COMM 973: Narratives, Health, and Relationships
Fall 2017

Professor: Dr. Jody Koenig Kellas
Class meetings: Tuesdays, 3:30-6:10, OLD 438
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Required reading:


- Additional required readings will be available on Canvas

Mission of the Department of Communication Studies

The role and mission of the faculty and students of the Department of Communication Studies are to examine human symbolic activity as it shapes and is shaped by relationships, institutions, and societies. This work concerns the creation, analysis, and critique of messages. The department's research, teaching, and service devote particular attention to understanding the ways in which communication erodes and sustains collaboration within and among local, national, and global communities.

Course Description and Objectives

Stories serve as prevalent forms of communication in relationships and act as one of the many communicative ways in which people describe, makes sense of, explain, negotiate, and construct relationships. Storytelling is also primary in how we make meaning in relationships and negotiate those relationships in public and private contexts. Thus, this course explores theory and research that situates narrative as central to making sense of, constituting, and reflecting our relational
lives. Given the expansive breadth and depth of narrative research across academic disciplines, this course can and does not provide an exhaustive review of narrative research. Instead, it purposes to expose students to a range of methodological and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and researching storytelling in ways that specifically inform our understanding of personal relationships. We will focus in specifically on an approach to narratives and storytelling that focuses on the communicative manifestation of narratives and how the content and features of these interactions are relevant to mental, physical, and relational health both within and outside the context of health care. This theory of Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) will provide a model and structure for our shared reading, critique, discussion and understanding of narratives and storytelling in and about personal relationships and health.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- Articulate foundational narrative approaches and theories across disciplines, particularly as they inform a CNSM approach to narrative.
- Understand and demonstrate an ability to apply the main theoretically and empirically evidenced functions of narratives and storytelling in and about personal relationships, including but not limited to creating, socializing, and coping.
- Value and evaluate the importance of storytelling content, process, and outcomes.
- Innovate ideas, arguments, and research projects on the heuristic and practical links between interpersonal storytelling and health.
- Articulate, critique, and propose research in the CNSM tradition and/or using CNSM theory, including research on retrospective, interactional, and/or translational storytelling.
- Demonstrate expertise in methods for examining retrospective, interactional, and translational storytelling.
- Understand, experience, analyze, and evaluate the power of storytelling in specific family, health contexts.
- Inspire and be inspired by creative, out-of-the-box, approaches to community-based storytelling research that matters.
- Engage: Generate questions that are theoretically grounded, empirically important, and heuristic about narratives and storytelling in and about personal relationships, both in conversation, writing prompts, writing reflections, class discussion, comprehensive exams, and in current and future research.
- Recognize and demonstrate the power and pitfalls of narratives and storytelling for health and well-being at various levels of abstraction.

**Course Requirements**

**Engagement & Class Participation (25%)**

Although I will be offering my own insights in class to orient you to various theories and perspectives, as a graduate seminar, the class format will consist of significant student-run discussion. Therefore, class participation, including thoughtful preparation of the readings and quality engagement with each other during discussion is essential to this class. In preparation for each class, I would like you to reflect on each reading in the following way: (1) Summarize in
one sentence (article)/paragraph-page (book) the major premise/thesis/argument of the article/chapter/book, (2) offer a one to two sentence/paragraph reaction to the article’s premise (i.e., contradict, critique, support, extend), and (3) pose a thoughtful and reflective question that was inspired by the reading and that you would like to discuss in class. Although I will not collect and grade these preparations, I do expect you to bring them to class and they will often serve as the jumping off point for our discussions. The primary goal of these exercises is to foster an engaging and provocative class interaction. You will also use them to guide you during in-class writing reflections that will be used to limit additional outside “formal” writing, but allow in-depth reading reflection (see Close Reading and Writing Prompts below). In short, you should be consistently and thoroughly prepared to lead and engage one another and me in discussion about the week’s topic and readings. Quality involvement requires communicated perspective-taking, respect, tolerance, and vulnerability. Please be respectful of everyone’s (likely sometimes differing) views and contributions.

