

**Becoming At-Risk: Transitioning into a Communications Classroom; a
Phenomenological Study**

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of high school students as they transitioned into the at-risk label of a Communications 11 student. This research focused on those students who were designated at-risk for non-diagnostic reasons. Four students were interviewed about their experiences and the transcriptions were confirmed by them to ensure authenticity. A composite description of these cases was created in order to gain an understanding of the intricacies of the experience as the students transitioned into the Communications 11 classroom. Furthermore, issues concerning how non at-risk students are assigned to a Communications 11 class, the experience of the average Communications 11 student, and the stigma associated with being a Communications 11 student were explored. The study discovered that the placement into a Communications class had implications for both the students' academic self-concept as well as their academic reputations with peers.

Keywords: Communications 11; At-Risk: Labeling; Academic Self-Concept; Peer Academic Reputation

Subject Terms: Phenomenology; Imaginative Education; Labeling; Academic Self-Concept; Peer Academic Reputation

Dedication

This study is dedicated to those who have the power to make decisions about the future of young people with the understanding: “*Between the idea and the reality, between the conception and the creation, falls the shadow*” (The Hollow Men, T.S. Eliot).

In addition, I dedicate this study to my students, whose honesty and input were greatly appreciated. And to my wife, whose patience and support made this study possible.

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Chapter 1: Why Communications Students and Why this Study?

The purview of this study was small and the aims were modest, interview four students, get, in their own words, a better sense of their experience, and use that understanding to improve my teaching. And yet the implications became somewhat larger. So we begin. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of a select group of British Columbia high school students as they moved from an academic, post-secondary geared English 10 into a basic skills centred English equivalency course called Communications 11. The participants in this study were four grade 11 students who had neither a specific learning designation nor a behavioural Individual Education Plan (IEP)¹ yet found themselves in Communications 11. My hope is that by more fully understanding the experiences of students as they transition into a Communications 11

¹ An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document for a BC student that describes program modifications and/or adaptations and services to be provided for students with special needs. It is a concise, usable, summary plan. It normalizes planning decisions; provides a record; tracks and reports on students' progress; and provides a means for a student and parent involvement. The school Case Manager coordinates the development and implementation of IEP. School staff, district staff, or staff from community may be involved. It is recommended that parents and/or guardians be part of the team. Where appropriate, students should also be involved in the discussions and decisions.

class it will shed some light on that transition and allow us to facilitate it in the most positive way possible for other students going through this experience. Furthermore, I hope that English 10 teachers, counselors, and administrators will consider these findings when making decisions whether to place a student in English 11 or Communications 11 in the future. In summary, this study hopes to shed light on this phenomenon in order to influence practice for ethical and pedagogical reasons.

so happy to

I remember walking into the grade 11 Communications class on the first day; I saw that half of the desks were empty. Attempting not to sound like the teacher from Ferris Buhler's Day Off, I began doing my attendance. 'Adams, Barns, Clingwall' I called out names in hopes that this was simply a small class. When I was done, over half of the class was absent. 'We heard that you were a new teacher so some people decided to skip' said one student pointing towards the window. Peering out I saw what looked like a varsity football team sitting under a large tree talking. 'Most of them are outside under the tree' continued the student. I called out the window for the students to come in, reluctantly they did.

Walking into the class, a 6'4", 250lb student stopped and stood in front of me and said, 'So you are the new teacher. Big deal.' and turned to the class laughing. I asked the student to take his seat. He responded, 'What if I don't?' How am I supposed to know, this is my first teaching

assignment, I thought. In the hopes that a confident voice would win, I told him 'This is a battle you simply cannot win.' To my surprise, with a little reluctance on his part, he smiled, turned, and sat down front-row-centre.

Over the year, I came to know this student who was in English 10 the previous year. He had difficulty all through school but had never been given a learning designation and at the end of grade 10, due to a failure to hand in assignments and an issue with truancy; he was placed in Communications 11. He was separated from his friends and he was now in, what he, and many of his friends, called, 'Stupid English.'

Understanding the Communications Class

In order to create clarity for those who are not closely tied to the teaching of high school students, I begin by offering some needed explanations. In this section, I will first explain why teachers, counselors, and administrators consider Communications 11 students to be at-risk. I will explain the difference between British Columbia Ministry of Education policy and actual practice in high schools concerning student placement in Communications classes. I will offer a contextual description of how I have come to understand Communications classes as well as identify some possible advantages and disadvantages of placing students in this course.

Communications 11 and 12 for Students at Risk

Communications 11 students are students who are considered at-risk, that is, at-risk of not graduating high school if they are not removed from English 11 and placed in a Communications 11 classroom. In order to better understand the purpose of Communications classes we will explore the differences between the English and Communications streams as outlined by the British Columbia Ministry of Education.

The B.C. Ministry of Education offers two English or English equivalency courses to their grade 11 students: English 11 and Communications 11. According to the Communications 11/12 Integrated Resource Package (IRP)², the language arts options available to students in grades 11 and 12 reflect the different language skills students choose to focus on as part of their career planning.

Communications 11 and 12 is intended to help students develop the language competency fundamental to many opportunities in life, including continued learning, employment, and social interaction. The curriculum provides students with opportunities to study a broad range of informational and literary works and to practice using language in written, oral, and visual forms for a variety of functions. The curriculum places special emphasis on ensuring that students graduate with strong basic language skills.

(<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/comm1112/comcont.htm>)

English 11 and 12 courses are for students who intend on attending post-secondary institutions after high school, while Communications 11 and 12 courses are for those students who intend on entering the workforce upon graduation. The IRPs state that English 11 and 12 focus on the expressive and functional purposes of language while Communications 11 and 12 focus on the essential language skills students need to

² The B.C. Communications 11/12 Integrated Resource Package (IRP) provides basic information Communications teachers require in order to implement the Communications 11 and 12 curriculums. The curriculum for Communications 11 and 12 is structured in terms of curriculum organizers. Each organizer consists of four columns that describe the provincially prescribed learning outcome statements, suggested instructional strategies for achieving the outcomes, suggested assessment strategies for determining how well students are achieving the outcomes, and provincially recommended resources.

function in daily life as well as in the workplace (No Author, 1998). In English 11 and 12, students are offered the opportunity to study literary and informational communications and mass media. This is achieved through the study of literature and activities that portray “language as a human system of communication-dynamic and evolving, but also systematic and governed by rules” (N.A., 1996, p.1). According to the English Language Arts 11 and 12 IRPs (1996), English 11 and 12 “prepare students for post secondary education and a broad range of career options” (p.2). Conversely, Communications 11 and 12 are intended to develop the language competency needed by students in order to facilitate continued learning, employment, and social interaction (N.A., 1998). The only Grade 12 course required for graduation is a choice between English 12, Communications 12, or Technical and Professional Communications 12³. Students enter communications classes because it is anticipated that they may not be successful in the more academically rigorous English stream. Thus, these students are considered at-risk of not graduating if a choice is not made by the student to be in Communications or if their English 10 teacher, counselor or administrator does not place them in it.

Continued on next page

The B.C. Ministry of Education (M.O.E.) policy states that students have the choice between Communications 11 and English 11 following English 10. In my experience, there appears to be a divide between the educational policy of the M.O.E. and the implementation of this policy by B.C. schools. What appears to be the practice in

³ Technical and Professional Communications 12 is an option available to students who successfully complete English 11. Communications 11 does not meet the prerequisite requirements of this course.

B.C. schools is that there are three levels to this choice. Level one is a *genuine choice* wherein students are offered the opportunity to choose either course. This type of choice is what is intended by the M.O.E. to be the practice of B.C. schools. The second level is a form of *structured choice*. A *structured choice* is where the choice between English 11 and Communications 11 is only offered to those students who score low in English 10 because of the expectation that students who do well would choose to be placed in English 11. This type of choice falls within a gray-area where it does not specifically go against the policy of the M.O.E. however it does not necessarily align with the intent either. The third level is the *absence of choice*. In my experience, there are a number of instances where students are informed by their teacher, counselor, or administrator that they have been placed into Communications 11. This practice goes against the policy of the M.O.E. and as such may be seen as problematic. An important point of clarification is that students who are successful in Communications 11 can take English 12, however this has not been the practice at the school where the study took place. In Addition, the M.O.E. document does not mention that the decision to be in Communications 11 might have implications for the student.

This Study in Context

Try to imagine you were a student. As you walk into school on the first day of Grade 11, you pick up your timetable from the office. Staring closely at the prescribed agenda for your next few months you see that you have been placed in a Communications 11 class. Remember, you did not choose Communications 11; you were placed in it without your knowledge or consent. You are in what some students call “Stupid English”; without even knowing it, you have been assigned an informal label, you have

become a “Comm Student” and in turn, you have become at-risk. The at-risk label you receive is because as a student in a Communications class you are considered to lack the skills needed to pass English 11 and subsequently English 12, which carries the potential of not graduating. What will you do? What can you do? What will this mean for your future? How do you feel about how other students might perceive you? What is it like to live this experience? These are the kinds of questions this study hopes to explore.

