George Mason University
Graduate Course Approval/Inventory Form

Please complete this form and attach a copy of the syllabus for new courses. Forward it as an email attachment to the Secretary of the Graduate Council. A printed copy of the form with signatures should be brought to the Graduate Council Meeting. Complete the Coordinator Form on page 2, if changes in this course will affect other units.

Please indicate: ___X__ NEW  ____ MODIFY  ____ DELETE

Local Unit: Communication Department  Graduate Council Approval Date:

Course Abbreviation: COMM  Course Number: 637

Full Course Title: Risk Communication

Abbreviated Course Title (24 characters max.): Risk Communication

Credit hours: 3  Program of Record: M.A. in Communication

Repeatable for Credit?  ___ D=Yes, not within same term  Up to hours
___ T=Yes, within the same term  Up to hours
__ X_ N=Cannot be repeated for credit

Activity Code (please indicate): ___ Lecture (LEC) ___ Lab (LAB) ___ Recitation (RCT)
___ Studio (STU) ___ Internship (INT) ___ Independent Study (IND) ___X__ Seminar (SEM)

Catalog Credit Format  3 : 3 : 0  Course Level: GF(500-600) ___X__ GA(700+)

Maximum Enrollment: 20  For NEW courses, first term to be offered: Spring 2005

Prerequisites or corequisites:

Catalog Description (35 words or less) Please use catalog format and attach a copy of the syllabus for new courses. Research on sharing information about physical hazards (e.g., toxic waste, radiation, disease, injury, biohazards). Topics include communication concerning workplace safety, environmental concerns, risk assessments, and scientific uncertainties. (26 words)

For MODIFIED or DELETED courses as appropriate:
Last term offered:  Previous Course Abbreviation:  Previous number:
Description of modification:

APPROVAL SIGNATURES:
Submitted by Katherine E. Rowan, Graduate Coordinator___________email: krowan@gmu.edu
Department Chair Don M. Boileau______________________________email: dboileau@gmu.edu
Department/Program:  _____Communication  ___________ Date: _10/6/03_

College Committee:  __________________________________________Date: __________________

Graduate Council Representative: ________________________________Date: __________________
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
Course Coordination Form

Note: No other units are affected by this communication department course.
Katherine E. Rowan, Ph.D., Graduate Coordinator
Signature _______________________________  Date ________________

Approval from other units:
Please list those units outside of your own who may be affected by this new, modified, or deleted course. Each of these units must approve this change prior to its being submitted to the Graduate Council for approval.

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Graduate Council approval: _______________________________  Date: __________
Graduate Council representative: __________________________  Date: __________
Provost Office representative: _____________________________  Date: __________
Course Nature and Goals

Risk communication, or discourse about physical hazards, been an academic field of study roughly since the time of the 1984 Bhopal disaster, an accidental chemical release that killed more than 2,000 people in India. The Bhopal disaster awakened many groups to the realization that we need to coordinate our communication and emergency management efforts in big and small towns throughout the United States, as well as industrial sites throughout the world. Further, in the 1980s, there was increasing awareness that the physical hazards that caused anger and moral outrage were not necessarily those that caused the greatest numbers of illnesses and deaths. A further source of interest in risk communication has come from the existence of frightening diseases such as cancer and AIDS. Scientific uncertainty about these diseases sometimes leads people to wonder about the possible ways in which they may have contracted them. Consequently, groups as diverse as trade associations, medical associations, public relations offices, and many government groups currently devote considerable effort to learning how best to communicate with the public about risk and safety.

Our era has fueled interest in risk communication for additional reasons. First, despite this last century being one of the "safest of times," it, in one sense, was also one of the most dangerous. Half of past century's worst industrial accidents (those killing more than 50 people) occurred since 1977 (Shrivasta, P., 1987, in Bhopal: Anatomy of Crisis). Further, the mass media's roles in alerting us to disasters, accidents, and harmful substances have increased, as have the number and variety of humanly produced hazards. And third, while many newly synthesized chemicals and procedures make our lives infinitely safer, healthier, and more comfortable than we would be without them, these same substances frighten us. They frighten us because we understand them less well than we do, say, familiar hazards like fire. They frighten us because our knowledge of science is not all that it should be. And they frighten us because we do not trust industry or the government to operate in connection with these hazards in ways motivated by the affected citizen's best interests.

Given the importance of effective risk communication for this era, in this seminar, we have several goals. First, we want to master, in a broad sense, the literature on risk communication. We cannot read everything that has been written on risk communication, but we can be conversant with the key works and key scholars. Second, we want to ask questions and raise issues that our own areas of expertise make salient to us. Sociologists and political scientists have done much of the extant work in risk communication. While their contributions are substantial, inevitably, there are dimensions of risk communication that these scholars do not consider. The field of risk communication will be enriched if people with expertise in communication and scientifically educated individuals with interest in communication begin to contribute to it. Further, the spate of workshops available on risk communication will be improved if individuals who have studied communication run them. Additionally, if you plan to teach, many of your students are likely to become engineers, technical
writers, journalists, and public relations officers. These individuals need an understanding of why communication about genetically modified organisms, toxic chemicals, carcinogens, nuclear power, radiation, and many other physical hazards is so difficult, and what they can do to improve these communication processes.

**Texts**

Course pack (for contents, see page 7+ of syllabus) -- available on announcement from ____________________.


**Selected Bibliographies and Items of Interest on Risk Communication**


Center for Environmental Communication, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. Web page for risk communication information: [www.rutgers.edu](http://www.rutgers.edu) [In the University web site, click on the Center for Environmental Communication. Then on “publications.”]