**Narrative Pedagogy**

Narrative pedagogy is an adaptation of narrative medicine that is training in “narrative competence to recognize, absorb, metabolize, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness. Through narrative training… doctors, nurses, social workers, and therapists [improve] the effectiveness of care by developing the capacity for attention, reflection, representation, and affiliation with patients and colleagues” ([www.narrativemedicine.org](http://www.narrativemedicine.org)). We will explore the concepts associated with narrative medicine throughout the semester in an effort to ensure more effective teaching and learning through narrative pedagogy appointments, in-class narrative reflection (i.e., writing prompts/written reflections/reading discussions), and through reading Rita Charon’s book *Narrative medicine: Honoring the stories of illness*.

**Narrative Pedagogy Appointment (non-graded).** You will need to schedule one (ungraded) narrative pedagogy appointment with me this semester (during the first month of classes). During this appointment, please be prepared to respond to the following: “I will be your professor and so I have great deal to learn about your education and your life. Please tell me what you think I should know about your situation” (based on Charon, 2006, p. 177). As in the practice of narrative medicine, I will do my best not only to listen in a manner that recognizes, absorbs, and interprets your stories, but also to be moved by them. Keep in mind that this is not intended to be a therapy session, as I am not a trained psychologist and so you shouldn’t feel pressure to tell or not tell more personal information. After our appointments I will write a short narrative summarizing our appointment, share it with you (based on Charon, 2006), and invite your responses, questions, corrections, or additions.

**Close Reading and Writing Prompts.** Building off approaches developed in the field of Narrative Medicine (Charon, 2006), we will spend time in class doing close readings of article(s) and writing to prompts inspired by the readings. Writing prompts will be timed and you will be invited to share what you wrote in order to inspire critical thinking and class discussion of readings. We will not have time in class to hear everyone’s writing every class period, nor will writing prompts be graded. However, the expectation is that you are prepared to write, share, and engage with each other thoughtfully about the articles and/or books assigned for class.
Scholar Interviews and Class Discussion Facilitation (10%)

Based on your interests, this semester, you will facilitate a portion of one class period’s discussion. To supplement your understanding of the material assigned for the week, you will be asked to interview one of the authors from that week or a scholar who does similar work (or whose work informs our understanding of the topic) on their research related to narratives, relationships, and health, the methods they use, the challenges they face, their opinions on the need for future research, theorizing, etc. You will present on your interview and creatively engage the class in discussion, application, evaluation, and/or synthesis of the articles for the week. If we find that interviews are challenging to obtain based on scholars’ schedules, we may choose to complete this assignment in pairs.

Writing Reflections (15%)

One of the course objectives is to inspire and be inspired by creative, out-of-the-box, approaches to community-based storytelling research that matters. In order to achieve this objective, we will engage in retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and translational storytelling “in action” over the course of the semester (see tentative course schedule below). This will most likely entail at least one or two off-campus experiences. You will reflect on these experiences in writing, analyzing and interpreting the content, process, and outcomes of storytelling and bringing in readings to help you make sense of, synthesize, and evaluate the links between theory and practice. There will be two or three written reflections depending on the goals we set forth on the first day.

Final project (50%)

This course is designed to foster the design of an original study on some aspect of narratives or storytelling, health, and relationships. Thus, the semester project entails completing a research proposal or project on retrospective, interactional, or translational storytelling. I have some ideas for final projects, but I also have some ideas about full group-study projects. We will spend time during the first class period identifying what YOU hope to get out of this seminar, and I will design our final project options based on your feedback as it coincides with course objectives.

Course Policies

Attendance: As with any graduate seminar, attendance at each class is expected. Should you have an emergency that prevents you from attending class, please get in touch with me as soon as you can prior to your absence.