As a first year teacher, I was assigned to teach the Communications 11 and 12 classes. I did not know what to expect. I really had no idea what ‘Communications’ was, as in university, Communication courses had to do with Media studies. The impression I received from by my colleagues was that Communications 11 classes were not ‘like other classes’. One teacher described Communications 11 classes as being “a dumping ground” for students who were low performers and habitual skippers. Students in Communications classes, I was told, would test me continuously, try to push the boundaries, and exhibit challenging behaviors. Historically, at the school where I teach, Communications classes were assigned to the new teachers. When I began teaching there, I wondered if this practice was because it was easy to teach or if it was because no one else wanted to teach the students in these classes. Through the years, I discovered the latter to be true.

At the school where I teach, no teacher had taught Communications 11 and 12 for more than four years. To say I was hesitant about the course would be a significant understatement; I was scared. What had I gotten myself into? Was it worth the struggle to try to move these students to a higher place in learning? However, as I have continued to teach Communications 11 and 12 over the years, I find myself strongly connected to

these students. Many of the students in my Communications classes are those who are perpetually in trouble at the office, they are defiant of authority, and are low performing academically; but, in my experience, the students I have taught in Communications classes are also the most grateful, courteous, honest, and endearing students who I have had the pleasure to teach. I get more thank-yous at commencement from Communications students than from any other grade 12 courses I have taught. These students appear to demonstrate a true appreciation of the time that I have invested in their lives.

As a teacher of Communications 11 classes, I feel there is a stigma associated with being a Communications 11 student. For some students, Communications 11 was a foregone conclusion as they have been streamed due to their Individualized Education Plan⁴ (IEP) or Learning Disability⁵ (LD). For others it was a choice offered to them by their grade 10 English teacher, their counselor, or an administrator because they scored low in English 10; a choice, as previously stated, that appears to have a variety of levels.

Students in Communications 11 classes are presumed to be poor readers, to have poor written and verbal communication skills, and to lack a basic understanding of English grammar. The assumption is often made that their educational shortcomings have necessitated their placement into Communications 11. This is because if they were in English 11 there is a potential that they would be at-risk of failing. It is hoped that students who are in Communications are able to improve in the aforementioned areas and

⁴ An Individual Education Plan is a documented plan developed for a student to meet their educational needs and describes their individual goals, what adaptations and modifications are to be made for them, as well as measurements for tracking the student's achievement.

⁵ A Learning disability is a disorder that affects a student's ability to acquire, organise, retain, or use information. A learning disability is identified in students who otherwise demonstrate average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning.

“graduate with strong basic language skills” (N.A., 1998, p.9). There are problems with these assumptions. In my five years of experience as a Communications 11 and 12 teacher, I have noticed that many Communications 11 students do not fit with these assumptions. They are instead placed due to lack of attendance, an inability to hand in assignments or due to poor marks on in English 10.

I also find it troubling that students in Communications 11 classes ‘know’ they are considered “stupid.” I base this assumption on statements that I have heard students say, such as ‘we are only Communications students; we don’t matter.’ ‘The principal only listens to smart kids’. ‘There is nothing we can do!’ I struggle with the idea that students and teachers associate being a Communications 11 student with being a ‘behavior problem.’ I find teaching students who have acquired negative self-perceptions as learners and negative associations with school very difficult as these attitudes appear to act as barriers to their learning. I find the uphill battle exhausting for both the students and myself. Through understanding the experiences of these students, I hope I will be better able to help myself, as well as future Communications students, overcome what may be the real and perceived barriers they face as Communications 11 Students.

Advantages and disadvantages of Communications Classes

Communications classes offer students with disabilities or poor literacy skills the opportunity to graduate with a Dogwood Certificate (B.C. graduation certificate), an opportunity that may not be afforded to them if they were to stay in the English stream. Communications classes are seen by many as an essential part of school as they aid in the improvement of an at-risk student’s reading, writing and oral communication skills. This, coupled with curricular expectations that are less rigorous than in English classes,

creates a situation where students who may have had difficulty in the past tend to be successful.

A potential disadvantage of a student being placed in a Communications class is the relationship that research has found between a student's academic self-concept and their academic performance. Research has shown that academic self-concept can influence and be a predictor of academic achievement and performance (Ireson & Hallam, 2008, Gerardi, 2005, Marsh, Hau, & Kong. 2002, Helmke & Schrader, 2001, Pekrun, 2001, Marsh, Byrne, & Yeung. 1999). The placement of students into either the Communications or English stream is based on their perceived ability, and as such is a form of ability grouping. It is argued that when students are placed in ability groupings, the self-concept of students who are placed in low-ability groups become increasingly negative as they progress through school (Ireson & Hallam, 2008). "One consequence of low academic self-concept is that students have negative intentions towards learning more in the future" (Ireson & Hallam, 2008, p. 10). According to Schunk (2001), this doubting of their learning capabilities causes such students to participate less readily, avoid work, lack persistence when encountering difficulties, and demonstrate lower achievement. Research suggests that the implications of lower achievement go beyond an academic issue as "achievement feedback can be assumed to influence students' general sense of self-worth, thus affecting students' overall psychological health and personality development as well" (Pekrun, 2001, p. 13802).

Research has shown a connection between students' academic reputation among peers and their academic achievement. Guest et al. (2008) found that students' academic reputation among their peers "predicted changes over time in [their] academic self-

concept, teacher-rated effort, and scholastic grades” (p. 633). This research suggests the negative perception a student’s peers associate with a Communications class may be further detrimental to that student’s academic achievement.

As a teacher of Communications classes, I want to advocate for my students. I want the “choice” of Communications 11 to be offered to students based on their English 10 teacher’s, counselor’s, or administrator’s understanding of the short and long-term benefits to those students. I want to come to an understanding of what it is like to be a Communications student so I can help make better choices for future Communications students. I want to know if the stigma that appears to be associated with being placed in Communications 11 is legitimate. I want to know if the benefits of a student taking Communications 11 outweigh the downfalls of the at-risk label associated with the “Comm Student.” I also want to explore the effect it might have on their academic self-concept and their peer academic reputations. By researching the lived experiences of these students, our knowledge about them will deepen and enable myself as well as other educational professionals to understand more robustly what these students experience. It is expected that this research will lend valuable information to the conversation about the effects of student placement in Communications 11 classes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to explore the lived experience of students as they transition into a Communications 11 class, four areas of research need to be addressed: special education labels, the at-risk label, the role of academic self-concept and the role the perception that peers have of a student's academic ability plays in a student's academic achievement.

In my experience, within a Communications 11 classroom, it is not uncommon to have five or six designated or labeled students. The labels typically associated with students in Communications class are: regular LD (learning disability), severe LD, ADD (attention deficit disorder), and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder). Further, they may have an IEP (individualized education plan) and be on either a modified program⁶ or an adapted program⁷. Why do educational professionals use labels to identify students? Why is it that, for many, the use of a label is a contentious issue?

⁶ In a modified program, the learning outcomes are substantially different from the regular curricular expectations of a course and are specifically designed to meet the student's learning needs.

⁷ In an adapted program teaching and assessment strategies are altered to accommodate a student's individual learning needs that may include a variety of instructional strategies and assessment practices.

What does it mean to say that Communications 11 students are “at-risk”? The following is an unpacking of these questions.

What are Special Education Labels?

A label is commonly defined as a short word or phrase that is descriptive of a person or group. In schools, special education labels are identified using a diagnosis. These diagnoses are “underpinned by the scientific method which proceeds by observation, experiment and measurement” (McClimens, 2007, p. 261). Traditionally the process of diagnosis for LD, Kersting (2004) explains, involves a comparison between the I.Q. of the individual student measured against their academic achievement. The extent of the gap that is found between these two factors is what is used to determine if a learning disability exists. The comparison between I.Q. and achievement continues to be the method of identification of learning disabilities and the application of a learning designation by schools. The Special Education Services Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines created by the B.C. Ministry of Education (N.A., 2002) states:

Students with learning disabilities demonstrate at least average ability. On an individual assessment of cognitive ability or on a norm referenced achievement instrument that measures reading comprehension, written expression, or problem solving in mathematics, students will score at or above one standard deviation below the norm. Despite this average ability, students with learning disabilities often experience difficulties in the acquisition of basic academic skills and/or in school performance and are characterized by unexpected academic underachievement or achievement that is maintained only by unusually high levels of effort and support.

This document goes on to explain, “Students with learning disabilities demonstrate a significant weakness in one or more cognitive processes (perception, memory, attention,

receptive or expressive language abilities, and visual-spatial abilities) relative to overall intellectual functioning.” These “weaknesses” are assessed through norm-referenced assessment instruments. What constitutes a learning disability in schools is “a significant discrepancy between estimated learning potential and academic achievement” (N.A. 2002, p.1).

