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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series  
MED2015-1588**

**New Perspectives on Communication  
Education: Student Involvement and  
Engagement**

**Oya Şakı Aydın  
Associate Professor  
Istanbul Commerce University  
Turkey**

**Zeliha Hepkon  
Associate Professor  
Istanbul Commerce University  
Turkey**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Şakı Aydın, O. and Hepkon, Z. (2015). "New Perspectives on Communication Education: Student Involvement and Engagement", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MED2015-1588.**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:  
www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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ISSN: 2241-2891

14/09/2015

## **New Perspectives on Communication Education: Student Involvement and Engagement**

**Oya Şakı Aydın**  
**Associate Professor**  
**Istanbul Commerce University**  
**Turkey**

**Zeliha Hepkon**  
**Associate Professor**  
**Istanbul Commerce University**  
**Turkey**

### **Abstract**

In the past few years, scholars began to define literature in a more extensive way. The definition expanded and began to embrace all types of written and audio visual forms. According to this very approach, components of communication, as well as ways of expression, are named as forms of literature. From this point of view, literature and communication are elements which intersect and interpenetrate. Particularly "adaptation" studies crystallize this tendency. Adaptation is an inter-textual form between written materials and visuality. Therefore adaptation studies provide us opportunities for searching these intersections. Furthermore, the notions of text and textuality can lead us to more common points. Text is an umbrella notion which indicates that the work (novel, film, photography...) consists of a process of meaning production. On the other hand, the communication scholar Walter Ong (2003), after analyzing communication from a techno-determinist point of view, comes to the conclusion that communication technologies transform our way of thinking, evaluating and sharing our thoughts. The crucial variables in this process are the technologies like; writing, the print and electronic communication devices. Departing from these points in this paper we ask the questions below:

- What are the main intersections between literature and communication?
- How can we use works of literature as a material for communication education?
- How can scholars utilize "creative writing" sessions to discover the creativity of their students?

Here we use creativity as the ability to produce new meanings. We also assume that this ability can be developed by practice and encouragement. In this paper our aim is to answer the questions above within the framework of the new notion of literature. We will use qualitative research methods. First of all we will realize a literature review to create a theoretical basis, then as a case study we will analyze the course named "Literature and communication" at the Communication Faculty of Istanbul Commerce University.

## Introduction

In the recent years, we observe that scholars and students are getting more and more interested in the communication field. But we also observe that most of the time, communication is thought to be about interpersonal communication, mass communication or the technology about it. The use of technology in everyday life makes this perception even more profound. The idea which leads us to write this paper is that we view communication and literature as converging areas. Literature consists of many ways of self-expression. Communication with all its diverse aspects similarly reflects meanings, emotions, knowledge, ideas and attitudes. It is obvious that both are connected with some sort of a) expression, b) meaning. As often underlined by the French film theorist Christian Metz, film is a kind of language which forms a meaningful text (Metz 2012: 65).

To start with, we will try to define the term, literature from a wide perspective. As Damrosch points out the term changed its meaning from "written by words" in the past years to a huge area filled with all written words, *orature* and even cinematographic images (Damrosch 2010: 9-10). So if we define literature embracing all forms of expression, then we make a new definition like: literature is a form of communication commonly written but not necessarily.

Once we had our new definition of literature, we began to estimate ways of integrating literature to our courses on communication education at the faculty. "Text" is an essential element in literature and communication studies. Analyzing texts of literature, cinema, television, magazines, newspapers and blogs gave us a wider perspective on meaning-production. On the other hand, to integrate, to engage students to our courses we usually use applications. Here concerning this subject about literature, we decided to give "creative writing" classes. This course named "Literature and Communication" was placed in the curriculum in 2011 in the Istanbul Commerce University, Communication Faculty and still (in 2015) it is a selective course for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students and three hours weekly.

Briefly, in this paper during the first part we will be discussing the notions of engagement and involvement and the "nature" of communication education in Turkey. In the second part we will try to analyze student involvement in a particular course mentioned above as "Literature and Communication". We will share our observations and students' responses to a questionnaire about the course to detail their participation during the lessons. Education is a mutual process, as Freire states (2014: 55). So we will be underlining the importance of the engagement in education throughout this paper. And as a conclusion we hope to create a discussion concerning student involvement to creative writing classes in Communication Faculties.

## **The Notions of "Student Engagement" and "Involvement"**

It is important to define the term engagement and try to discover educational ways on how to improve it. It is necessary to reveal the diverse aspects of this concept. Quave and Harper state that, "student engagement is simply characterized as participation in educationally effective practices both inside and outside the classroom, which lead to a range of measurable outcomes" (2015: 2). And it is also estimated that, the quality of education is directly linked with the students' engagement. Students should be able to shape and lead their educational environment (Pawson et al. 2009: 204). In a more general definition engagement is defined as, "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Trowler 2010: 7).

If we are looking for a holistic view of the notion we should consider interacting fields like; student feedback, student representation, student approaches to learning, institutional organization, learning spaces, architectural design, and learning development. Here we will limit our review with a narrow description of this notion. We should note that if we want to understand involvement in education, the student's point of view is necessary. University education is part of being an adult for youngsters.

