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**"TRUST ISSUE MANAGEMENT" AS A SPECIAL TOPICS COURSE: CELEBRATING OLD AND
NEW WAYS OF LOOKING AT TRUST**

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"Trust Issue Management" as a Special Topics Course:

Celebrating Old and New Ways of Looking at Trust

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Abstract

Trust is an increasingly important issue: interpersonal trust, consumer trust, trust

within organizations, and trust of organizations from corporations to non-profits to

governments. Not only is trust important, but it is also communication-centered. In

order to prepare communication students (especially those in public relations) to make

healthy trusting decisions and manage organizational trust issues, this essay proposes a

special topics course in trust issue management. It provides a rationale for the course,

course objectives, a reading list and schedule, and assignments that engage students in

examining the concept and management of trust.

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Foundations of Trust Issue Management

The problem of trust has been a high-profile issue in recent years—can people

trust business leaders, government leaders, or even emergency personnel to act in the best

interests of many? Can opposing sides in public dialogue trust their counterparts to

converse and even bargain in good faith? Can organizations trust their employees to care

for sensitive information? Can people trust websites and the people who operate them to

protect personal data? Can people trust e-mails they receive asking them to confirm

financial information? As Hauser and Benoit-Barne (2002) have argued, globalization

brings with it an increasing reliance on people about whom we know very little, a

condition making trust "a paramount problem for civil society" (p. 267).

Professional communicators bear much responsibility for handling trust issues.

They must take rhetorical action that shows their organizations to be trustworthy, they

must make consumers aware of online dangers and how to avoid them, and they must

work with both internal and external publics to maintain healthy—but not

dysfunctional—levels of trust that allow interpersonal and commercial interactions to

take place. With trust taking on increasing importance in a global and technologically-

advanced society, communication curricula need to meet the challenge of training

communication students to manage these issues. Though trust and its management seems

to be a communication issue most likely to confront students involved in public relations

or related fields, it is also an issue for students moving into political communication,

organizational communication, and even interpersonal communication. Trust is a topic both old and new; it has been studied as an interpersonal concept for almost 50 years (e.g., Deutsch, 1958; Gambetta, 1988; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), and the communication field has studied trust in various forms for more than 30 years (e.g., Pearce, 1974; Boyd, 2003). But it has yet to make substantial inroads into communication curriculum, however, particularly as it relates to trust issues of new technology—e-commerce, the exchange of personal information online, and the management of perceptions of the related issues of confidence and security. This paper proposes and describes a special topics course that couples a specialty area of public relations, issue management, with the burgeoning issue of trust. Together, they form an upper division special topics course that will help students be aware of what issue management is, what common trust issues are, and how issue management can be employed to manage those issues of trust, both old and new.

Organizational discourse is largely about issue management—communicative action about contested questions to significant publics in order to achieve organizational objectives. Put another way, issue management is about anticipating the concerns of various audiences and addressing them, either through words or actions, before they turn into crises; this focus on relationships with publics reflects Heath's (1997) assertion that issue management should "balance the interests of all segments of the community" (p. 6). An increasingly important category of issues, particularly as it relates to new technologies, surrounds the idea of trust.

Practically speaking, Borzo (2004) argued that identity-theft schemes such as "phishing" threaten "the trust that all online business transactions are built on" (p. R8).

Hymowitz (2005) explored the delicate balance needed to maintain both trust and security, internally and externally—how can organizations protect their interests without making employees feel suspected or stupid? Bank (2005) reported on companies' efforts to train—and sometimes even trick—employees to be more careful about extending trust, particularly trust mediated through new technologies.

Conceptually speaking, people managing the trust issues of the 21st century need to know the difference between "trust" and "confidence," between trust-building measures and security-building measures (see, for instance, Luhmann, 1988; Seligman, 1997). Scholars such as Nissenbaum (2004) and Boyd (2003) have warned that simply instituting more and more confidence-building security measures might not increase trust, but might paradoxically decrease it. Students who will potentially become trust issue managers need to know these distinctions and begin thinking about how to negotiate the delicate balances they require.

<div style="text-align:center">The Trust Issue Management Course</div>

Overview

The proposed special topics course is an upper division course with approximately 25 students. Students who take the class will learn the basic principles of issue management, including how organizations can manage issues created by others and how organizations can identify and promote their own issues. That basic issue management knowledge will then be applied to specific trust contexts—the difference between trust and confidence (and why that matters); how individuals trust and/or exhibit trusting behavior toward other individuals online; how individuals trust and/or exhibit trusting behavior toward organizations online; how organizations communicate

trustworthiness about financial and personal information collected online; threats to online trust (including identity theft traps such as phishing, pharming, and "evil twins"); organizational challenges in managing employees' online activities, particularly those that might endanger the organization's security; and others. Upon completing this class, students will be much more aware of trust and security issues that must be managed, and they will have some practice at thinking critically about these issues and developing communication plans addressing them. The course will use primarily lecture and discussion formats.