Dunwoody, S., & Long, M. (latest version). Annotated bibliography of research on mass media science communication. Available for $10 by mail from Prof. Dunwoody at the University of Wisconsin. Price includes hard and floppy disk copies. To purchase a copy, write Center for Environmental Communications and Education Studies, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706.


The Society of Risk Analysis maintains a website for its association. This academic and professional organization is devoted to the study of risk assessment, risk management, and risk communication. The website address is <www.sra.org>

**Assignments**

_____ Weekly written responses to course during the first two thirds of the course (40 points).
Essay proposing a question you will address in your seminar project. The essay should describe some phenomenon that "bugs," frustrates, puzzles or intrigues you in the risk communication literature. This typed paper with references should define key terms in your question and describe the method you will use to answer your project's question [e.g., literature search, designing and teaching a training seminar; designing a study] (10 points)

Nearly complete, first version of major course project (I will give you feedback on the paper so you can consider this feedback before doing the paper's final version; no points)

Class participation and oral presentation of your course project (10 points).

Final version of the course paper using perfect APA or MLA formatting and citation style (40 points)

/100 possible points

Grading

Grades will be assigned on an un-curved, percentage basis; because there are 100 total course points, earning 90% of them would give you an A, earning 80% would give you a B, and so forth.

Policies

Do three things and you will find this course personally useful. First, read the required readings. Second, ask yourself--often--what bugs, pleases, or puzzles you about the ideas we are reading and discussing in class as well as the science you see daily in the mass media. Third, take your feelings seriously. They may turn into questions that you can raise in class or possibly even into ideas for your course paper, a thesis, or even ideas that you want to keep thinking about and refining for the rest of your life.

Because I study writing, I will be happy to help you with yours. That is why I want to see a near-perfect first version of your course paper and a final version. I will comment on the first version and grade the final version so that you have every chance to develop your skills and produce an excellent paper. Naturally, as in any academic course, I expect you to do your own scholarly work. Plagiarism, or any other form of academic dishonesty, will be punished with a failing grade in the course and a report to the Dean of Students Office.

Finally, I am honored to be with you this semester and excited. Risk communication is an area of study where people with fresh perspectives have great deal to contribute. I hope that this course can assist you in your scholarly and professional goals. And, I hope that your professional goals include helping people use insights drawn from rhetoric, philosophy, and social science to improve day-to-day efforts at risk communication.
Communication 632R: Risk Communication

Weekly Agenda

Sample Semester

Monday, January 10

Course Overview
Lecture: Stasis, Topoi, and Contemporary Risk Communication

Monday, January 17

No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Monday, January 24*

Risk Perception and Message Design

Monday, January 31*

Risk Assessment

Monday, February 7*

The Problem-Solving Approach to Risk Communication

Monday, February 14*

Earning and Re-Earning Trust

Monday, February 21*

Gaining Awareness
Motivating Action in Emergencies

Monday, February 28*

Deepening Understanding of Technical Information

Monday, March 6*

Developing Understanding of Counterintuitive Ideas
Essay Proposing Course Paper Due
Monday, March 13

   **Spring Break -- No Class --**

Monday, March 20*

   **Promoting Enduring Attitudinal and Behavioral Change**

Monday, March 27

   **Risk Communication Training**

Monday, April 3

   **Assessment of Risk Communication Efforts**

Monday, April 10

   **International Differences in Assessment and Perception of Risk**  
   **First Version Course Paper Due**

Monday, April 17

   **No official class meeting – Appointments scheduled for feedback on papers**

Monday, April 24

   **Student Presentations and Course Evaluations**  
   **Final version of course paper (with first version and critique sheet) due no later than Monday of finals week**

Monday, May 1

   **Student Presentations**  
   **Final version of course paper (with first version and critique sheet) due no later than Monday of finals week**

*Written response to readings due by 5 p.m. Please type all written work. You may turn in written responses to my department mailbox or turn them in to me by email.
Selective Bibliography and Course Pack Readings*
Sample Semester

Professor Katherine E. Rowan

*Starred readings are included in the course pack.

I. Risk Assessment, Perception, Management

A. Scientific Risk Assessment


B. Psychological Risk Perception


We have nothing to fear. (1985, October). *Science85*, pp. 38-41.
C. Risk Management Cases and Challenges


II. The Problem-Solving Approach to Risk Communication


III. Earning and Re-earning Trust: Ethical, Philosophical, and Pragmatic Explorations of Risk Communication


IV. Gaining Awareness and Motivating Action in Emergencies


Heaton, A. (1997, Nov. 9). Effective risk communication in a changing environment. Presentation for “The scientist’s role in effective risk communication,” (Continuing Education Course #3). Annual meeting of the American College of Toxicology, Washington, DC.


V. Deepening Understanding of Technical Subject Matter through Risk Communication


**VI. Gaining Agreement about Problems and Promoting Enduring Attitudinal Change through Risk Communication**


**VII. Assessment of Risk Communication Efforts**


Sullivan, P. A. (1988, October). Figure displaying PALSS, a grid for document assessment. (Note: Prof. Patricia Sullivan, the developer of this document design tool, is a faculty member in the English Department at Purdue.)
VIII. Ethnic, Regional and International Differences in Risk Assessment, Perception and Management


IX. Sample Workshops and Training Programs in Risk Communication


Risk communication training. Programs offered by the U.S. Army Environmental Hygiene Agency.