4.1.1.1. The Impact of Educational Labels

Sifting through the myriad of educational and psychological journals related to labeling and labeling theory, three potential repercussions of labeling emerge: the improvement of educational opportunities for the individual, the creation of misconceptions about the individual as well as roadblocks to their learning, or a combination of the two (Weisel & Tur-Kaspa, 2002; Kelly & Norwich, 2004). Based on research by Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1990), Weisel and Tur-Kaspa (2002) argue that those who label students see it as a way to communicate their strengths and weakness, to offer an explanation of ability or lack-there-of, to suggest interventions and whenever possible to provide foundations for research as well as funding. The acquisition of a label, it is often argued, leads to increased opportunities and resources not otherwise available to those without labels (Gillman, Hayman, & Swain, 2000). The addition of a label enables educational practitioners to identify the individual needs of a student in order to facilitate an appropriate intervention as well as support the student (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007; Layne, 2007). Research has shown that the successful diagnosis of a learning disability can lead to important improvements in the education of the child

(Layne, 2007). A label acts as a positive intervention strategy or way of helping the student, giving them extra help in terms of E.A. (educational assistant) support, a modified or adapted curriculum, reduced expectations, and more time to complete activities. These researchers assert that it is only when “a label does not lead to improved, or more appropriate and targeted educational interventions, [can] one legitimately question its value” (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007, p. 2).

According to Baum and Olenchak (2002), special education labels become problematic when they are misdiagnosed. A misdiagnosed label often worsens a child’s situation and contributes to their failure to be successful in the learning environment (Baum & Olenchak, 2002). This lack of success is attributed to an inability to meet the learning needs of the students as interventions are aimed towards an inappropriate treatment. A misdiagnosis is often seen in cases where individuals and families seek out an unnecessary diagnosis as the result of the mistaken belief that even an inappropriate label will offer interventions and supports that improve their child’s life experience and educational provision (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

Jussim et al. (1995) see how the application of a label to an individual or group, whether it is disadvantaged, at-risk, or whatever, influences how perceivers judge and evaluate the individual or group with the label. This study found that group labels acted to both positively and negatively bias the perception of individuals in a group (Jussim et al., 1995).

Now that it has been established that labels, although arguably educationally important, may also be detrimental, it is important to look beyond the positives and negatives of this educational reality and look closely at the labels themselves. Most

psychological and educational research revolves around the use of formal labels such as ADD, ADHD, LD and gifted (Baum & Olenchak, 2002). Others concentrate on labels such as EBD (emotional and behavioral disorders) (Bianco, 2005). What happens when the label is informal and it is so vaguely defined it appears to encompass a large array of problems? One such informal label is the at-risk label. Schonert-Reichl (2000), explains that the at-risk label is used as a means to identify a range of problems and issues “such as learning difficulties, poverty, social relationships, and family and school contexts” (p.3).

Discussion

Communications 11 students have the label of at-risk. This at-risk label can be credited to the assumption made by teachers, counselors and administrators that if the student is not removed from the English stream and placed in Communications they are at-risk of not graduating. However, in the larger community, this label carries with it a set of further assumptions. First adopted in the early 1980's, the at-risk label has become a fixture in educational circles (Ronda & Valencia, 1994). The notion of at-risk, according to Schonert-Reichl (2000), is described as “young people on a trajectory toward a myriad of problems that threaten their present and future adjustment” (p. 3). The adjustment Schonert-Reichl (2000) speaks of is the child's ability to adjust socially and emotionally within a given context. In schools, the label of “at-risk learner” generally refers to persons who have been identified because of low literacy attainment (O'Brian et al., 2007). Quoting a study by Richardson et al. (1986-1987), Placier (1991)

explains, “that most educational researchers identified at-risk students statistically, by correlating student characteristics with school failure or dropping out” (p. 2). It is estimated that between 15 to 30 percent of school aged children fall within the at-risk category (Schonert-Reichl, 2000).

Many researchers see the at-risk label as problematic because the assignment of vague categorical classifications, like at-risk, have the potential of placing students in special programs that fail to help them (O’Brian et al., 2007). Ronda and Valencia (1994) see “part of the problem with the notion of at-risk is that it tends to overlook the student so labeled, while drawing attention to the presumed shortcomings of the individual” (p. 3). Others see the conceptual framework of at-risk as problematic stating that it is overly simplistic and misleading, and inevitably leads to the marginalization of students rather than the improvement of the school experience (Te Riele, 2006). For others, being labeled at-risk poses the dilemma where, while it is necessary to identify students for the purpose of successful interventions, the labeling of problem populations tends to create stigma, self-fulfilling prophecies and inappropriate attention on certain individuals to the detriment of the real problem sources (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2000; Maimon, 1999).

It is apparent in a variety of studies that there is a stigma associated with being labelled at-risk (Wotherspoon, & Schissel, 2000; Maimon, 1999; Britt, 1995; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Akey, 2006). These studies explain that the emotional states of students act to promote or interfere with their ability to be academically successful. According to a study by Einsenberg and Schneider (2007)⁸ that looked at the perception of ADHD

⁸ This study used linear regressions to estimate independent associations between perceptions of academic abilities and parent reported ADHD diagnoses, controlling for scores on standardized reading and math

designated students by parents, teachers and the students themselves, the at-risk label lead to an overall negative perception by all parties of the student's academic abilities. Other studies have shown that students who were considered to be at-risk tended to alienate themselves from school activities as well these students had a significantly higher dropout rate than non-labelled students (Wotherspoon, & Schissel, 2000; Maimon, 1999; Britt, 1995; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Akey, 2006). Studying stigma consciousness and ethnicity of students in higher education, Pinel, Warner, and Chua (2005) found that stigmatized students "exhibited a tendency to perform poorly and to disengage psychologically from school" (p.497). The psychological disengagement, it was argued, served a self-protecting function for the stigmatized students (Pinel, Warner, & Chua, 2005). Reyna (2000) explains that students who are stigmatized as having low ability "have to constantly cope with the threatening implications of [this] stereotype-namely, low expectations and hopelessness" (p. 95).

Academic Self-Concept

What is further problematic is that a stigma can also affect a student's academic self-concept⁹ as well as their peer academic reputation¹⁰. A number of studies have found that a student's academic self-concept can influence and be a predictor of academic achievement and performance (Ireson, and Hallam, 2008, Gerardi, 2005, Marsh, Hau, and Kong, 2002, Helmke, and Schrader, 2001, Pekrun, 2001, Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung, 1999).

tests, assessments of externalizing behaviors, and other factors (Eisenberg & Schneider, 2007 p. 390)

⁹ Academic self-concept is the way in which an individual perceives their academic ability.

¹⁰ Peer academic reputation is the perception of an individual's academic abilities by others.

Research has shown that educators play an integral role in the development of a student's academic self-concept where "teacher expectations of student performance tend to pace academic advancements, since teachers treat those they expect to be academically successful differently than students they expect little [from]" (Gerardi, 2005. p. 295). Guay, Marsh, and Boivin's (2003) study of academic self-concept and academic achievement showed, "as children grow older, their academic self-concept responses became more reliable, stable, and more strongly correlated with academic achievement" (p.133). This stabilization of a student's academic self-concept as they age is problematic when a student's academic self-concept is low. Gerardi (2005) explains, "individuals interpret and judge their achievements and abilities in ways congruent with prior self-conceptions, actively seeking self-confirming feedback and resisting that which is inconsistent with past self-preconception" (p. 295). Research has shown that low academic self-concept causes a student to participate less readily, avoid work, lack persistence, and continue to demonstrate low achievement (Schunk, 2001). The self-fulfilling nature of low academic self-concept extends beyond academic achievements. Pekrun (2001) explains that the negative achievement feedback these students receive "can be assumed to influence students' general sense of self-worth, thus affecting students' overall psychological health and personality development" (p. 13802).

Peer Academic Reputation

Guest et al.'s (2008) study of the association of peer academic reputations with academic self-concept, effort and performance across the upper elementary grades found,

“children’s academic reputations among peers in the upper elementary grades predicted changes in children’s self-concept, effort, and performance” (p. 632). Gest, Domitrovich, and Welsh (2005) explain, “peer academic reputation may serve as an influential ‘generalized other’ in the development of children’s academic self-concepts and may contribute to the development of children’s academic engagement and skills” (p. 345). The insight that peers have about a student’s peer academic reputation may be “derive[d] from extended interactions as collaborators on academic projects, providers or recipients of academic help, or close observation of classmates’ work habits, perhaps taking into account interactions from both the current and past school years” (Gest, Domitrovich, and Welsh, 2005 p. 343). The studies showed evidence that the overall effect of a negative peer academic reputation is a lowering of a student’s academic self-concept that in turn tends to lower academic achievement. The Gest, Domitrovich and Welsh (2005) study found “that peer academic reputation helps to predict changes over a 1-year period in children’s teacher-rated academic effort and skills” (p. 344).

