
Having Difficult Conversations

Course Information

- ❖ MC 399-301
- ❖ Tuesdays
(February 6th – April 3rd)
- ❖ 5:00-6:40 p.m.
- ❖ 334A Case Hall
- ❖ Erin Schaefer
- ❖ Email:
erinschaefer9@gmail.com
- ❖ Cell:
320-267-6850
(9am-9pm)
- ❖ Office:
Bessey Hall 280 or
James Madison College
on select dates/by
appointment (see
below)
- ❖ Office Hours in Bessey
Hall:
Tuesdays 10-11:15,
Thursday, 10:00-10:45
- ❖ Times Available to meet in
the James Madison
College:
*I will be available in the
North Case Hall lounge
area for an hour (from
11:30am-12:30pm) on the
following dates (shoot me
an email or text to locate
me):*
 - February 7th
 - February 21st
 - February 28th
 - March 14th
 - March 28th
 - April 11th

Course Description

Listening – particularly in highly charged conversations - involves a great deal of complexity. Each person in the interaction brings with them a web of stories and standpoints. In this course, we will begin by examining the nature of these stories and their capacity for both harm and good. Then, we will look at how emotions – particularly fear and attachment – interact with the (re)production and (re)vision of stories. Because emotion happens in the body, we will seek to explore the interaction of stories and the body from multiple perspectives, including neurological ones.

Specifically, we will focus on how fear, attachment, and mindful awareness mediate our construction and perception of the stories as we engage in challenging conversations with others. We will begin this process within the self, examining the neurological and narrative shifts that occur when participants use a technology of the self, neurofeedback. Neurofeedback allows participants to observe and change their brain wave activity from moment to moment.

A type of neurofeedback training called alpha-theta allows participants to examine how mindful they are as they call up stories (autobiographical memories). The goal of alpha-theta is essentially to work with the “malleability of memory,” or as we can conceptualize it, the malleability of narrative. We will develop our own mindfulness to support a similar process in the way that we work with narratives – our own and others. After exploring alpha-theta as a process of working with different parts of ourselves, we will explore how to communicate effectively with others in difficult conversations. In this section, will draw mainly from film examples as case studies.

Course Materials

The two required texts are available for purchase from Collegeville Textbooks. All other readings are on D2L or can be linked to from the schedule. **You should also always bring your book and/or articles to class on the day that they are assigned.**

Required Texts

- Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*. Toronto: The House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003.
- Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Guided Mindfulness Meditation: A Complete Guided Mindfulness Meditation Program from Jon Kabat-Zinn* (a set of audio CDs). Sounds True, 2005.

Mindfulness Component

As part of developing our ability to practice open, self-reflective listening during difficult conversations, we will practice secular mindfulness. This will include using exercises from Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Guided Mindfulness Meditation* audio CD: the guided body scan and sitting meditation. Mindfulness is a practice of open awareness of the present moment. It requires deliberate practice, as well as attention to the body and breath. The goal is to foster grounded, non-judgmental awareness of the present moment and all that it holds (memories, thoughts of the future, your body, the environment, and other people). If you have concerns about doing this practice, please do not hesitate to talk with me; your grade will not be negatively impacted. Also, because mindfulness sometimes results in mental and physical shifts, you are welcome to take a break during these exercises (e.g., leave the classroom) for as long as you deem necessary.

Course Requirements, Assignments and Expectations

Following are the various components of your work and your grade in this course:

- Participation (20%)
- Weekly journal and habit tracker (20%)
- Reading responses (30%)
- Final learning journey and manifesto presentation (30%)

Please note that students taking this as a non-credit course will be expected to participate and complete all of the assignments.

Participation (20%)

Class sessions will be largely discussion-based, anchored around your reading responses. Each session will be organized on the assumption that you have carefully read the assigned texts and that you are prepared to discuss them thoughtfully.

The requirements are as follows:

- Attend all class sessions and arrive promptly for class. Repeated late attendance disrupts the class and will be reflected in your participation grade.
- In the case of a significant, unavoidable conflict (such as a religious holiday or court date), an emergency (such as hospitalization), or chronic illness, you will receive an excused absence. Religious observances do not require documentation, but other excused absences should be documented. In other cases, such as car breakdowns, minor illnesses, etc., you will receive an unexcused absence. As this is a short course which depends

heavily on participation, students with more than one unexcused class absence may not be eligible to receive a participation grade or a course grade.

- Read all required materials carefully and bring a copy of the readings to class.
- Make informed, thoughtful contributions to class discussions consistently throughout the semester.
- Raise questions in class, whether during lecture or discussion. All questions are welcome, no matter how basic, complex or confused! If you would prefer to ask your question or express a concern privately, you can talk with me before or after class, drop by my office hours, or email me.
- Please do not use your phone, check your email, or otherwise use your electronics for non-course related material during class time. The congenial and collaborative environment of the classroom depends on your active participation. If I notice you using your phone or reading email during class, I will not interrupt our work but your inattention will be reflected in your participation grade. If you need to use your phone for an urgent communication, please step outside class.
- If you would like to record the lecture portions of our class sessions to assist with your learning, please discuss this with me in advance. Please do not record class discussions as this may inhibit the free exchange of ideas.
- Please feel free to visit with me during office hours! It is especially important that you come to my office hours if you feel that you are having difficulties with the course or if you do not participate as extensively as some students during class. You may come individually or, if you prefer, with other students. If you cannot make my assigned office hours, I am always happy to make an appointment with you for another time or to talk on the phone.

