LEARNING COMMUNITY PURPOSE AND GOALS

COMPASS for Student Success is offered as a year-long learning community for developmental students. In the fall semester, COMPASS emphasizes critical reading, writing, study skills, and career planning. Students enroll in a beginning-level writing course (ENG061 Basic Writing Skills or ENG071 Fundamentals of Writing) that is integrated with Strategies for College Success (CPD150); they also enroll in their choice of reading sections that meet separately.

In the spring, COMPASS combines a beginning-level writing course (ENG071 Fundamentals of Writing or ENG101 First-Year Composition), Introduction to Communication (COM100), and a college reading course (RDG091 College Reading Skills I or CRE101 Critical and Evaluative Reading I). The English and Communication courses are fully integrated and team-taught by two instructors who coordinate assignments; for example, all English papers are written on Communication topics and count for both courses. As in the fall, the reading courses meet separately.

ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION:

Students select one of two prompts on communication in the movie Meet the Parents. The paper should include an introduction with thesis statement, background paragraph, at least one paragraph on the first part of the prompt (focusing on the specific communication concept in the movie), at least one paragraph on the second part of the prompt (focusing on how the specific concept affects communication), and a conclusion. The paper may also include a close-reading of one scene from the movie.

Integrative thinking occurs as students use a structured academic paper format taught to them in English to describe the communication course competencies. In this paper as in the first paper of the semester, students are also practicing a paragraph format called PIE, which stands for Point, Illustration, and Explanation, as well as practicing
introducing definitions and other quotations from the textbook with MLA-style signal phrases. Thus, as students recognize and apply communication concepts to the movie, they must write paragraphs that make a clear point which is illustrated by specific examples from the movie. They then discuss the example and explain how it illustrates the point. (PIE is based on the logical structure of claim [point], data [illustration/example], and warrant [explanation/discussion].)

Further integrative thinking is prompted by the optional close-reading paragraph, in which students analyze the visual and other non-verbal aspects of the scene in order to illustrate a clear point about inter-personal communication.

PURPOSE OF ASSIGNMENT:
One purpose of this assignment is for students to learn and/or review the structure of an academic essay. Students are taught how to use a prompt to develop a thesis statement and how to use the thesis statement to structure the essay. Another purpose of this assignment is for students to develop and demonstrate their understanding of communication course competencies by applying them to a movie; students use specific examples from the movie to illustrate and support the thesis. The specific communication competencies for this unit are: (1) describe the influence of perception in human communication, and (2) describe the influence of self-concept in human communication.

QUESTION OR ISSUES THE ASSIGNMENT ADDRESSES:
Students who select the first prompt on common perceptual tendencies address the influence of perception in human communication, and students who select the second prompt on identity management address self-concept in order to describe identity management. Both prompts include a second question of how the specific communication concept being observed (common perceptual tendencies or identity management) affects communication in the movie.

DISCIPLINARY GROUNDING:
The disciplinary grounding from Communication is the understanding and application of perception concepts. The students must be able to define, explain, and apply concepts accurately in the paper.

As elaborated above, the disciplinary grounding from English is the rhetoric of a structured academic essay, including the thesis statement and the PIE body paragraphs, which in turn have their disciplinary grounding in logic.

While students are not asked to watch the movie as they would in a film studies course (for example, by looking at film-specific qualities such as editing, lighting, or camera angles), the close-reading paragraph has its disciplinary grounding in the literary studies premise that a text will, upon close examination, reveal a meaning beyond that of surface or plot. Students must thus integrate literary studies, communication, and rhetoric/composition if they are to make a clear point about communication illustrated and supported by visual and non-verbal details from the movie.
STEPS TAKEN IN EACH COURSE TO HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP DISCIPLINARY GROUNDING:

Many smaller assignments led to the second of three papers in the learning community. The students read the textbook chapter, listened to lecture, engaged in active learning on the communication concepts (including a discussion board), and wrote a paragraph on each prompt prior to selecting one for the paper. Once students had selected their prompt/topic, they wrote their thesis statements together in class and then used the thesis statements to write an outline for the paper.

In addition to the assignments listed above, we used three new smaller writing assignments on the movie during spring 2008. First, students were given a homework assignment to write one paragraph on how Meet the Parents is a movie about communication. Second, after discussing the homework, students wrote a short narrative paragraph on the plot details any reader in our campus community would need to understand Meet the Parents as a movie about communication (this paragraph would later be revised to serve as the background paragraph in the paper). Third and still before students had selected a topic, they were assigned topics at random and divided into two groups for an exercise on close reading, which included modeling by the instructor.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT STUDENTS’ WORK IN RESPONSE TO THE ASSIGNMENT:
(evidence of disciplinary grounding and purposeful integration)

The following examples provide evidence of students developing PIE paragraphs and effectively discussing identity management and common perceptual tendencies. The writing explains the communication concepts and then applies the ideas to scenes and overall themes from the movie Meet the Parents, focusing on the main characters of Greg and Jack. The first two paragraphs below are excerpted from the end of the final paper, as these “B” students bring the concepts and the movie to a close. In the first example “Mark”, a student from the spring 2008 class, clearly explains and applies the concept of identity management, demonstrating his understanding of the complexity of managing who we are as we communicate with others while still adapting to specific situations. In the second example “Evan”, a student from spring 2007, demonstrates that he has grasped the concept but is still struggling to explain it accurately and concisely. People surely do have different selves, as Evan states; however, identity management is not focused on a good impression, but more so on interaction and disclosure which is appropriate for the given situation and progression to communication competence.