The application of a label, as previously addressed, is a contentious issue. On one hand, a label may act to help an individual by providing access to special considerations and services. On the other, it can act to stigmatize students, which research has shown to be a barrier to academic achievement. What is missing from the research is an examination of the experience of an individual entering the at-risk label of Communications student. What is it to live this experience? In addition, if a stigma does exist for a Communications 11 student, what is it like to become stigmatized?

Chapter 3: Phenomenological Research Methodology

To understand the essence of the experience as students transitioned from regular English to Communications 11 classes, an interviewed based phenomenological study was conducted. A phenomenological study, according to Creswell (1998), explores the structures of a human experience. This, he continues, is achieved by looking for the central underlying meaning of the experience; exploring both the outward appearance of the phenomenon and the inward consciousness based on the individuals' memory, images, and meaning. How does one experience becoming a Communications 11 student? How does a Communications 11 student feel they are perceived? What are the social and emotional implications of being a Communications 11 student? Alternatively, does it matter?

Within schools, educational decisions about student placement, whether it be in a specific course or program or with a specific teacher, tends to be based on demonstrated

academic success. As educators, we claim to have the best interests of the students at the forefront. However, at times, it would appear that our considerations do not take into account the student as a whole. Students are not placed based on if they will enjoy the class. Academic decisions are not made based on feelings. The primary goal of student placement is to improve academic success. As an educator of students who are placed into my Communications 11 class, I question, would educators make the same decisions for these students if it were understood what it was like to be a student in a Communications 11 class? This question has prompted the need to use a Qualitative Phenomenological Methodology of Study in order to explore the students' lived experiences as they make this transition.

Stake (1995) describes qualitative research as one that encourages the understanding of the “complex interrelationships among all that exists” (p. 37). “The dependant variables are experimentally rather than operationally defined. Situational conditions are not known in advance or controlled. Even independent variables are expected to develop in unexpected ways” (p. 41). Qualitative research, according to Creswell (2005), “emphasize[s] the importance of the participant’s view, stress[ing] the setting or context (e.g., a classroom) in which the participants expressed the views, and highlight[s] the meanings people personally held about educational issues” (pp. 42-43).

Within the realm of qualitative educational research a variety of methods are available. Creswell (1998) describes the five traditions of qualitative research as

grounded theory, ethnography, the case study, the biography, and phenomenology. The difference between the traditions is the focus of each (Creswell, 1998). “Grounded theory designs are systematic, qualitative procedures that researchers use to generate a general explanation that explains a process, action or interaction among people” (Creswell, 2005 p. 52). This mode of inquiry is intended to create a theory that explains, “at a broad conceptual level, a process, an action, or interaction about a substantive topic” (Creswell, 2005 p. 396). The theory that is generated through this type of study becomes a predictive model about the experience of individuals. Ethnography attempts to describe and interpret a cultural or social group or system’s shared behaviors, beliefs and language (Creswell, 1998). This mode of inquiry is conducted when the study of a group leads to a better understanding of the issues they face (Creswell, 2005). A case study examines a particular situation frozen in time through a detailed in depth data collection (Creswell, 1998). In a case study, the boundaries between the phenomena and the context are not clearly evident. This requires an all-encompassing approach relying on multiple sources of evidence that are triangulated to create an understanding of the situation being studied (Yin, 1994). A biography is a form of narrative research that focuses on the life of an individual and their experiences (Creswell 1998). Biographies are typically constructed from records and archives, however interviews and photographs are sometimes used (Creswell, 2005). Phenomenology attempts to understand the meaning of an experience about concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

Relating back to the purpose of this study, to understand the lived experience of a student as they transition into being labeled at-risk, the phenomenological approach was best suited for this research.

A phenomenological study explores the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Creswell, 1998). In simpler terms, it is the study of experiences and the way we put them together to create a worldview (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Phenomenology is rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German Mathematician, who wrote extensively addressing phenomenological philosophy beginning in 1913 until his retirement (Creswell, 1998). Phenomenological studies, according to Van Manen (1990), explain “the meaning embedded in lived experience” (p. 100). Creswell (1998) explains that phenomenological studies seek out the “essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (p. 52). Put simply, the aim is to study how human phenomena are experienced in the mind of the individual, how this experience relates to their actions and what meanings are constructed by individuals living the experience.

A modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, as described in Creswell (1998), was used to analyze data. This method begins with a description of my experience with the phenomena. This was to create an awareness of my own presuppositions about how a student enters into a Communications 11 class, how those students are perceived, as well as if they were given the choice would they choose to be

in English 11 or in Communications 11, for the purpose of epoche or bracketing. Epoche or bracketing, according to Creswell (1998), is the suspension of judgments about what the researcher perceives to be happening until it is founded on a more certain basis. This was achieved as I searched for my own understanding of the experience. The process of getting to know myself allowed me to reflect upon my experience with the phenomenon so that I could better understand the rationales for my preconceptions and biases and also allow for student understandings of the transition to be different from what I expect. A bracketing out of preconceptions was done to minimize their effect on the interviews. Prior to each interview, I reread my understanding of Communications 11 (see chapter 4) so that I would be conscious of my own biases in an attempt to minimize their influence on the interviews.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, for the purpose of ‘horizontalizing’, as well as for the creation of individual and composite textural descriptions (Cresswell, 1998). The process of horizontalization, according to Creswell (1998), is where all the statements about an experience are separated from the individual interviews and listed. These statements are separated from the interview to eliminate the contextual clues about who made the statement and what part of the experience it described. The purpose of horizontalization is to allow the researcher to eliminate his own bias and treat each statement with equal value.

From this newly created list, the statements were subsequently grouped into, what Creswell (1998) calls themes or ‘meaning units’. This grouping was achieved using van Manen’s (1990) detailed or line-by-line approach where I examined what each statement revealed about the phenomenon. This process included the reading, rereading,

evaluating, re-evaluating, comparing, and reflecting upon each statement. The statements were then clustered into the themes or meanings that emerged. These clusters brought about participants' pictures of the experience of entering the label of Communications student from: how they felt they entered this phenomena, how they categorised the typical Communications 11 student, how they felt they were perceived by others, the differences they saw between English 11 and Communications 11, and the choice they would make between English 11 and Communications 11 at the time of the interview.

From these meanings, a description of the experience of each individual was created. This experience, as I understood it, was presented to the students who participated in the study. They were offered the opportunity to give feedback on my interpretations and asked to eliminate any information they felt was not representative of their experiences or add any information they thought was missing. Once students were comfortable with the descriptions of their experiences, the clusters of meanings found in the experience of each individual student were combined. As a final step, a composite description was written from all the interviews where I explained the experience of students as they transitioned into Communications 11.

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A clarification needs to be made prior to explaining how candidates were chosen for this study. For students who have an IEP Communications 11 is a foregone conclusion. These students have been in adapted or modified classrooms from grades 8 through grade 10. The logical transition for these students is to continue along their

academic journey into Communications 11. For these students, this study would have been conducted much too late in their educational travels. My intent for this study was to focus on students for whom Communications 11 was not a foregone conclusion. Thus, it was essential that these students had neither a current nor a previous learning or behavioral designation and were in Communications 11 either by their own choice or due to a placement decision made by their previous year's teacher, counselor, or administrator.

Four Communications 11 students who at the time of the interviews were all 16 years old participated in this study. Three of the four students had attended the school where the study took place since grade 8 while the fourth student had moved away from the school in grade 9 and returned at the beginning of grade 11. One of the four participants was female which was approximately proportionate to the male to female ratio of that specific Communications 11 class. Two students came from single parent households and two from multi-parent households. Although diagnostic tests for learning disabilities had been done on all four students when they were in grade 8, none of them had an IEP, a behavioral designation, or been in a modified or adapted class.

#### Methodology

Moving beyond the who of the study we begin to ask the question of how? How was the lived experience of a student as they transition into a Communications 11 class uncovered? In-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted with four Communications 11 students. The interviews were conducted by me, their classroom teacher, in the

classroom at lunch, after school, or during the student's spare block. Since the purpose was to have students explain their experience as it was happening, it was important that the interviews were conducted within the first three months of the course. The interviews were emergent in nature to encourage students to discuss their individual experiences. This is not to say that there were no specific questions being asked, rather an emphasis was placed on what the student wanted to discuss about the experience rather than that of the researcher.

Six guiding questions were used during the interviews to spark discussion:

1. What does it mean to be a Communications student?
2. Why are you in a Communications Class?
3. Describe how you felt when you were told you would be in Communication 11?
4. Are Communications 11 students treated differently than other students? If so, how? Why? Give examples.
5. What do you plan on doing after high-school? Does being a Communications 11 student help you meet that goal?
6. If you were given the opportunity to change anything about your experience at school what would you change? Why?

