Course Identifier: FCE 444

Course Name: Interpersonal Relationships

Department: Department of Human Development and Family Studies
College: College of Social Science

Primary contact name, phone number, email: Jodi L. Spicer, MA
(517) 353-5267
spicerj@msu.edu

Faculty and Staff Involved in Developing and Offering the Course (please list full name, position at MSU, email address, and project role for each person)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FULL NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>EMAIL</th>
<th>PROJECT ROLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jodi L. Spicer, MA</td>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td><a href="mailto:spicerj@msu.edu">spicerj@msu.edu</a></td>
<td>Creator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Semester(s) offered in 2009-2010 and number of students enrolled:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEMESTER</th>
<th># STUDENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>183 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>186 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please address these categories:

I. Course Description (400 word limit)

FCE 444: Interpersonal Relationships provides students with a deeper understanding of the complexities and dynamics of interpersonal relationships within families, as well as other important social, physical and cultural contexts, through the exploration of theory and application.

Upon completion of this course, students are expected to:

• Comprehend various theoretical approaches to understanding family relationships and behavior from a human ecological perspective.
• Gain greater understanding and application of family theory and concepts in specific family situations.
• Comprehend the diversity of family structures and organization.
• Think critically about relationships between family communication and its impact upon family decision-making and ongoing lifestyle choices.

As a fully online course, FCE 444 uses a variety of interactive platforms – most notably Ning. Ning is a social networking platform that allows users to focus on a particular topic and create social networks around specific interests. Last fall, using Ning, a social network was created for FCE 444 creating a virtual
classroom for students providing a set of interactive tools that work together to increase student engagement. These tools provide students with:

- the opportunity to interact and participate in total class discussions,
- regular video blogs (vlogs) hosted by the instructor,
- weekly small group discussion forums,
- an interactive chat feature
- a messages feature that allows students to send and receive messages with classmates without giving out personal email addresses.

To further foster a sense of community and shared leadership, each student is assigned to a small discussion group (n=10). Students report that they not only engage in stimulating discussions within their groups, but also feel more connected with their classmates as compared to traditional classrooms.

Student performance is assessed in three ways:

- Three Interactive Writing Assignments
  - “Getting to Know One Another”: Students participate within their small groups and create a personalized profile (including picture) in Ning, and write a short summary paper of what they have learned about one another.
  - Group Facilitator’s Summary Paper: Each week within each small group, one student is assigned as the Group Facilitator. S/he leads, facilitates and concludes a discussion (with assigned topic) throughout the week, writing a summary paper of what s/he learned at the conclusion.
  - Fictional Family Analysis: Students analyze a specific fictional family (depicted in a novel, television show or movie), demonstrating his/her understanding of the course content.
- Weekly Participation in Small Group Discussions
- Three Quizzes

II. Learning and Interaction Goals of the Fully Online Course

I have taught large undergraduate classes successfully in traditional face-to-face and blended formats utilizing ANGEL. Last summer, I was asked by my department chair to create a fully online course. I knew that my success as an instructor was dependent on the high level of interactivity that the face-to-face and blended format provided...but how could I successfully create that in a fully online course? My biggest challenge as an instructor was to find a way to engage students in a collaborative way that encourages them to openly share and learn from one another’s unique experiences and perspectives.
At the same time, I became more actively involved active in various social networks – both personally and professionally. These interactive experiences have provided me with a high level of connectivity and involvement. This collaborative environment seemed like a perfect solution to my dilemma!

As I embarked on the journey of creating a fully online course, I asked myself “how can I create a class that has academic credibility, but takes advantage of the students' social networking skills/expertise.” Integrating a social network into the course has provided a wonderful opportunity to capitalize on the collaborative tools that social networking provides. It was a big leap of faith and confidence on my part, and I am very pleased with the level of success achieved in the first semester (FS09), and now being continued for a second time this semester (SS10).

What about Facebook? Why Ning? When it comes to online instruction and collaboration, social networking sites have the potential to provide an effective alternative to virtual learning environments. However, in an informal poll last semester it was confirmed that students are strongly against introducing their “personal world” of Facebook into their academic world. As one student stated, “Facebook = personal life; Ning = school.” However, students report that they not only appreciate the ability to apply skills they are used to operating within (and are familiar with), but also appreciate the functionality that a social networking platform provides.

III. Points of Interest and Innovation

While ANGEL provides a great deal of functionality to both students and instructors, there are limitations when looking for comprehensive interactive solutions. ANGEL is used within the course as a virtual “backpack,” storing important information (syllabus, course outline, assigned readings and PowerPoint lectures) as well as the corresponding assignment drop boxes. ANGEL is also the place that students go to take the assessments for the course. However, Ning is where the rich interaction between instructor and students, and between student and student, occurs.