Objectives

Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

*explain issue management and principles of pursuing it both defensively and catalytically;

*identify trust issues common to a wide variety of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations;

*identify trust issues facing online businesses specifically;

*critically analyze trust issues in order to develop basic communication plans; and

*explain in detail and critique the management of one particular trust issue facing an actual organization.

Readings and Schedule of Topics

The class will use readings from one textbook (Cook, 2001) and a course packet; total reading load will average approximately 50 pages per week. A reading packet will include scholarly as well as popular press articles that engage the dual concerns of issue management and trust. Table 1 outlines the course topics and readings, week by week.

Grading and Assignments

In order to encourage critical thinking and structured engagement of trust issues, this class is a writing-intensive class. As such, this class follows several basic guidelines: it requires at least 5,000 words of writing, it determines final grades primarily on writing assignments, it gives students at least some opportunities for feedback and revision, and class size is no larger than 25 (Farris & Smith, 1992). To meet these standards, the assignments for the class are almost all writing-based.

Trust journal (20% of final grade). Once each week, students will write in a small notebook their reflections on trust issues for that week. These journal entries will include citations of trust controversies and actual issues affecting organizations, comments and critiques of class discussion and assigned readings about trust, and even comics or popular culture references about trust issues. Journals will be collected and evaluated twice during the semester for their engagement with trust issues and demonstration of critical thinking about trust. Each entry should make a point or have a guiding thought. Trust journal entries may relate to the ongoing trust issue management plan assignment.

Trust issue management plan (60% of final grade—the sum of the components below). The major assignment for this class is a trust issue management plan for an actual organization facing a trust issue. The issue may be located at any point on the issue lifecycle discussed in week two (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). If it is a current or critical issue, the plan must take into account and critique current issue management efforts. If it is a dormant, potential, or imminent issue, students will have more freedom to suggest what should be done to manage the issue. In order to make this major project

less daunting, it is broken into several pieces, each with separate values toward

determining a final grade.

Issue description (10% of final grade). This component of the plan describes the

organization, the trust issue it is facing, and the current or potential consequences of the

issue (2-3 pp.).

Current issue management (10% of final grade). This component outlines the

current issue management practices of the organization or industry regarding this trust

issue (3-4 pp.); if the issue has not yet reached current status, this paper will suggest

initial steps toward managing the issue.

Critique and communication plan (20% of final grade). This pivotal component

takes the information developed in the first two short papers and does two things with it:

1) critiques current or proposed issue management steps, defending judgments of praise

or criticism, and 2) suggests a communication plan to address the issue in the future.

This plan must include at least one "mocked-up" public relations document in support of

the plan (4-5 pp. + PR document).

Presentation (20% of final grade): At the end of the course, students will present

their cases, identifying the organization, issue, current issue management practices (with

critique), and proposed issue management plan. This is a communication course, so

presentation skill counts on everything from content to delivery (10-15 min. + questions).

Final exam (20% of final grade). A final exam, given during the assigned final

exam time, will consist of short answer and short essay questions testing students'

knowledge of issue management, trust theory, and the applied trust issues addressed in

class.

Conclusion

Issue management as an area of study is not uncommon in communication programs with a public relations emphasis. The addition of trust to a study of issue management, however, allows for the delivery of basic issue management instruction with the bonus of better preparing communication students for both the established and the increasingly important new issues regarding trust. The special topics course described in this essay helps students improve their own understanding of trust and their ability to manage trust issues for themselves and the organizations of which they will eventually be a part.

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Table 1

Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignment Due Dates

(references to Cook (2001) textbook are by chapter)

Week	Topic	Readings
1	Organizational discourse	Cheney & McMillan, 1990
2	Issue management part I	Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Crable & Vibbert, 1985
3	Issue management part II	Cook introduction; Heath, 1997
4	Trust and confidence part I	Cook chapter 1; Petrovic, Fallenbock, & Kittl, 2003
5	Trust and confidence part II	Cook chapters 3, 11; Hymowitz, 2005; Sitkin & Roth, 1993 *due: Trust journals (first collection)*
6	Trust issues for organizations	Edelman, 2005; Palmer, Bailey, & Faraj, 2000; Ratnasingam, 2005 *due: Issue description paper*
7	Developing a trust IM plan	Boyd, 2003; Chadwick, 2001; Cook chapters 5-6
8	Application: trade secrets	Cook chapter 10; Delaney, 2005a *due: Current issue management paper*
9	Application: employees online	Bank, 2005; Cook chapter 2
10	Application: online auctions	Boyd, 2001; Boyd, 2002; "Online-auction," 2005; Vishwanath, 2004

11	Application: credit cards and other personal information	Borzo, 2004; Delaney, 2005b; Pacelle, 2005
12	Application: electronic media	Hu, Lin, & Zhang, 2003; Schroeder, 2004 *due: Critique and communication plan*
13	Student presentations	
14	Student presentations	*due: Trust journals (final collection)*
15	Student presentations/exam review	
16	*Final exam*	