All four interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and rechecked by the researcher. Following the transcription process, the interviews were coded using the original interview as a means to account for the tone the student used when speaking about the experience.

Researchers tend to believe that a study is done for the betterment of the lives or experience of the individuals being studied. Yet, at times, researchers forget that perhaps these individuals may not see their experience or lives as problematic. What happens when participating in a study creates or uncovers a previously unknown negative stigma? What happens when an experience, which at the beginning seemed positive, becomes negative? It is essential that when a phenomenon is brought into the consciousness of a student they be offered the tools that will help them deal with it. One item that was essential in dealing with the realization that these students are part of a phenomenon is earning the trust of the students. It was essential that a basis of trust was established with each interviewee in order for the student to feel supported as they deal with the phenomena. This trust also encourages students to move beyond self-protecting answers and allows the heart of the phenomena to be discussed.

The establishment of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee was accomplished using a two-step process. First, as their classroom teacher, I needed to establish an atmosphere where students felt trusted and respected in order to deliver the Communications 11 curriculum. It was for this reason that the teaching techniques used in the Communications 11 class were influenced by Kieran Egan's (2005) *Imaginative Approach to Teaching* and the work done by the Imaginative Education Research Group. In the two months leading up to the interviews, the curriculum for this course addressed the use of formal and informal labels, self-perception, empowerment, and ownership within the students' lives along with developing their literacy skills. To this end, the

Philosophic and Ironic Frameworks, as outlined in *An Imaginative Approach to teaching* (2005), were used.

Egan explains the Imaginative Teaching methodology in his books *The Imaginative Approach to Teaching* and *The Educated Mind*. It was through the use of the Philosophic Imaginative framework<sup>11</sup> that students were engaged in lessons that encouraged their participation in open dialogues about a variety of issues that Communications 11 students face. Further, these lessons offered the students tools they may have needed to deal with the stigma of being a Communications 11 student if one existed.

The imaginative approach to teaching and learning is a framework that can be used to deliver a curriculum that engages the minds of students. Egan (2005) states, “[o]ne crucial purpose of education is the incessant struggle against this trivializing of our lives” (p.212). Within the context of the Communications 11 class, the Imaginative Approach was used to fight against this trivialization in an attempt to engage disengaged students. The philosophic framework offers a methodology that encourages students to challenge their understandings of truth and reality, to see the world in scales of gray rather than merely black and white. Within my classroom, it was important that education was not a mere impartation of knowledge, rather it was a place where students were encouraged to test knowledge so they could better understand what they were learning and fit it into their understanding of the world. Further, it was important that

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<sup>11</sup> The Philosophic Imaginative framework focuses on the students’ ability to create connections between theories and reality as well as between themselves and the world. This framework focuses on the creation of generalizations in order to discover organizing principles as they try to make sense of their experiences and the world.

students felt empowered to become active participants in learning rather than spectators of it.

The basis of Egan's (1997) methodology is an understanding that three contrary foci pervade educational thinking about what schools ought to be. The first focus is that schools ought to be mechanisms of socialization where students learn how to exist within society. The second focus sees schools as dispensaries of knowledge where students are able to develop a critical sensibility. The third focus states that schools ought to develop the potential of all students where they learn how to learn and the teacher is the facilitator of this process (Egan, 1997). These three foci come into conflict as the normative process of socialization discourages the development of a student's critical sensibility, which in turn flies in the face of developing the individual (Egan, 1997). Overall, the three are incompatible.

As a response to these conflicts, Egan (1997, 2005) developed the imaginative approach to teaching that focuses on the development of the students' Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic, and Ironic understandings. The Imaginative Approach focuses on the development of the cognitive tools of: story, metaphor, binary opposites, rhyme, rhythm and pattern, jokes and humor, mental imagery, gossip, play, mystery, and the embryonic tools of literacy (Egan, 2005). In turn, each of these cognitive tools is affiliated with a particular way of knowing. Importantly, according to Egan (2005), the tools "tak[e] the engagement of students' imaginations as a central concern" (p. 6).

In Akey's words:

Student engagement can be defined as the level of participation and intrinsic interest that a student shows in school. Engagement in schoolwork involves both behaviors (such as persistence, effort, attention) and attitudes (such as motivation, positive learning values, enthusiasm, interest, and pride in success).



Thus, engaged students seek out activities, inside and outside the classroom, that lead to success or learning. They also display curiosity, a desire to know more and positive emotional responses to learning and school (2006, p.3).

According to Egan (2005), his Imaginative Approach offers a new way of looking at the problems associated with a lack of student engagement. Because a lack of student engagement is common to Communications 11 students, it was important to use a curriculum that would engage and empower students, and offer tools<sup>12</sup> to deal with a stigma if one were acquired.

Many teachers argue that the Imaginative Approach is a time consuming and onerous activity. The use of the imaginative framework requires thoughtful reflection by the teacher and a true understanding of what students are to learn. When a narrative is used in the Imaginative Approach, teachers are asked to create a story outlining the heroic qualities of the material to be taught. All of which become problematic when taking into consideration the time constraints of a complex curriculum. Egan (2005) is aware of these arguments and has suggested that the frameworks are mere tools to be used until the teacher becomes proficient in the application of this approach. He further argues that it is all worthwhile because the use of a narrative when teaching changes the context of the information, engaging the student's imagination, as they never know what to expect. In addition, by giving great human qualities to information, students are able to create emotional connections with the curriculum (Egan, 2005). In my experience, using the imaginative approach to teaching enables students to move beyond what they

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<sup>12</sup> The tools referred to in this section are not the cognitive tools of Imaginative Education, rather they are psychological coping tools addressed in the lessons outlined in Appendix A. These tools are intended to offer students the means by which to view and process information about themselves and others that enables them to have a positive self-concept.

consider to be mundane facts and grammatical lessons and instead find a renewed enthusiasm about learning.

Attached are two of the units taught during the first two months of the Communications 11 course (See Appendix A). The first unit dealt with students' self-perceptions. In this unit, students engaged in a variety of activities that required them to learn about themselves (i.e., their personality, how they perceived themselves, how they feel others perceived them, how they defined respect and responsibility, how stereotypes effected their self-perceptions and their perceptions of others). Classroom discussions were about the importance of positive self-perceptions. Students discussed strategies that encouraged them to see the opportunities their lives had to offer rather than life's struggles. The second unit was much more focused than the first. It dealt with the relativity of truth. This unit had students look at perceived truth and actual truth. Students discussed historic "truths" that had lost favor such as the earth being flat and the earth being the centre of the universe. This new understanding of the relativity of truth was related back to students' self-perceptions and their perceptions of others.

It was hoped that by using this methodology students would engage in discussions about their experiences as learners, they would seek-out the reasons they feel the way they do, and then discover ways in which they, individually as well as collectively, could deal with the implications of their experiences. Throughout this process of self-discovery, close monitoring of the students' self-perception was done through informal observations, group and individual conversations, and in-class guided journaling activities. The journaling activities, however, were used only to gauge each student's

progress in understanding how to deal with a stigma if one existed. This understanding would indicate that it was alright to move ahead with the research.

The second step in the trust building process was to build trust as a researcher. This process began by first asking students who met the criteria for the study, on an individual basis, to consider participating in the study. I provided the students with information about the purpose and goals of the study, what they as participants would be required to do, an explanation of the risks of the study, and an explanation of the potential benefits of the study to the development of new knowledge. I explained to the students that participation in the study was voluntary and that their participation or choice to not participate would in no-way affect their grades. In addition, I asked them to discuss this information with their parents/guardians before indicating if they would be participating. When a student chose to participate, I gave them the opportunity to set up an interview time that worked for them. Prior to beginning the interview, I explained to the students that if at any point prior, during, or after the interview they wanted to terminate their participation in the study they were allowed to do so and that any information collected to that point would be destroyed. I also asked the students if they or their parents/guardians required further explanation regarding the study. To encourage a continuation of this trust, students were asked to be co-researchers as they were offered the opportunity to review and edit the descriptions of their experiences.

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As with any study that the participants are students, it was important, that due diligence was taken to protect the identity of the students involved in the study. It was also important that participants in the study understood the purpose and scope of the study. To this end, signed consent to participate in this study was sought by both the students who participated as well as their guardian(s). The consent forms included information about the purpose and goals of the study, the risks to the participants, the potential benefits of the study to the development of new knowledge, the procedures that were to be followed and a summary of the study. Furthermore, both the participants and their guardians were encouraged to ask any questions about the scope and purpose of this study.