Accommodations. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must
be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses and grounds for university action. According to the University’s Bulletin (2013-2014), plagiarism is considered an act of Academic Dishonesty and is defined as, but not limited to “Presenting the work of another as one’s own (i.e., without proper acknowledgment of the source) and submitting examinations, theses, reports, speeches, drawings, laboratory notes or other academic work in whole or in part as one’s own when such work has been prepared by another person or copied from another person.” Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an “F” grade and may be grounds for failing the course. It is the policy of the Department of Communication Studies to file a report with the Dean of Students for any infraction (no matter how minor it may seem). It is your responsibility as a student to familiarize yourself with and adhere to these guidelines (see [http://stuafs.unl.edu/ja/code/three.shtml](http://stuafs.unl.edu/ja/code/three.shtml) for the university policies and descriptions of all academic dishonesty and [http://www.unl.edu/writing/avoiding-plagiarism](http://www.unl.edu/writing/avoiding-plagiarism) for helpful tips on avoiding plagiarism). It is my responsibility to report any cases of cheating or plagiarism to the administration. All assignments must be your own original work and must be prepared specifically for this course.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tentative Course Schedule</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Introducing Narrative from a Communication Lens</strong></td>
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**Week 1 (8/22): Introduction to the course**

**Week 2 (8/29): Defining Narrative(s) and Narrative Inquiry: Foundational (Communication) Approaches to Narratives Relationships and Health**

**Readings:**
- **Sharf, B., F. & Vanderford , M. L.** (2003). Illness narratives and the social construction of...

### Functions of Narratives and Storytelling

#### Functions: Creating

**Week 3 (9/5): Foundations in creating individual identity**

**Readings:**

#### Functions: Socializing

**Week 4 (9/12): Foundations in creating family identity and socializing members**

**Readings:**

#### Functions: Coping

**Week 5 (9/19): Foundations: Making sense of illness**

**Readings:**

### CNSM: Retrospective Storytelling

**Week 6 (9/26): Empirical Investigations & Relevant Methods**

**Readings:**


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**Week 7 (10/3): Retrospective Storytelling In Action**

• TBD

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**CNSM: Interactional Storytelling**

**Week 8 (10/10): Empirical investigations**

*Due: Writing reflection*

Readings:


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**Week 9 (10/17): FALL BREAK – NO CLASS MEETING**
**Week 10 (10/24): Interactional Storytelling in Action: RATING WORKSHOP**

*This is a heavy load of reading this week. Read these articles to get a sense for the methods, rather than worrying about close readings.*


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**CNSM: Translational Storytelling**

**Week 11 (10/31): Foundations: Narrative Medicine**

**Readings:**

- **Charon, R.** (2006). *Narrative medicine: Honoring the stories of illness.*

**Week 12 (11/7): Foundations – Reframing dispreferred narratives**

**Readings:**


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**Week 13 (11/14): TENTATIVE GROUP FINAL PROJECT MEETINGS/WORK TIME**

**Week 14 (11/21): Empirical investigations**

**Readings:**


### CNSM Synthesis

#### Week 15 (11/28): Translational Storytelling in Action

- **TBD**

#### Week 16 (12/5): Moving toward Translational Storytelling

*Due: Writing reflection*

**Guest Speakers:**
- Amanda Holman, Assistant Professor, Creighton University
- Erin Willer, Associate Professor, University of Denver

**Readings:**


- Check out from me and watch **Lynn Harter’s** documentary “The art of the possible.”

**Review the following websites for discussion:**

- [http://www.letschangethetalk.org](http://www.letschangethetalk.org)

- [https://www.scrapsoftheheartproject.com](https://www.scrapsoftheheartproject.com)

- [https://www.ohio.edu/scrippscollege/schoolsandcenters/barbara-geralds-institute.cfm](https://www.ohio.edu/scrippscollege/schoolsandcenters/barbara-geralds-institute.cfm)

### Synthesizing

#### Finals Week (12/12): Project presentations

*Due: Final Projects*