accountable, not only to their work, but to the work of others. Having this conversation up front helps set the tone and expectation for a collaborative, co-constructed and student-centered classroom where interpersonal communication becomes both the subject matter and incarnate, material and consequential to the learning process.

The Grading Contract

To be faithful to process pedagogy, we set aside exams and points and opted instead for a grading

contract. There are a variety of approaches to contract grading, however, the guidelines used in the *Interpersonal Communication* (IPC) course at the University of South Florida are adapted from Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) work on unilateral grading agreements.

Our contract specifies the criteria students must meet to earn the grade they desire. They begin the class with a "B" and are guaranteed a "B" at the end of the semester as long as they participate fully in class and complete all assignments. As our contract explains, "a 'B'-range grade is behavioral. It means that a student has participated in the class by attending, commenting on the readings as appropriate, that she has worked collaboratively with her peers, and that she has effectively shared her work informally during the course of the semester or more formally during class presentations." For a student to earn an "A," s/he must fulfill all the requirements for the "B" and must demonstrate substantial revision between the first draft and portfolio version of their work. Students who do not meet the "B" criteria receive a letter grade lower than a "B." Thus, grades are not assigned until the end of the semester and are based on each student's "final portfolio": a collection of all the work and re-work completed over the course of the semester.

Like Danielewicz and Elbow (2009), we have found that when students participate in the course and complete all the work necessary required to maintain the "B," "their writing improves enough to warrant a B" (p. 250). Attendance and participation facilitate the dialogic interaction that is key to this improvement, and thus are critical to students' writing development. However, monitoring attendance and facilitating participation just becomes another "B" behavior, meaning students are in-charge of their behaviors in these areas, and does not create a greater workload for instructors. We do take attendance daily as we would in any other class, however, because the method itself involves consistent in-class workshops and interaction, participation is both a requirement and a direct outcome of this approach. While we see that this works in our classrooms, where the students average around 35, we also believe that grading contracts could be tailored to fit the unique cultures and requirements of other humanities and social sciences courses, instructors, and institutions; starting at a "B" is not a requirement, but we strongly recommend it based our experiences and the literature that informs the structure of our IPC course.

Portfolio Papers and Writing Activities

The portfolio project itself consists primarily of four short (2-3 page) essays that are developed and reworked over the course of the semester via a series of

consensus-based workshops. Each workshop involves peer review, class-generated evaluation criteria and criteria for an “A” that can be adduced to all student work for a particular paper, and subsequent revision(s). Papers (as well as workshops) can be tailored to fit the nature and relevant concepts of the course. Recently, our department has gone through an institutional “Global Pathways” recertification of General Education courses, and Interpersonal Communication is among them. Our four essay assignments now have a cultural focus that actually enhances our pedagogical objectives of creating conversational and emergent knowledge. Below, we offer two detailed examples and then proceed to explain the role of workshopping.

Example One: Ethnography: Observation and narrative. The goal of the assignment is for students to perceive, imagine and make sense of interpersonal relationships that unfold before them. They will choose a culturally identifiable and meaningful social setting in which they can observe in detail a relationship between friends, a parent and child, a couple, work colleagues, etc. and take notes in as much detail as they think important, on the communicative acts they are observing and hearing. After reflecting on their observations, they will write a story of two to two and a half pages, about the inferences they have drawn. The story should convey who these people are to each other and what the significance of this moment is in the context of their relationship within the larger cultural context in which it takes place

Example Two: A Cultural and Relational Conflict.

Part 1: The students submit anonymous letters (1-3 paragraphs) to our web interface (e.g., Blackboard, CANVAS) describing a conflict that they or someone they know are facing because of their positioning in one or more social categories (such as sex, gender, ethnicity, class, disability, nationality, race, immigration status, age, etc.). The letter can be written like a Dear Abby letter, except that it should be addressed to Dear SPC 3301. In the letter, the students present the conflict according to multiple interpersonally signified aspects of culture (ideological, linguistic, historical, technological, structural, etc) and pose specific questions that they would like answered in order to solve the conflict. The instructor prints the letters and chooses several for the class to focus on.

Part 2: In class, the students work together to write a response to the letters. Using their expertise in conflict, power, and change in interpersonal relationships, they answer their letter by (1) explaining their understanding of what is going on in the relationship and (2) offering their advice on how

the couple can make a change that will improve the relational interaction between them. (3) Each pair submits a completed response to the web and presents their work in class. In writing and presenting, students highlight and apply key terms that are found within the textbook, clearly examining how they illustrate culture-specific issues and how communication may bridge these tensions.