## **Chapter 4: Getting to Know the Self**

In order to accurately assess, interpret, and discuss the experience of students as they transition into a Communications 11 classroom, the researcher must first separate him/herself from the experience by identifying their presuppositions (Creswell, 1998). This process of getting to know myself allowed me to reflect on my experience with the phenomenon so that I could identify my preconceptions and attempt to minimize their effects on the study. Before each interview, I asked myself the same questions I intended to ask the Communications 11 students. How does one become a Communications 11 student? What does it mean to be a Communications 11 student? How are Communications 11 students perceived? If a negative perception exists, what effect does it have on the student's future life choices? In addition, if I were a Communications 11 student, would I prefer to be in English 11? Prior to each interview, I reread my responses to these questions so that I would be conscious of my preconceptions with the understanding that they were based on my personal experience and not that of the

students. Therefore, they may not be representative of their experience. The potential result of not creating this awareness was that my preconceptions about the experience might have influenced the sense I made of the students' discussions. It is important to remember that my interpretations are those of someone who has been immersed in Communications 11 as a teacher for several years. As such, there was a process of recognizing bias as seen against informed experience. For example, as may be apparent, I was concerned that the "at-risk" label has the potential, and at times does, stigmatize students in their own eyes as well as those of their teachers and peers. This sense was built on personal experience with regard to interactions with these students, overhearing comments, discussions with teachers, etc. However, my aim in these interviews was to be aware of this experienced based bias and to be thoughtful about allowing for the complexity of what it means to be a Communications 11 student to arise. Therefore, allowing for those voices to appear that may be different from my current interpretations as presented below. My responses to these questions have been italicized because they are not generic arguments but rather are my interpretations of what is occurring with this phenomenon.

*I believe one becomes a Communications 11 student through a series of events beginning far before grade 11. I believe that for some it began in kindergarten or grade 5 or 7 or maybe 9. I am not truly certain. What I believe to be true is that, for a number of the Communications 11 students, at one point on their educational journey, gaps in their knowledge were created that caused them to slow their progress in reading and writing. This may have caused them to fall behind other students in their age group. The lag*

*that these students experienced has lead to their enrolment in Communications 11. This is not to say that the lag was sufficient to warrant a learning designation rather, it caused students to score below 60% in English 10 necessitating their placement in Communications 11. I believe that the assessment practices used by many teachers to determine a student's academic performance might not reflect a student's academic ability. I believe that it is all too common for a student to go into Communications 11 because they are frequently truant, have difficulty with the art of handing things in, or have serious emotional and social issues that interfere with their schooling. I do not see the educational value of placing these types of students in Communications 11.*

*I believe that for some students their enrolment in Communications 11 was not their choice. Although theoretically a student has the right to choose which English or English equivalent course they would like to be in, the lag they experienced in their reading and writing skills combined with the professional judgment of their English 10 teachers and counselors, made the choice for them. As such, if I were a Communications 11 student I believe I would feel as though I was forced into it. Forced into it because I am separated from the mainstream and placed into, what I believe teachers and students see as a "lesser" English 11 course.*

The previous two paragraphs point to four presuppositions that I held directly related to the study about what a student may experience in a Communications classroom. The first presupposition was that the placement of some students into

Communications classes was due to their low literacy skills resulting in a mark below 60%. My second presupposition was that the assessment practices that lead to some students receiving a mark below 60% might not have been a reflection of their academic ability but rather a reflection of the student not handing in assignments due to truancy or social and emotional issues. The third presupposition was that many students did not have a choice between English and Communications and might have felt as though they were forced into it. My fourth presupposition was that I believed teachers and students saw Communications 11 as a lesser English 11 course, a view of which I questioned the educational value.

*I assume that if I were a Communications student I might have a low academic self-concept. If, year after year, I were to score in the lowest percentile of the class on activities, projects, and exams, I would feel as though I were stupid. I am uncertain if I would even attempt an assignment or a project if I expected that I would fail.*

*What perpetuates the potential negativity associated with this phenomenon is that the perception of the self is generally linked with the perception of others. This begs the question; how do I think others perceive Communications 11 students? I wonder if other students see Communications 11 students as having a poor academic reputation. I believe many students call Communications 11 "Stupid English." For me, to be in Stupid English would have an effect; I might see myself as being stupid.*

*Does being a Communications 11 student affect their future life choices? This question is much more difficult to answer. On one hand, I*



*believe that Communications classes offer students who have low literacy skills the opportunity to graduate with a Dogwood Certificate (B.C. Graduation). This offers them opportunities they may not have if they were to stay in English classes. On the other hand, I believe that if they want to pursue further education they will be required to upgrade their English courses. As a teacher, I see the value of and place an importance on a post-secondary education. I believe that being in a Communications class might close doors of opportunity for these students.*

These responses bring to the surface three more presuppositions I held about Communications 11. My fifth presupposition was that students in a Communications class might have had a low academic self-concept that may have caused the student to become disengaged from school. I also believed that students in a Communications class might have had a poor academic reputation. My final presupposition was that although Communications 11 offers students the opportunity to meet their graduation requirements, it might also limit their ability to pursue a post-secondary education.

*I conclude this section by asking, if I were a Communications 11 student, would I prefer Communications to English? To this I am torn. As a teacher, I see the opportunities that being in a Communications 11 class has to offer the students. This class will improve their literacy skills, they will learn valuable computer and business skills, and they will learn how to be effective presenters. I do not believe that my students are stupid. I do not see Communications 11 students as lesser students because they are in Communications. However, I am concerned that these students feel as*

*though they are. I do not know if a student would prefer Communications 11 to English 11.*

My purpose in answering these questions prior to the interviews was to discover my presuppositions about this phenomenon. Going into the interviews, I was conscious of these preconceptions and understood that they were based on my personal experience and that they might not be representative of that of the students. This was an important step in the interview process because the potential result of not creating this awareness was that my preconceptions, if not identified and kept in the forefront of my mind, might influence the sense I make of what the students' were discussing. Further, I wanted to allow those preconceptions to be found limited, lacking, or wrong if that was the case.

My answers to these questions demonstrate my personal need to understand this phenomenon more fully. What I do know for certain is that I truly enjoy teaching Communications classes. In my experience, Communications 11 students are quite intelligent. They demonstrate true adaptability. They are able to make inferences and connections well beyond their perceived ability. Although Communications 11 students challenge authority, I find that it is not to be disrespectful; it is to understand why they are being asked to do the things they are doing.

Regardless of how many years anyone teaches Communications, it is impossible to truly understand the experiences as the students do. Teachers see the world differently than students. We tend to plan much farther into the future than students do. We are in the business of interpretation, whether it be for level of understanding or for grades. It is for these reasons that prior to beginning the interview process I wrote about my presuppositions. I tried to understand how I would respond to the questions I was to pose

to the students. I felt it was important that I approach the interviews with my answers in mind so I could make a conscious effort to minimize the influence my presuppositions may have in the interviews. When asking questions, I was careful in the wording I chose in order to minimize their potential influence on the student's answers. I approached the interviews with the perspective that the experience of a Communications 11 student as they transition into a Communications 11 class was their own. From this perspective, I tried to ignore trends in other interviews and honor the experience of each individual. As a result, each interview took on a life of its own. As each student described his or her experience of transitioning into a Communications 11 class (the informal label), an interesting picture emerged. In Chapter 5, the picture of the Communications 11 student's experience will be unveiled piece by piece.

## **Chapter 5: Presentation of the Data**

The most important part of this study is the presentation of the lived experiences of the students. In the following, I provide a single-subject analysis of the experience, where I describe the experience of each individual student. Following the single-subject analysis, I will provide a consolidated description where I combine overlapping themes from the individual summaries in order to offer a description of some of the different layers and responses to this experience of the transition into Communications 11. In this study, I offered students the opportunity to give feedback about their experience by allowing them to add or omit any information from their interviews, and my interpretations thereof, that they felt was not accurate or that needed further explanation. All four students chose not to omit any information stating they were comfortable with the original descriptions and interpretations and felt that they were accurate. Each student also chose to offer additional information they thought was important to the study and this is indicated in the descriptions by being underlined. For the purposes of

confidentiality, the names of the students have been changed. I will call the students Student 1, Student 2, Student 3 and Student 4. In Appendix B transcripts of the full interviews are given.

#### Student 1's Experience with Procrastination

In September of his grade 11 year, Student 1 arrived at school only to discover he had been placed in Communications 11. Placed, according to Student 1, “[b]ecause they (meaning his vice-principal, English 10 teacher, and counselor) didn’t think I could do English 11. I didn’t know why,” Student 1 explained, “but my mark wasn’t good enough or something like that. Just ‘cause last year I didn’t bother to do it.” According to Student 1, not bothering meant that “it was easy, I was like I’ll do it later, and later rolled around and I was like whatever.” In simpler terms, he procrastinated<sup>13</sup>.

Student 1 described his English 10 experience saying, “[I]ast year we did a lot of grammar this and grammar that, read a story and pick out all the little problems with it. That’s just where I am not good at. I can write easy, fairly easy, most of it is good from what I think, reasonably logical, I guess, I don’t know.” The difficulty Student 1 experienced with grammar extended beyond the written language and was evident when he spoke. Student 1 acknowledged that one of reasons he was having trouble in school up until grade 11 was that he was not willing to put in the effort.