“With Greg having so many different identities that he is trying to maintain throughout the movie, the communication throughout was affected. For example, when Greg is around the entire family at any of their gatherings, he becomes very quiet and only speaks when spoken to. This helps to protect the identities that he had set up with each of the different family members. Unconsciously he is setting up yet another identity for himself; he is making himself out to be a quiet and shy person. This affects his communication throughout the movie because it limits him to only body language that he most likely is unaware that he is portraying.”
— Mark, Spring 2008
“We as people have many different selves and the person we are isn’t always the person we show other people. Identity management allows us to keep certain things private and let positive things out so people think of us positively. In the movie *Meet the Parents* Greg was not successful to show the person he wanted to show because of the constant pressure he felt from his girlfriend Pam’s father. In life we almost have change our image hourly or daily, simply to maintain an image that best shows our character. Although we’re trying to act one way to a certain person that same person is trying to give a certain perception to you. The main purpose of identity management is to serve as a good impression whether we know we’re doing it or not. Identity management is determined by our social status or social situation but it’s truly used to accomplish our own personal goals, but how are we to determine if our role playing or identity management was a success.”

— Evan, Spring 2007

Whereas paragraphs on identity management are fairly straight-forward, as students were able to choose the one topic and then dive into it, choosing perceptual tendencies involved selecting one or more of five perceptual tendencies:

“Another perceptual tendency that is used in the movie is being influenced by what is most obvious. Jack is again another example of this perceptual tendency, because when people are influenced by what is most obvious they tend to only pay attention to their first thoughts about a specific situation. An example of this would be in the scene where Jack and Greg are going to the drug store, and the song ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ is playing. When Greg hears this song he thinks that it is talking about smoking marijuana, but Jack thinks that it is talking about a magic dragon named Puff. Jack automatically assumes that because he was influenced by what was most obvious to him. There is also another scene in the movie where Jack sees that his son has found a pipe in the jacket that Greg is borrowing, and his son claims that he doesn’t even know what it is. He thinks that it is obvious that it is Greg’s pipe, because it was in the pocket of the jacket he was borrowing, and because his son said that he did not know what the “sculpture” was. During the whole movie Jack seems to blame Greg for various different things, because he is influenced by what is most obvious.”

— Sarah, Spring 2008

“Jack also has the bad habit of favoring negative impressions over positive ones. As Adler and Rodman say, ‘Research shows that when people are aware of both positive and negative traits of another, they tend to be more influenced by the negative traits’ (39). As this quote simply states, when we hear or see something that we perceive as negative, that impressions carries more weight in our minds than when we hear or see something that could be viewed as positive. In the scene where Jack meets Greg, Jack completely rejects the facts that Greg is a nice guy, has a secure job, brought him a thoughtful, unique gift, and that Greg truly loves his daughter. Jack only focuses on the negative impressions: that Greg drove up in an old car, he has baby spit-up on this shirt, and that he does not like cats. So when they first meet, Jack uses only negative impressions to form an opinion of dislike. A second example of Jack demonstrating this perceptual tendency is during the time when Jack and Greg and a few others go swimming and play volleyball in the pool. Greg is not playing so well, and Jack has
another impression that Greg is a pothead (which turns out to be wrong). Jack keeps teasing Greg as if his non-coordination is because he is a pothead. Jack’s negative viewpoint causes him to misinterpret many situations. This causes a severe breakdown in communication.”
— Megan, Spring 2008

Students’ reflections on the paper further include commentary about both the writing and the thinking process.

In her portfolio reflection for this assignment, Megan wrote,

“Writing this paper was a process. This particular paper was difficult for me to run with. So, when I could not get started, or got stuck, I would stare at the computer screen, and hope some idea would hit me on the head. But it was far more effective when I would review what I had previously written or reread the requirements for the paper. Decisions were essential to this paper. First, I had to choose my prompt. Then I had to choose which perceptual tendencies, not to mention deciding whose feedback I should use. After receiving feedback from Dr. Horn, I came to the same conclusion that she did; that my background paragraph, because the movie still exists, needs to be in present tense. I also found it reasonable when she recommended that I discuss my quotes before jumping into my illustrations.”

Mark wrote about this assignment in his end of the semester reflection:

“The paper I believe taught me the most was the paper we had to write about Meet the Parents. This, I feel, is when we had to start using some critical thinking and analyzing. We had to tie together certain aspects of communication, into this movie which could involve watching it a few times or analyzing a few scenes in depth. It may not seem important to others, but to me it was somewhat of a turning point in the semester. I see it as you are cooking a stew; you can’t just throw the ingredients in the pot and call it done, you have to cut the vegetables, season them and boil it.”