Writing workshops occur during class on the day that a paper is due. Because they are designed to build consensus and student collaboration, demonstrating how the instructor is only a facilitator in the dialogics of writing as part of the interpersonal learning process, they are a critical step toward the final portfolio. Our workshops are an important occasion for us to show the students that writing is not representation or transmission, but interpersonal dynamic. Similarly, Kent (1989) distinguishes between dialogic and monologic forms of writing, explaining that monologic writing “(occurs) when the student cannot identify the other and, consequently, cannot converse with the other” whereas dialogic writing “occurs when a writer responds to the other” (p. 37). We find that at the start of the semester, most of our students approach writing as a monologic; thus, writing workshops help students understand writing as dialogic: as interpersonal communication. While there are multiple ways to facilitate writing workshops, we draw on many of Chisholm’s (1991) ideas, including the incorporation of a peer review worksheet for a constructive conversation and reflection around student’s (own) writing. Referring to the two essay assignments above, questions that are useful to have on the worksheet include:

- In your own words, what is the thesis or main idea of this paper? Write it here in no more than a sentence OR if you are not sure what the main idea is or how to find it in the essay, say so and say why you cannot. Be specific.
- How do you think the main idea could be made stronger or clearer OR, if you cannot find it at the beginning or are a bit confused: what do you think it might be?
- Once you have identified the thesis or the main idea:
 - what do you think the author could do without (be specific)?
 - What do you think the author needs more of (be specific)?
- If you could ask the author one WHY question, what would it be?

Workshops facilitate writing as interpersonal communication by fostering dialogue. In a workshop, and over the course of several workshops, students

accomplish three important things: they understand that writing is communication meant for others, and not for one instructor (we make it so that asking the instructor “what do you want” becomes nonsensical); they work to build consensus and accountability as to what count as criteria for revision; and they allow us, as instructors, to act as facilitators and model how to offer constructive feedback. For example, on workshop day, we provide students with a copy of two student papers which the instructor reads aloud to the class as students follow along. The class then breaks into smaller groups and, using the questions above as a guide, discusses the papers. After the small group discussion, we return to a larger class discussion about each paper. During this portion of the workshop, we collaboratively provide substantive feedback about each paper, a process that models to students how they can provide constructive, generative feedback for one another during individual peer-reviews. We also use this portion of the workshop to create consensus-based evaluation criteria for what constitutes a strong or “A” paper. Thus, workshops generate the criteria and the momentum that students use to re-vision and rework their papers for their final portfolio. We recommend that the instructor provides formative feedback to student papers after conducting this workshop so that the class discussion and collaboratively generated evaluation criteria becomes the context for the feedback provided. After the workshop, the instructor can also assign peer review of individual papers as homework or create additional class time for partner or small-group peer review that allows each student to engage in a discussion about her writing. The same questions can be used as a guide for these reviews as well.

Whether peer review takes place inside or outside of class, the role of the instructor is to monitor and guide students on how to provide substantive feedback to their peers, while being careful not to overtake the dialogue, meaning-making and community emerging from this interactive process. After workshops and peer review, students revise their work outside of class and submit as many versions as they desire in the final portfolio. In our IPC classes, instructors decide if they will require students to revise all four papers or a lesser number depending on the overall student workload in the class. The original draft, instructor and peer feedback, any additional drafts, and a “final” revised copy of each paper are included in the portfolio that is collected at the end of the semester.

In our classrooms, we devote a significant amount of time to workshops and the writing process because it is integral to this pedagogical method. The writing workshop described above requires a full 75 minute class-period (our class period length in a twice per week course) and will, at minimum, account for about 15% of the overall semester’s in-class time. However, we find

that we also devote class time to other parts of the writing process, such as pre-writing, brainstorming, and follow-up discussion and activities. We also recommend incorporating one-on-one or small group peer review, which can be conducted either inside or outside of class depending on time constraints. Thus, overall, about 25% of in-class time is devoted to dialogic writing processes. We find that spending this much time on writing, however, is not a loss when it comes to course content. In fact, it enhances development of course concepts by creating space for collaborative discussion and application while continuing to facilitate the very interpersonal communication processes which comprise the subject-matter of the course. Finally, while these writing processes are of key importance to this method, our exact means of accomplishing it is not meant to be prescriptive. The portfolio method invites flexibility; in our IPC classrooms as well as other communication classrooms, we have each experimented with different in-class writing ratios, number of papers assigned, and peer-review/workshop methods. The key for success when approaching the writing in this method is to a) emphasize to students that writing is central to the course and allocate class time accordingly, and, b) ensure the writing workshops and activities – whether in class or out of class – are interactive, dialogic occasions.

Reflexive Essay

Together with the content essays, students are to include in their portfolio a short reflexive essay, typically one to three pages in length. In this essay, we want students to address the choices they made with regard to their revisions, and also direct them to reflect on their class experience, contributions, and take-aways. This essay invites students to consider what they have learned about processes of interpersonal communication and writing over the course of the semester and provides a space for them to consider how or if their understanding of these processes has changed over time.