Student 1 saw Communications students as “Stupid...lazy. Not so much stupid is they can’t do anything, is stupid is they don’t want to. They like, just not willing to put in

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<sup>13</sup> Participants of each interview were offered the opportunity to add or omit any information from the interview that they felt would create a better understanding of the experience. All statements in the interviews are those that the students agree with.

the effort into a lot of stuff they do.” Student 1 went on to explain, “[t]hat is exactly what I think of myself from grades 1 through 10.” For Student 1, a lack of motivation was associated with the experience of becoming a Communications student. This appeared to be both the cause of him being placed into Communications 11 as well as how he described Communications students.

When Student 1 discovered that he was to be in Communications 11 he responded, “I didn’t care.” While making this statement the student’s body language and demeanor changed. Every other answer given by the student during the interview seemed to be well thought out. This quick, matter of fact, response appeared as though it had been rehearsed. There is a possibility that Student 1 might have been putting up a front. I came to question his response as a result of informal interactions that I had had as a teacher of this student in the classroom. This is not to say that Student 1 was unhappy that he was in Communications, in fact, there is significant evidence to the contrary. For example, when asked which course he would choose, either English or Communications, he stated, “I don’t know...I kinda like Comm., lots of essays, it’s all easy.” Later he stated that going into Communications class was “pretty much the same as going into every other class.” It is unclear why this discrepancy appeared to be occurring and it might have been a misinterpretation of the student’s tone and body language. In a follow up interview, where Student 1 read the description of the experience, he acknowledged that he did not like that he was initially placed in Communications 11. He then reiterated that he did enjoy the course.

Student 1 believed, “[s]ome of the English 11 kids perceive us differently. Like ‘cause they are sitting there they can pick out the comma that’s not supposed to be there

and then I'm sitting over here and I'm like writing it down they're like that's not supposed to be there and I'm like oh well thanks, they're like oh well it's ok you're Comm. you don't know that." Simplifying how he believed he was perceived as a Communications student, he stated, "[t]hey call us stupid...like don't understand it, don't get your own language." The frustration in his voice was evident while talking about how he believed he was perceived. Student 1, upon reading the description of his experience, stated, "I was surprised that you noticed I put up a front!" It was explained to the student that the tone he used while talking about how he felt he was perceived by other students appeared inconsistent with the aloofness he expressed when stating that he did not care what they thought. I explained to the student that I believed he did care. That the front he was putting up might be self-protecting. Student 1 agreed.

Student 1 planned to join the army when he graduated. He felt that this was sufficient motivation to, as he put it, "turn it around." He saw the value in the activities he participated in during Communications 11 classes. He saw Communications 11 in a positive light saying that there was less pressure in that class, a theme that ran throughout many of the interviews. Although, Student 1 might not have been aware that the imaginative education framework influenced many of the activities, he did explain that this class had "open[ed] my brain to different spectrums." The spectrums he referred to were the different ways of thinking about the world that were addressed as part of the Imaginative Education units. Student 1 was actively engaged in classroom discussions, which upon later discussion, was because he felt that the topics used in his Communications class were interesting. In the follow-up interview, Student 1 explained,

“I really enjoyed the Communications class and I did very good, if only I did that good through all of high school.”

What I gathered from the formal interviews as well as informal classroom interactions with Student 1 is that he enjoyed the class, yet the stigma associated with being a Communications student was troubling to him. In spite of this, Student 1 seemed to be highly motivated to improve himself so that he could get the career he wanted. The major regret that came about from the interviews was that it took him too long to realize that a change was needed. Confirming this assertion Student 1 stated, “Ya, that’s pretty much how I feel.”

Student 2’s English teacher

At the end of grade 10, Student 2’s English teacher “mentioned Comm and stuff” to him and his parents. He explained that it was his choice to go into Communications 11 qualifying “well, my mom agreed with it ‘cause I couldn’t really get good marks in the other one (meaning if he was to choose English 11).” Student 2 felt that English 10 was a good experience for him. “My teacher last year was like, she’d mark on anything...like she’d give you marks for like all your stuff. So she was like a really easy marker. So I didn’t, I think I got like 60% or something.” He did acknowledge that he had some difficulties in English 10 stating that he had trouble “organiz[ing] it and like how to start like paragraphs and stuff and how to start an essay.” This was consistent with what was discovered as I worked with Student 2 throughout the course. I would however, include



that coming into Communications 11 his reading comprehension, spelling and understanding of basic grammar were equally low.

Student 2 explained that marks “like 60%” in English 10 were not the norm for him, they were usually much lower. He stated, “But other than that year, all other years were not even close to that.” Student 2 felt that his poor marks were because “I didn’t try hard enough or I just didn’t know what I was doing.” In Student 2’s experience “once [I] miss[ed] a couple of assignments it just kinda [went] downhill from there... Then like [I] g[ot] a different attitude about it and struggle[d] so much more.” When referring to the assignments he had done in past he stated, “I couldn’t get interested in [it], like I tried and stuff...[it was] harder”. Based on my experience as his Communications teacher, I noticed that as the Communications 11 course progressed Student 2’s reading level improved dramatically. Student 2 attributed this to silent reading where he read five novels in two months. He explained that prior to grade 11 he had only read two books from beginning to end. Student 2 later explained that “this has changed [for me], now I am more motivated and I try and catch-up. I think it’s a maturity thing.”

Student 2 expected that Communications 11 would be “less work” than English 11. Student 2 believed that “[b]asically that’s what like everyone thinks. It’s kinda laid back. But like it’s still, I don’t know. It’s like not like I thought like you still do a lot of work, just different types of work.” He stated that some students are in Communications 11 because “they are having a really hard time in English 10.” As a Communications 11 student, he admitted that he “might mess around a bit...do [my] work most of the time and slack off some times like doodle on a piece of paper or something.” He believed that others saw Communications 11 as “a good English class, a respectable one.” He stated,

“I think so, like [English 11 students] still look at you and think ohhh woohoo (you’re not very smart), I mean you are still going to school and like getting it done so it’s good.”

For Student 2, it appeared that being in Communications demanded some respect.

Student 2 appeared to believe that although he was not in English 11 and might be seen as not very smart, he deserved respect because at least he was smart enough to be in school. Prior to entering into the Communications class, Student 2 believed that although “[English 11] might teach you a little bit more details. [Communications 11 would] give [him] like the basics that [I] need to have for communicating.” He thought that English students probably saw Communications students as “slackers” and explained, “they don’t really know ‘cause they’re not in class.” When asked to respond to what he thought English 11 students believed about Communications he stated, “I don’t really care.” He later stated, “some might think a lot less of Comm and like some might think of it as a really good class, I don’t know.” Student 2 appeared to be genuinely indifferent to what others thought of Communications 11.

Student 2 felt that Communications 11 was worthwhile for him stating “when I get older, I gonna like, when I get high up in a company I’ll have to write letters to other companies. I don’t want to look like an idiot when writing it.” He believed that although English “might teach you a little bit more details...Comm....gives you like the basics that you need to have for communicating.” Student 2 felt that Communications 11 was a lot less pressure than the English courses he had taken in the past. Student 2 plans to become an electrician and sees Communications as a good fit for him.

From the formal interviews as well as the informal interactions in the classroom, Student 2 appeared to have felt no effects of a stigma associated with a Communications

11 classroom. When asked to confirm my interpretation of his experience, Student 2 reinforced that he believed, “people think Comm students are less smart.” He stated that it was important to add because “I only really hang around Comm students, most of my friends are in Comm., so I guess that’s why I didn’t think about it before.” Overall, he seemed to be enjoying school this year and appeared focused on his goals. “I learned a lot in Comm this year. In the past I’d like forget English, but I understand it better, the materials, and I remember what we did in class.”

#### Student 3: Communication

At the end of grade 10, Student 3 met with her counselor who suggested that she take Communications 11. Student 3 explained, “[s]he just said to take the easy classes for grade 11 so grade 12 will go by a little easier.” She said that it was “‘cause I had a struggle with normal English and Social studies.” Explaining the issues she faced, Student 3 said, “[t] was a struggle. I kept failing and it was really hard for me to do it, kept, keep up...It was a struggle through last year. Just ‘cause of all the stuff that went on with me through out, like at home and stuff.” Student 3 relayed that for her “it’s hard to concentrate on school where there’s lots going on at home especially if you are in a more challenged class<sup>14</sup>.” Taking on part of the responsibility for her being in Communications 11, she explained, “last year I was doing so bad, I skipped every day. Sometime I just didn’t go...every...all day and I just hated school.” Student 3’s apparent disassociation from school and her truancy appeared to have been the result of difficulties

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<sup>14</sup> Challenged class, according to Student 3, means difficult or academically challenging class.

she was having at home. A complexity to this was introduced as Student 3 explained, “I feel more comfortable in a Comm class because English [was] really hard for me.” She openly expressed feelings of inadequacy as an English 9 and 10 student as compared to Communications 11 stating “[in Communications] I don’t have a lot more smarter people around me to kinda be like oh wait you don’t get it. And it sucks when everyone else is writing away and you’re just like what do I do with this?” Student 3 later stated that this feeling was common for her during both English 9 and 10. These statements suggested that perhaps a negative academic self-concept might have played a role in her disassociation with school and truancy as well. Student 3 felt that because “[she] ha[d] a really hard time learning...it’s a really good thing [to] have a Comm Class.” Student 3 stated that she had a lot of difficulty with memorization stating, “I used to study and it’s, it’s nothing. It really doesn’t help me...If it’s there, it’s there, if it’s not, it’s not.”