The term engagement has more expansions than involvement or participation. It is related to feelings and sense making and being active in class. There are three major types of engagement:

- Behavioral engagement.  
Students who are behaviorally engaged would typically comply with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behavior.
- Emotional engagement.  
Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.
- Cognitive engagement.  
Cognitively engaged students would be invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge. Each of these dimensions can have both a "positive" and a "negative" pole, each of which represents a form of engagement, separated by a gulf of non-engagement (Trowler 2010: 5).

Student involvement is an equally important concept. Student involvement theory views the concept of students as active participants in their educational environment. This concept seeks to find out "How motivated the student is and how much time and energy the student devotes to the learning process." (Astin 1999: 522). Students who do not become socially integrated may or may not

suffer from persistence issues, depending on the individual. Therefore, failure to become involved in campus activities, organizations, and extracurricular activities, which promote involvement and integration of college life, can lead to higher chances of attrition for some students (Roberts and McNeese 2015: 3).

Another important concept is "active learning". It is defined as "anything that students do in the classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor's lecture" (Ruddock-McIntyre 1998: 56). Active learning shows that the mind is actively engaged in the lesson. Students are dynamic participants in their learning environment and they reflect on and monitor both the processes and the results of their learning. "Learning is the process of discovering our distinctive agency as a person and how this grows out and leads into the capacity to learn with others to create the contexts in which we live in and work. There is no solitary learning" (Ruddock-McIntyre 1998: 56). Lectures often involve passive learning methods which are usually out of the control of the student. We should also note that "active learning is more useful than passive learning, even though it may be initially more difficult" (Cropley 2008: 166). As a result, essential factors of active learning are student activity and engagement in the learning experience.

### **Communication Education Debate in Brief**

The use of technology and applied courses in education are crucial especially in the communication departments. We have to consider new technologies as important parameters in forming media content in the working practices of media professionals and the daily lives of ordinary people (Dursun 2013: 281). New media or digital media is now an essential part of communication education. Some scholars estimate that technology can transform education in different aspects (Depietro 2013: 1, Garcia-Morrell 2013: 125, Mihailidis 2005: 418, Sorensen 2001: 55, Yoon 2013: 197). The use of electronic devices as educational material, integrating digital media to class hours, realizing online classes are the most mentioned topics about the technology based education issue.

Eventually Kellner discusses similar issues in his article about critical pedagogy and arrives to the conclusion that "new technologies are altering every aspect of our society and we need to understand and make use of them both to understand and to transform our world" (Kellner 2015). We wish to add to these comments concepts of participation, engagement and involvement. Integrating new technologies is important but for engagement, students must create their own materials. So applications in courses should go beyond technology based classes. Creating content using new materials is far more crucial than technology itself.

In this part of our paper we will be discussing general traits of communication education in Turkey and the role of applied courses. In curricula of the communication departments in Turkey we generally notice that

there is a tendency of offering students applied courses and theoretical courses all together. In the Istanbul Commerce University we have approximately a percentage of 30-40% applied courses in a 4 years curriculum. In the Media and Communication Faculty we have:

**Compulsory courses (Applied)**

- Information Applications I and II.
- Camera techniques.
- Making Film and Management.
- Montage Techniques.
- Printing Techniques.
- Desktop Journalism.
- Producing and Direction for TV.
- Media and Social Policy.
- Photography.

**Elective Courses (Applied)**

- Creative Writing.
- Literature and Communication.
- Graphic Design.
- Documentary Film and Short Movie.
- Art Direction.
- Multimedia Design.
- Advertising Photography.
- Music Culture in Broadcasting.
- Internet Radio Broadcasting.
- Reporting for Television.
- Advertising Design.

**Case Study: "Literature and Communication" Course**

Communication as a field of inquiry intersects with diverse subjects of cultural life (Griffin 2005: 34). Literature is a huge source of content for communicational purposes. The elective course for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students of the communication faculty consists of three parts. For communication students telling stories and listening to them is crucial (Fulford 2014: 63-67).

1. In the first hour of the lesson instructor gives general information about literature and communication. Each week during a 12-14 week time (a semester) we discuss diverse issues about the intersection points of literature and communication. The main topics are:

- World literature, defining literature and creating a story line.
  - From *Orature* to literature: novels and characters.
  - Reading texts from different cultures: From Greece to India and creating a plot.
  - Adaptations: Novels adapted to films and TV serials.
  - Literature genres in general: Essay and essay writing.
  - Reading translations and writing travel essays.
  - Global readings: *Global* writers and examples.
  - Science-fiction, detective books, fantasy and fantastic literature: Creating a utopia or dystopia.
  - Literature Critics: Literature reviews, magazines and criticizing books.
  - Classical books and their meaning.
2. In the second hour of the weekly lesson, we read in the class with the students chosen texts from local and international writers. These texts may be parts from a novel, a short story, travel writing or an essay. After reading the text we discuss with the students about the writer, his/her style, the genre of the text and why we like it or not.
  3. The last part of the lesson is devoted to creative writing. Creative writing is "writing freely and to write down anything where the purpose is to express thoughts, feelings and emotions rather than to simply convey information" (Gümüř 2012: 12, Koçak 2013: 20). We choose a topic or starting point usually connected with the first parts of the lesson. We give the topic to students and give them 20-30 minutes time to write down something. After starting with the volunteers we read them aloud and discuss.

