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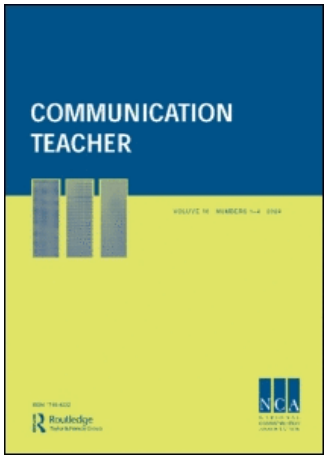

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The "Communication Commando Model" Creates a Research Culture of Commitment

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Original Teaching Activities/Ideas

The "Communication Commando Model" Creates a Research Culture of Commitment

John C. Pollock

Objective: Students experience the excitement of scholarship by generating their own professional research papers in one semester
Courses: Upper Division Communication Research Methods

A major dilemma faced by undergraduates is the enormous intellectual distance between standard short exercises (essays or exams) in traditional class work and more thorough, literature rich, meticulously analyzed, often empirically tested, issue-oriented work of scholars. Like assembly-line workers making only small contributions to larger products, undergraduates seldom experience the commitment and deep satisfaction of carefully bringing a complete research project to professional levels of excellence. Over the past 15 years, I have designed a "communication commando model" of teaching to foster scholarly enthusiasm and public issue connection among students.

Communication Commando Model Characteristics

To promote a level of undergraduate research engagement that approaches the intensity of winning sports and military teams, I use a "commando model" to describe the expertise, commitment, and team solidarity I expect. Reaching beyond traditional motivational metaphors such as "puzzle solving," "detective work," or "artistic creation," all achievable by individuals, the "commando" challenge asks students to help one another succeed collectively, to work in teams, to sacrifice for one another for overall project quality, and to hold one another to the exalted purposes expected of military commandos trained to complete missions in short time

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frames, in this case, one semester. Further, the "commando" perspective expects instructors to serve less as lecturers or sideline coaches than as mission co-participants in the struggle. The "commando" metaphor additionally counter-frames a required research methods course from a process of endured drudgery to one of shared excitement, transforming researchers from modest backroom denizens tied individually to chairs and desks into intellectually muscular, pro-active, disciplined explorers ready to bond together to jump into any situation and generate ambitious solutions with immediate deadlines.

To inspire exuberant motivation, I have tested four activities that parallel broad successful undergraduate teaching recommendations made by Harvard professor of education Richard Light (2001). Across all activities, strong writing is emphasized.

1. *Clear Expectations: Professional rather than Undergraduate Standards of Excellence.* The instructor makes explicit at the outset that semester-long projects, rather than mere class assignments, are serious contributions to the entire communication studies field. The project "target audience" is not the instructor but the communication discipline. Previous student research papers presented at scholarly conferences are "templates" of excellence, examined in class on the instructor's website and cited in a book (Pollock, 2007).
2. *Highly Structured Classes with Frequent Feedback.*
    - Selecting a Shared Theory and Methodology: Although other theories and methodologies (survey research, experimental design) are discussed in class, community structure theory is often used, exploring relationships between community demographic characteristics and reporting on critical issues. The methodology is newspaper content analysis, combining article-level "prominence" and "direction" scores into a sensitive, single-score Media Vector for each newspaper. Examining similar theory and methodology, students can share assignment experiences, empirical results, and theoretical implications.
    - Quick Snowball Format: Unlike term papers, the commando project is "front-loaded" with a majority of writing in the first half of the semester. Introduction, literature review, hypothesis, methodology, and reference sections are spaced approximately one week apart until mid-semester, building "snowball" fashion on previous assignments, comprising a "prospectus."
    - Saturated Feedback to Students and Teams: Continual written feedback is provided in two ways: to the entire class weekly in tip sheets and to each team individually on its project. Frequent in-class oral feedback on each paper emphasizes shared dilemmas. Consequently, when the second prospectus draft is due at semester midpoint, teams have had several weeks of advice on editing and revision. After initial data collection and coding (and in-class training in SPSS), each team uses PowerPoint to present content analysis results. Instructor guidance in Pearson

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correlation and regression analysis encourages the entire class to make suggestions.