Weekly Journal & Habit Tracker (20%)

This course will explore how daily habits and “ways of being” are connected in important ways to how we communicate with others. This includes our embodied level of openness. Based on this premise, this course has a mindfulness component, which can support a more open way of relating to yourself and others while also observing the limitations of your ability to be open while listening.

Weekly Journal

The weekly journal is a place for you to reflect on your own formal and informal practices of mindfulness. This may overlap with your reading responses. Since mindfulness is about increasing awareness of whatever is happening in the present moment, you may use this space to write about pretty much anything. You can use whatever medium works best for your reflection (or experiment with a couple different forms). While I will not collect these journals, I will ask to skim through them at the beginning of each class. You may also be asked to share an excerpt from your weekly journal in class; please be prepared to do so each week. If you choose to do a video diary or a similar medium that is not easily accessible, just be prepared to paraphrase/summarize an excerpt for class each week. There is no length requirement for this assignment, but keep in mind that you will need to draw from your weekly journal in order to complete your learning journey/manifesto final presentation.

Habit Tracker

Practicing formal and informal mindfulness requires regular practice and discipline: creating and sticking to your intentions for practice. As part of developing a practice, you will set your own daily goals for journaling and mindfulness. You will turn in a “habit tracker” document each week. I will provide you with a printed copy of a habit tracker for each week. This document will ask you to mark which days you completed the goals that you’ve set for yourself. At the bottom of each document, there will also be a set of questions for you to respond on the Monday before you submit the document to class each week. These questions are:

1. What do you wish you had done differently?
2. What prevented you from sticking to your habits (if relevant)?
3. How can you overcome the barriers you experienced in practicing your habits (if relevant)?
4. Write a general reflection on what it was like doing these habits, including any changes that may have occurred as the week progressed.

To receive a 4.0 the weekly journal & habit tracker part of the class, you will need to

- a) show me your journal entries at the beginning of each class, and
- b) turn in all 8 habit tracker documents on their specified due dates.

For each habit tracker or journal entry that you don’t turn in, this portion of your grade will be reduced by .25. That means that if you do fail to produce your journal entries *and* your habit tracker for the week, this portion of your grade will be reduced by .5.

Weekly Reading Responses (30%)

Please refer to d21 for a list of guiding questions, made available one week in advance. You are not required to respond to these questions in your reading response, but you should be prepared to respond to them in class. Your response should be anchored in the readings and should demonstrate strong synthesis. Responses should be at least two pages (*minimum* 525 words), double-spaced, with one-inch margins and no more than four pages.

Final Project (30%)

Your final project is a chance for you to reflect on the readings, class discussions, and your own mindfulness practice. It should draw partly from your weekly journal, partly from your reading responses, partly from in-class discussions, and any other aspects of your experience that you find relevant. You should synthesize your learning journey in some form of narrative. In addition to reflecting back on what you’ve learned from the course, your project should also look forward, articulating a manifesto based on key learning moments. I will provide a more detailed description of this project in a separate handout.

The length of your piece will vary depending on the medium, but be prepared to present for 5-10 minutes, followed by at least 5 minutes of discussion. For this project, you must do something more than simply speak in front of your audience. This may mean using one or more mediums - such as a 3-5 minute video, a collage poster, or a “comic book” (to list a few examples). If you wish to give a purely oral presentation, you should have some sort of creative spin. This may mean giving a spoken-word or dramatic performance. Performances can also work with audio voiceovers. I once gave a performance dramatizing my own mindfulness practice using pre-recorded voiceovers to relate my thoughts during meditation, followed by direct talk with the

audience. As you think about which medium you will use, try to choose something that will make your presentation memorable for you and your audience; think outside the box. If you have questions about your idea, come talk with me.

The first draft of this project is due to the designated d2l dropbox on Sunday, March 25th at 11:59p.m. You will share this draft with me later that week (the week before your in-class presentation/our final meeting) during a required 20-minute conference. Final presentations will take place in class on Tuesday, April 3rd.

Grading policies

All written assignments must be typed and double-spaced with one-inch margins. They should also be carefully reviewed, revised and proofed. If you need an extension, please let me know. All assignments must be handed in on time, unless you have made prior arrangements with me. Unexcused late assignments will be subject to a penalty of 1.0 grade point per assignment per day.

Students with Disabilities

Students with documented disabilities are provided academic accommodations through the Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities in 120 Bessey Hall, 353-9642, rcpd@msu.edu. If you need academic accommodations, please let me know your specific needs by the second week of classes so that I can work with you effectively. If you are unclear as to what constitutes a disability or to what help you may be entitled, please talk with me or someone at the Resource Center.

Mandatory Reporting

Essays, responses, and other materials submitted of this class are generally considered confidential pursuant to the University's student record policies. However, students should be aware that University employees are required to report child abuse/neglect and allegations of sexual assault to the appropriate campus authorities when they become aware of such matters in the course of their employment. Sexual assault survivors are encouraged to meet with the Sexual Assault Program at the MSU Counseling Center for confidential counseling and advocacy services. I will not recount the content of your writing for this course without discussing it with you first.