Students are more easily connected and integrated to class by reading their own writings. By responding and interacting with each other, students create a social environment in class (Beach-Anson 2004: 252).

As indicated above this is a practical course. During the lesson we observe that some students do not participate in the writing exercises. They usually have an excuse like, "I am tired", "I do not feel like doing it", "I cannot write", "I don't like to write", "I have no inspiration, no ideas to write", "I am not talented like the others".

We as instructors try to encourage them to write. But sometimes it is not possible to motivate the students. After 4 years of teaching this course, our observations and experiences show clearly that approximately 20-25% of the class participates in creative writing regularly and only 50% of this percentage fully completes the given tasks.

Some students change their attitude towards the lesson according to the topic. For example, "adaptation" is mostly a favorable topic but "Ancient Greek drama versus Indian Drama" is usually not. They seem to be more interested in connections of literature to media: for example, literature to mass media and social media. Therefore instead of abstract information about

literature they prefer concrete products of media like, TV serials, movies, songs and blogs.

To be able to learn students' involvement and engagement to this course we formed a question form. In this form we asked the students 5 questions which are:

1. What is the content of the Literature and Communication Course?
2. Which part of the course seems more useful to you?
3. What is creative writing? Can you describe?
4. Do you participate to the creative writing parts? Why, why not?
5. Do you think that these exercises help you with other courses? Why?

Twenty-one students, who participate in our course this semester (2014-2015) answered our question form. In order to understand student involvement we asked questions about essential elements of this course. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> questions were asked to comprehend their involvement in class.

#### *Understanding the Content of the Course*

The first three questions are about understanding the content and goal of the course. Most of them described the course as a whole of "subjects about communication and literature". Some added words like, "world literature, literary works, novels and stories, classical and modern literature, authors, culture and media, literary genres and creative writing".

The second question was about the different parts of the course. Most of the students (16 of 21) preferred the "creative writing" session. Some of the others liked the reading session (3 of 21) and the rest (2 students) preferred the literature review session. "I can show my creative abilities", "I like reading new things", "I contribute to the creative part and I feel more productive", "It is necessary to read and write in the communication department". "Reading books is essential for us. The course forces me to read and write. I like that".

The third question was about the description of "creative writing". We encountered different definitions. "Creative writing is to find striking subjects to write about", "Writing about the given subject", "Imagination and its reflection on writing", "To find and write original subjects", "It is about fictional texts", "It is where we express ourselves freely", "To express meaning", "Writing your own work without copying", "Writing texts", "It is a part of the course that lets us create our own texts".

#### *Participation to the Course*

The rest of the questions were about applications during the class. 18 of 21 students say that they participate to creative writing exercises. The reasons for participating were diverse: "It helps me improve myself", "I can express myself", "I like to listen to the writings of others'", "My imaginary improves and we learn the ways of expressing ourselves", "I participate because I like literature", "I enjoy creative writing. It makes us more creative in a way", "It is general culture and creation together. It helps us with other lessons too", "I

participate because it helps me imagine things", "Thinking and creating stories are essential for the mind. I like words and to play with them", "We usually do not write things. So this course forces us to write and express ourselves".

Creative writing is an essential part of this course. We believe that for the purposes of active learning, lecturers should encourage students to produce their own materials. There are different ways of teaching like, lecture, reading, audiovisual materials, demonstration, discussion and practice by doing. The more you practice the more you learn. So to be able to engage communication students to courses (with application or not) we need to create practicing possibilities.

### **Conclusions: Student Engagement for Active Learners**

The media sector seeks for professionals to fulfill the necessary positions. Media organizations want journalists, scriptwriters, presenters to be able to use the technology and also to create content. From this point of view the goal of the communication faculties are "to educate people who will have these necessary abilities and skills for the media sector" (Dursun 2013: 279). As Hardt states, "In fact, the significance of the telegraphs railroads, highways and rivers as means of transportation, and spread of schools and newspapers as institutional sources of knowledge and experience provide the historical background for a theoretical discourse about the place of communication in modern society" (Hardt 1992: 35).

From another perspective, media literacy scholars underline the process of message production to be a media-literate audience. According to these scholars media literacy is more than specialized abilities. Meaning production is an essential part of the concept (Potter 2005: 22). Media education in general should be an open process. The students should freely participate in classes. Depending on our observations in class, students who participate to creative writing exercises are more engaged to the course. We believe that, creating their own texts by the help of literature and creative writing exercises helps them to be a part of the faculty and communication world in general.

To sum up we can say that productive engagement in education is an important tool by which students develop an understanding about their friends, professors, and institutions that give them a sense of interconnection, and belonging, while at the same time offering rich opportunities for learning and development.

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