Additional Portfolio Items

Instructors can also have students include supplementary materials such as notes, journal entries, in-class activity documents, or anything else that would help the student in not only seeing their improvement throughout the course of the semester, but also in having a concise, well-organized product containing a semester’s worth of work. The additional documents included in the final portfolio also create an opportunity for students to demonstrate their level of participation, particularly for those who might be hesitant to speak-up during class discussions, and to present documentation to account for excused absences. In short, it is a tangible record of the semester-long process and

progress as well as an artifact that makes an argument for their desired grade. The portfolios can be collected in class or can be collected in an office or mailbox as they tend to be heavy to carry, depending on the size of the course. The instructor can, then, evaluate the contributions the student made in the course and can note improvements in writing and also provide some further comments about how students provided peer feedback to one another.

Variations

The portfolio assignment can be utilized to teach classes other than Interpersonal Communication. Collectively, we have successfully implemented this assignment in other writing-intensive Communication classes such as Women and Communication, higher-level relational classes such as Love and Communication, and even Public Speaking. Ultimately, we have each experimented with different ways to run writing workshops and conduct peer reviews, and throughout various trials we find that the portfolio assignment continues to meet our course objectives as well as our personal pedagogical goals and expectations. We especially like the way this method facilitates engagement and collaborative knowledge communities within our classrooms, and, thus, believe college teachers across the humanities and social sciences would also enjoy the classroom dynamic facilitated via this portfolio-based, process-oriented approach.

Evaluation of the Method

I, Mariaelena, have trained graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to embrace the principles of process pedagogy and the portfolio-based method for teaching Interpersonal Communication outlined above for the last nine years. At the beginning of the semester, I hold a three-hour training session and workshop where those who have taught IPC before lead workshops and discuss their experiences to new recruits. Throughout the semester, I will visit GTA's classrooms and, at the end, we meet to evaluate the experience and to discuss how to evaluate the portfolios for the purpose of entering final grades. The topic of evaluation in process pedagogy is of course an important one, for it goes against the grain of quizzes and exams.

Since the inception of this method, we have found its efficacy validated in multiple ways. The first and most telling evidence of success is found in the student portfolios themselves, which provide tangible documentation of the change and progress students make over the course of the semester. Because the portfolio contains a collection of student writing over time, as individual instructors, we can easily see substantive

improvements in the quality of student writing as well as gauge development and competency with course concepts and ideas. Students also include a course reflection in their portfolios; thus, we are also able gain insight into their perception of the this method, including their level of engagement with the process. In addition to and separate from the portfolio, the authors have invited students to provide anonymous qualitative feedback about the course. This qualitative feedback provides insight into what students have learned about (writing as) interpersonal communication, and the ongoing, collaborative and consensus based learning processes in which we've engaged over the course of the semester. Below is a composite of responses in six categories universal to each of the course's student evaluations. We note that not all students respond positively to the portfolio assignment—in particular, some comments do indicate that students experience uncertainty about their performance in contract grading. Accordingly, we believe that any instructors who implement this method should anticipate pushback from some students; remember, this is likely the first time they are experiencing this type of pedagogy. This is why we recommend that you explain that contract grading is not withholding of grades, but actually ongoing grading, and the ability to know and be accountable for one's grade every step of the way. We also find that we receive a great deal of positive student feedback in response to this method, including comments about how the portfolio/contract grading system fosters increased investment in the class, and a significant improvement to experiment within a discourse community and (thus gain confidence) with their writing.

Portfolio/Contract Grading – Positive

"I really enjoyed the grading style because it forced student investment in the class when working towards an A grade."

"I think having a B and working toward an A is a good incentive and it made me get into my papers and try to make them better."

Portfolio/Contract Grading – Negative

I wasn't sure if I was making my grade better by editing my papers or making them worst <sic> sometimes.

Writing – Positive

"Good flexibility for creativity to be expressed on assignments."

"The paper workshops were a big help to revising my final papers."

"I learned more about the writing process in this course than I did in my English comp courses."

“Loved the autoethnography/scholarship essays – it made learning the concepts personal and I connected with some of my peers on a personal level through the papers. It was a new perspective of Interpersonal Communication.”

Writing – Negative

“Not a fan of writing in the first place, least of all writing about me. Seemed a little narcissist <sic>.”
 “Still not convinced auto-ethnography is valid.”
 “Was sometimes unsure if I was going the right direction on papers even with peer group.”