Ning is used in the course as the virtual classroom. It is a closed social network that users must be invited (by the creator, or in this case the instructor) to join. At the beginning of the semester, each student is sent an invitation to join:
As a Guest, you are provided limited access to this site (for the purposes of this application) by going to: http://msufce444.ning.com and entering the following information:

Email: jodilspicer@me.com
Password: password
Once students have joined, they have full access to the virtual classroom:
The tabs at the top of the page provide access to the primary dimensions of the course. The FCE 444 page (or home page) is where all the important course information can be found, namely: basic information about the course (including course description and syllabus), due dates, assignment information, class discussions, videos and an activity feed). The virtual classroom also comes with a messages feature that allows students the opportunity to send and receive messages with other members in the class without giving our personal email addresses.

Each student also has the ability to create his or her own personal page within Ning. This is also built into the course as a requirement for the first assignment. Students have reported that this is not only fun (and interesting), but helps create a sense of community within the course and with their fellow students. Each person’s page can be designed and personalized to reflect individual styles and personalities. This personalized page also has the ability to post status updates that can link directly with Twitter, add pictures, and upload videos.
Within the virtual classroom, students are provided with a number of interactive opportunities to communicate with one another - both in small group settings as well as with the entire class.

There are a number of ongoing total class discussions:

1. **Student Help Center**: This discussion forum serves as a help center for the entire class. Students are encouraged to help one another, share tips, ask and answer questions and receive support from one another.
2. **Jodi’s Question of the Week**: Each week discussion topic is posted that is primarily one of interest or fun. This is used as a strategy to increase and sustain student engagement and interest.
3. **Class Communication/Messages**: Throughout the semester, broadcast messages are sent to all students with important course information. These messages are received within students’ messaging “Inbox” and are also filed here for reference.
4. **Student Lounge**: This discussion forum is open to the entire course with the primary purpose being one of fun and friendship.
In addition, each week small groups engage in facilitated discussions. Students also have the opportunity to interact with the instructor in a variety of ways. Regular video blogs (vlogs) are posted which provide opportunities for students to see and hear the instructor share information about important course content (course updates, assignment information, extra credit opportunities) as well as informal “lectures” on relevant theory and practice related to the relevant course topics.
In addition, regular office hours are held using the Chat Feature within Ning – allowing students to easily see when the instructors, as well as their peers, are online, offering the opportunity chat in real-time.

V. Evidence of Effectiveness with Students

Students are generally pleased with the interactivity of this course, and appreciate the opportunity to connect with one another. They attribute the success of the course to the functionality that Ning provides. Recently, several students shared their feedback about using Ning with an online course:

“I feel like I can become more connected with my classmates by being able to communicate and getting to know them online. It seems as though everyone in my group will be able to get along perfectly fine. Ning is a wonderful website to use for online classes; I wish every professor would use this site for their classes! It gives us a chance to connect with each other and the professor. I am excited about taking this class because of how it is structured. It is really cool and it should be fun!”

“Starting a new class is always a bit of a challenge. You hope that you like the people that you are in class with, you hope you can find someone to study with, you hope your teacher rocks! That is when you walk into a new class ROOM...entering into the virtual classroom is a whole different ballgame. You still hope that your teacher rocks, but there are new worries. Can you get online, will you be able to upload the necessary documents, will you still be able to get assistance from your classmates? So far I can say that I am very happy with the state of my virtual classmates.”

“I would like to say that I am really looking forward to this semester. I feel that Ning is going to be a great way for us to communicate as a class, and I think that other professors should be aware of it. Online classes can be so impersonal and this is just one way that students can really interact and get to know one another. It also if a fun way to interact, and it’s at a level that we are comfortable with because it’s on the internet and almost the same as Facebook.”

“The fact that we are in an online course makes it difficult to get a more personable impression of the people in the class. However, with interaction in an online forum being a major facet of the class, we get the chance to interact with people we may never even have talked to otherwise in a more formal class setting. Instead of fiddling with our cell phones and ipods, we are using technology to create a more interactive experience with our classmates, which to me is a very cool thing. I have learned more about my group mates in 2 weeks than I might ever learn about my classmates in my other classes.”

“This happens to be my first class that I have used Ning in, so this website was a completely new experience for me. I have had online classes before and always felt that some of the
personal connections you make when you meet in a classroom are missing. Ning definitely allows me to feel more connected to my classmates, and I hope I can get a better learning experience from being a part of it.”

“I’ve never used Ning before but I’m pleasantly surprised by it! I think it will be a more interactive way to learn through an online class than simply using ANGEL.”

VI. Plans for Sustainability

This course is taught every semester, and I have been asked by the department chair to teach the course in a creative and interactive manner. To date, I have taught the course for two semesters. Since this is a regular course offering of the department, I will steadily improve the course and will work with other instructors who might want to learn the methodology for their courses. If I am no longer the instructor, I will work with succeeding instructors in the course content and delivery. In addition, I have begun working with MSU Virtual University this semester to maximize the potential for this approach in other online environments across campus.