3. *Collaborative Research Organized Around Substantive Academic Work.*
   - Immediate Team Formation and Topic Self-Selection in the First Class Week: In my experience, teams of at least three undergraduates and early team self-selection of topics are productive, maximizing student commitment to sustained research throughout a semester. The instructor can guide teams toward public issues of critical social or political importance, such as warrantless wiretapping, alternative fuels, immigration, universal health care, medicating children, etc. (For suggested topics, see the Political Engagement Project: http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/initiatives/engagement.htm.).
   - Training in Library and Database Resources: Twice during the semester, a specialized librarian instructs on sophisticated searches in communication, US Census and Lexis-Nexis, or NewsBank newspaper databases.
4. *Mentoring Across the Life Course.* This concept implies caring not just about
   - classroom performance, but also about students' lives, spending time "outside" the classroom (over lunch, at pizza places, in student lounges), yet focusing on academic issues that can affect students over the life course, counseling them about jobs and graduate schools, accompanying them to conferences, and helping them network with mature scholars.

A Communication Commando Culture: Teamwork, Sacrifice, Commitment

By the end of the semester, successful "communication commandos" are capable of diving into assignments immediately to generate literature reviews, hypothesis sections, and methodology descriptions. They are eager to immerse themselves in data-collection coding and analysis and willing to interact frequently with other students and with the instructor to polish robust, semester-long projects that meet high scholarly and professional standards. Sacrificing traditional extracurriculars, some communication commandos engage more proactively in a culture of commitment: serving as undergraduate teaching assistants, communicating their enthusiasm in the next semesters' communication research methods courses, taking advanced independent study courses to advance their projects (or improve those started by others), submitting and presenting papers at scholarly conferences, and gaining admission to some of the nation's most distinguished graduate schools. This "culture of commitment" is necessary to put papers through multiple drafts beyond classroom requirements, prepare conference presentations, and seek funding for trips to scholarly conferences. Some students also report appreciation among prospective employers for professional projects that manifest research empowerment.

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Appraisal

Despite its benefits, three limitations accompany the commando model of research engagement. First, the instructor must make an extraordinary time commitment to editing every team's submissions, rendering the model most effective in classes under 35 students. Second, the model emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on a single theory and methodology, which can be countered by the introduction of theoretical and methodological balance in the same class, as well in other advanced courses. Lastly, the commando model makes evaluating individual achievement difficult. Therefore, a communication methods text (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000) and individual exams are employed. Students also rate their own and their team members' contributions twice a semester. This tool has been remarkably accurate in evaluating relative contributions of individuals, thus reducing artificial grade inflation from the superlative efforts of a few.

Limitations aside, the commando mission approach enjoys multiple benefits:

1. Learning the value of multiple drafts.
2. Connecting academic ideas with students' lives. (Students learn they can create original research contributing to disciplinary knowledge or public policy.)
3. Reinforcing peer learning. (Team discussion reinforces class lectures.)
4. Integrating ideas from other disciplines through multidisciplinary literature reviews.
5. Modeling professional behavior. Since 1994, student teams animated by the communication commando model have presented over 80 refereed papers at scholarly meetings, almost annually at DePauw honors conferences, others at conferences organized by ECA, NCA, or ICA. Four student papers have won the NCA Stephen Smith Award (2000, 2005, 2006, 2007) for best student co-authored papers in the nation. Student papers have won six "best undergraduate paper" ECA health communication division awards (2003–2008).

Encouraged by their success in writing and presenting scholarly papers to exercise leadership, eight commando students from my college have demonstrated national leadership since 1996 by winning election as national presidents of NCA's Lambda Pi Eta (national student honors) organization. Former research commandos have earned graduate degrees at such institutions as Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Boston University, Texas, Carnegie Mellon, Syracuse (both Maxwell and Newhouse schools), Pennsylvania State, New York University, UC San Diego, Georgia, George Washington and the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The communication commando model can excite undergraduates about the great adventure of professional communication scholarship and, more broadly, the communication discipline itself.

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