The next type of evaluation for this process occurs via group assessment(s). All IPC instructors meet at the close of each semester to debrief and reflect on what we have learned from teaching the course that semester. At this time we compare the change we see in our student portfolios, share the feedback from student reflections and course evaluations, and also complete the Southern Association of College and Schools (SACS) assessment of the learning outcomes for this course. Each semester, six (n=6 per semester) student portfolios are randomly selected and assessed separately by two evaluators on a 4-point scale (poor, satisfactory, excellent, and outstanding) in four different categories: mastery of interpersonal communication concepts, insight into/application of interpersonal communication concepts, creativity/risk-taking, and writing abilities as developed. This systematic assessment has been employed semester-after-semester for the past nine years to determine whether course learning outcomes are achieved, and results have indicated that outcomes are not merely satisfied but typically exceeded. Based on this assessment, we feel confident asserting that this is an effective method for teaching interpersonal concepts and developing writing, but what this particular assessment cannot do is account for the other, less tangible successes of this approach.

Much like the process of communication itself, our greatest success might be less measurable. It is nonetheless manifest in the embodied experience of a cohesive classroom community – a knowledge community – and lasting relationships among our students. IPC classrooms *look* and *feel* much different than other classes in our department. Our students form interpersonal relationships with one another over the course of the semester because, through the use of this method, they are learning and practicing interpersonal communication. Thus, we would especially like to emphasize that, when we are evaluating the efficacy of this course, we are not merely concerned with seeing improvement in student writing and demonstration of theoretical competency; rather, we are also observing the way this process helps constitute interpersonal

relationships and a knowledge community that is connected to a larger discourse community. In short, we observe that over the course of the semester, as a result of employing this method, that one of the most successful outcomes of the course lies in the constitution of new connections and relationships: discursive relationships, interpersonal relationships, and epistemological relationships. Ultimately, it is the culmination of various types of feedback, assessments and our observations as instructors in the classroom that leads us to evaluate this method as a very effective. In this way, the activity fosters the process, experiences and outcomes Mariaelena was hoping to achieve when she designed the course. These include: engendering increased student investment/ownership of their work, an understanding of writing as interpersonal communication, and a fresh, personally meaningful understanding of interpersonal communication concepts in/as process for use in everyday life.

Discussion and Conclusion

This process-oriented portfolio assignment is effective and beneficial because it facilitates an important shift in the dynamic of the communication classroom. First, it places the onus of the grade on the student as part of a relational dynamic—the student (as part of a learning community) is always in control of the grade. Second, and most important, the nontraditional grading schema—the grading contract—disrupts students’ expectations for evaluation, shifting the learner’s orientation from product to process. Because grades are not assigned throughout the writing process or on any other assignment, students are freed from the burden of worrying about their grade, and, thus, are able to focus instead on the content of the writing and the writing process itself.

This shift in orientation does not happen immediately. Instructors wishing to implement the portfolio method should be prepared for students’ initial skepticism or apprehension, particularly when their papers are returned to them with no grade, just comments. Once students let go of the expectation for a grade, however, they are truly able to engage and participate in the class differently. They look forward to review, workshops, and feedback (whether it is coming from their instructor or peers), and learn to understand re-vision – a way of seeing and acting differently upon their work – as part of the process. In fact, it is through these interactive aspects of the writing process that students experience a second benefit of the portfolio assignment: they begin to understand that writing is itself a form of (interpersonal) communication.

Through the process of interactive writing workshops, peer review, and class discussion students come to understand that they are always writing to, with

and for others. This dialogic orientation to writing is not taken-up by students immediately, but, rather, it is something that emerges gradually from the process itself. As instructors, we help facilitate this shift in orientation by constantly reinforcing (in workshops, during class discussions, and in assignment descriptions) the idea that writing is not for a teacher but for a (particular) public; in this case the community is the one that emerges in the classroom. Thus, throughout the semester, we continually use the process to emphasize how writing, like other forms of communication, is a collaborative, interactive process with no beginning or end. We can see evidence of this shift in orientation in the portfolios based on *how* our students writing changes over time. Further, by the end of the semester, we consistently observe the emergence of new interpersonal relationships and knowledge communities. Thus, this portfolio method for process pedagogy does not merely provide a view of communication-as-process, it performs the very communicative model that we strive to teach students in our *Interpersonal Communication* classroom. This interactive, interpersonal process also prompts students to become reflexive and accountable for *what* and *how* they choose to communicate within their writing. Thus, the portfolio system facilitates student accountability and reflexivity at the level of their grade and at the level of their communication.

Finally, the portfolio is a document (albeit always incomplete, because the end of the semester is an artificial deadline) that provides a record of a process. The collection and compilation of work over the course of the semester allows instructors and students to see and evaluate both process and, in most cases, progress. The ability to *comprehend* their learning process provides a rich and meaningful course experience that students are able to take-away with them. In sum, the portfolio disrupts students traditional learning expectations to foster a learning experience that emphasizes student accountability and reflexivity, collaborative engagement, and provides for both the theoretical and applied understanding of writing as process and writing as interpersonal communication. We share our portfolio method because we believe it can be adapted to fit the unique cultures and needs of other humanities and social sciences courses, instructors, and institutions.

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