INSTRUCTORS’ REFLECTIONS ON THE ASSIGNMENT AND STUDENTS’ WORK:

This assignment has evolved considerably over the past four years, an evolution that will be elaborated upon below. After attending the meeting for this assessment project in March 2007, we realized that students had struggled with the second paper not only because it was the first structured essay of the semester, but also because we were asking students to integrate three disciplines—communication, rhetoric/composition, and literary studies—without making that integration specific. Instead, we attempted to lead students from a general discussion of the movie to a close reading of specific scenes through the assignment sheet and a subsequent handout on organization, in other words, by simply telling students what to put where.

Compounding the difficulty of the assignment was the second part of the prompt, which asked students to evaluate the perception (first prompt) or the identity management (second prompt) of the character upon whom they had chosen to focus. Evaluation is ranked as the highest-order thinking skill in Bloom’s Taxonomy. Whereas on the previous assignment, we had asked the students to demonstrate comprehension and engage in limited application, we were now demanding comprehension of communication concepts, application of those concepts to a movie,
analysis of the movie in terms of the concepts, and evaluation of the communication in the movie based on the concepts. In addition, we expected students to demonstrate original insights into the movie. No wonder students were struggling!

This semester, before finalizing the assignment sheet, we looked closely at responses to the first homework, the paragraph that students wrote about how Meet the Parents is a movie about communication. Students’ writing revealed that even before discussing the movie in class, they recognized and understood examples of the communication concepts for the unit: a father’s prejudice that no man could be worthy of his daughter (based on common perceptual tendencies), a prospective son-in-law’s use of lies as he tries to impress his girlfriend’s parents (identify management), and the collision course each of these communication strategies places the protagonists upon. We therefore changed the second half of each prompt from evaluation to analysis and asked students how the communication concept(s) they had chosen affected communication in the movie.

As discussed earlier, we also made the close-reading activity explicit, if optional. Few students attempted to integrate their close-reading into their paper, however, possibly because this was the last section of the paper we worked on together in class and because the close-reading of visuals/non-verbals works better for the identity management prompt than for the perceptual tendency prompt. For example, Greg’s awkward attempts to manage his identity around Jack are usually undermined by his voice, gestures, and spatial relationship to Jack. Students analyzing visuals and other non-verbals in Jack’s perceptual tendencies, on the other hand, could focus only on the limited gestures, facial expressions, and vocal qualities that characterized Jack’s reactions to Greg.

CHANGES MADE TO THE ASSIGNMENT AS A RESULT OF THIS ASSESSMENT:
The purpose of the original assignment was for students to demonstrate their understanding of communication concepts by identifying them in the movie through close reading. The purpose of the revised assignment—at least from an instructional perspective—is for students to learn to write a structured academic essay in which they demonstrate their understanding of communication concepts by identifying examples of these concepts in the movie. Thus, the revised assignment is more explicitly integrative. Writing pedagogy—focusing on thesis, organization, and paragraph structure—has become a more explicit focus of this second unit, rather than something that was covered in class so that students could write passing papers. This new instructional focus is more appropriate to a heterogeneous class of developmental and first-semester composition students.

In order for students to focus on what we the instructors had deemed the most important objectives of the unit—understanding the communication concepts and mastering essay structure—the second question in each prompt was changed from evaluation to analysis, a more developmentally appropriate task, as discussed above. We already knew from homework and class discussion that students had much to say in response to this second question.
The presentation of the task in the original and in the revised assignment sheet also differs in small yet significant ways. The original assignment contains a paragraph listing and explaining three basic overall requirements, followed by a bulleted list of what kinds of paragraphs the paper should include. When students were confused by this presentation of assignment requirements, we gave them more explicit guidelines on how to structure the paper, a complete list of what to put where. The end result, however, was that while a small number of students wrote satisfactory essays that followed the suggested structure, some students ignored the list, and others used it to create disjointed papers that met all of the requirements but that did not hold together as a coherent whole.

The revised assignment sheet presents assignment requirements more clearly and purposefully. Following the two prompts is a bulleted list of the minimum requirements for the assignment. While this list is similar to the one from the original assignment that details what kinds of paragraphs the paper should include, these requirements have been paired down to reflect the revised purpose of the assignment. Following this list is a paragraph detailing more specific requirements for the PIE body paragraphs, again similar to the paragraph on the original assignment sheet listing and explaining three basic overall requirements, but labeled and positioned differently on the new assignment sheet. Unlike previous semesters, students did not ask repeated questions about the assignment sheet, “what you [the instructors] want” on the assignment, or how the paper should be structured.

In previous semesters, much class time was devoted to the close reading and discussion of key scenes from the movie, yet few students effectively transferred this skill to their reading and discussion of scenes not shown in class. With a literary and film studies background, their English instructor encouraged and expected students to reveal new insights about the movie, which they failed to do. The new preparatory assignments, however, revealed that students were fully capable of insightful, original analysis of the communication in the movie; what they needed was disciplinary grounding in essay structure that would allow them to clearly present a coherent analysis to a general audience.