Prior to entering Communications 11, Student 3 thought, “it would be like just a normal, easier class like essentials math and stuff. It [would be] just easier, at a slower pace, and it [would] kinda start from the beginning all over and [go] slowly to the end.” When I asked Student 3 how she felt about Communications 11 she stated, “I think it’s a lot easier than English...I feel more comfortable in Comm class because English is really hard for me.” Student 3 saw Communications 11 as “a good thing...it keeps you on track ‘cause I am not doing too bad in class. So it’s a lot easier for me.” Student 3 explained, “English is such a serious subject, right? Like you have to do it and it’s just there’s so much pressure in a normal English class. And in Comm it’s more in a laid back and it’s at your pace that you can do.” Student 3 expressed that she felt that Communications

was occasionally difficult but felt that it was a good experience for her. With confidence and pride, she exclaimed, “I am really into school this year.”

When describing Communications students, Student 3 stated they were “[c]hallenged. Challenged with school. You can tell that the kids in this class are kinda trouble makers right?... Within English class it’s the more not troubled kids.” She quickly clarified “I wouldn’t say that I am troubled, I got put in this class for a reason.” Student 3 believed that others saw Communications 11 “[a]s just a stupider English.” Yet like other students, she stated, “I don’t care what they say.” She believed that she, like many others in Communications 11 class, have learning difficulties. For her, the difficulties she experienced were something that “[she] [couldn’t] really do anything about.” Expressing her frustration she explained, “like I want to be more smart than I am but I’m just...I’m not...no matter how hard you try...you just the way you are.” This being said, what I discovered working with her is that the difficulties she was experiencing were the result of gaps that existed in her understanding of basic grammar and how to organize and write essays. What was apparent was that a feeling of helplessness appeared to emerge as Student 3 spoke of her learning.

It appeared that Student 3 believed that her decision to take Communications 11 was the logical choice. It is unclear if this can be attributed to how the counselor structured the conversation with her or if the fact her older sister had been in Communications had an influence or if it was a combination of these and other factors. Although she did choose to take Communications, she appeared to be bothered that this choice caused her to be grouped with students that she found to be immature. What became apparent from the interview was that Student 3 strongly identified herself as

having learning difficulties that, in her mind, necessitated her choice to be in Communications 11. It appeared that, although she knew of some differences between Communications 11 and English 11 when Student 3 initially chose Communications 11, she was unaware of a stigma that might have been associated with being a student in a Communications class. In the follow-up interview, Student 3 stated, “It really bothers me that people see me as *less intelligent* just because I am in Comm, even some teachers treat you like you’re stupid.” It appeared that at some point during the transition into Communications 11 Student 3 became aware of a stigma; however she continually asserted during the interview that she liked Communications class and that it was the correct choice for her.

#### Student 4's Experience

The manner by which Student 4 entered into Communications 11 was different from that of his fellow students. For him, Communications 11 “was forced upon me.” “I didn’t fail English”, he explained, “but I didn’t pass it.” To clarify, Student 4’s English 10 mark was just over 50%. The not failing, but not passing meant that although he had the 50% required to advance to English 11, his English 10 teacher decided to place him in Communications 11. This placement appeared to be troublesome to Student 4 who stated, “[w]ell, he (the English 10 teacher) said I handed in all my work but I managed to fail somehow. I don’t understand how you can fail if all your work is handed in.” Student 4 attributed his placement into Communications 11 to a lack of consequences in previous classes stating, “I need a teacher...that’s strict.” According to Student 4, some

of his past teachers “didn’t care what [he] did.” He explained, “I need people saying if you don’t do this then you’re going to fail. And then I will do it.” He willingly admits that the major educational difficulty he faced was because, as he put it, “I procrastinate.”

When describing Communications students, Student 4 stated, “a Communications student is probably a person who doesn’t really get grammar or like being able to write properly. So they are going into Communications 11 or 12 to get the help they need to write that...to write better paragraphs and get their punctuation up.” In Student 4’s comparison between English and Communications, he stated that in Communications “instead of sitting in class and just like copying down notes on how to do grammar properly we get to like do like full paragraph essays and write stories and stuff.” Student 4 sees his experience as a Communications 11 student as a positive one stating that he was now doing “way better” in school. Student 4 believed that it was “[p]robably ‘cause I’m being challenged more and I have actually more limits to what I can do instead of goofing around.” He also attributed his improvements in school to the “different style of learning” he was experiencing stating, “It [was] a better style of learning actually.” Communications 11 was still not easy for Student 4 who found “some parts are really challenging, I have to get help.” He explained that it was not always difficult saying “I mean like half the time it’s like ok I can do this.” Student 4 compared his Communications 11 class to his Math Essentials by stating “in like Communications...ya...that helps more because they’re challenging you more in Communications than Math. It’s...[Math] makes you feel dumb in a way.” This feeling of dumbness according to Student 4 was due to the decreased workload expressing, “you look at their work and it’s like half a page long questions and our questions are like a

sentence long.” Student 4 saw this difference in the expectations of students based on perceived ability to be unfair. Echoing the other interviewees, Student 4 stated that given the choice between English or Communications he would choose Communications. He believed that Communications 11 would give him the tools he needed to be able to achieve his goal of becoming an RCMP officer.

When I asked if he felt there was a difference between an English 11 student and a Communications 11 student, Student 4 stated, “No. But they’ll think there’s a difference. They’ll think they’re smarter than Comm students, but they’re not.” Student 4 explained, “They (English 11 students) will be like ohh you’re in the retard class and they’ll say stupid things like that.” Student 4 dismissed these statements stating, “But then people that are in Comm can do better writing and they can do grammar more properly than people in like English 11.” Regardless of how he perceived others saw Communications students, he stated that he did not believe that being in Communications class was a negative experience.

In Student 4’s experience, “most teachers favour other students.” He asserted that he believed teachers of his other courses have different expectations for Communications students and that those expectations favored the “smart kids.” One example he gave was when “someone’s like late to class they’ll get in trouble, but if another person’s late they will just laugh and be like ok just sit down.” Student 4 appeared irritated as he made these statements. It appears that this irritation might have stemmed from his view that the inconsistencies he saw in the treatment of himself as a Communications student was unfair.



What appeared to be evident from the interview was that Student 4 was aware of a stigma prior to his placement in Communications class. It appeared that the stigma of Communications was real to him and might have been the cause of the apparent frustration in his voice as he spoke about how he perceived others saw him as a Communications student. Student 4 also expressed anger towards others in the Communications classroom stating, “I don’t care for basically any of them.” He also appeared to be angry about being treated differently than other students in his other classes. In the follow up interview, he thought it was important to add, “I expect better of myself, I should have been in English.” “Comm was the only class that I liked last semester. It was because I didn’t feel stupid because of the assignments and that we were treated like we’re not stupid.”

#### Results of the Interview Experience

For some students at least, the transition into the at-risk label is not an easy one. As I previously mentioned, each interview took on a life of its own. For each student, the experience of entering into a Communications class ranged from a natural transition like in any other class to difficulty accepting that they were “forced into it.” Although there were many differences found between the interviews, there were just as many similarities. In this section, I will offer a composite description of the experience of transitioning into the informal label of the Communications 11 student. The intent of this composite description is not to offer a predictive model about the experience, rather it is a grouping of ideas that were derived from the research. The groupings that will be

discussed are: how students believe one becomes a Communications 11 student, what students believe an average Communications 11 student looks like, and the stigma experienced by Communications 11 students. In the end, it is expected that this grouping of ideas will offer a clearer picture of the experience so that the understanding provided will allow teachers, counselors, and parents to make better decisions with regard to their particular students.

### How do students become a Communications 11 student?

Let us begin by looking at how the participants of this study came into the experience that we call Communications 11. For this, it is important to understand that these students experienced one of two types of transitions. The first was a transition that involved a choice on behalf of the student. The second transition was where the perception of choice was absent which appeared to cause the student to feel forced into Communications 11. In the following, we will look at both types of transitions.

The first type of transition was when the students were given the choice of taking either Communications 11 or English 11. For one student, it appeared that their counselor might have influenced their choice. In a conversation with the counselor, it was suggested that she “take the easy classes for grade 11 so grade 12 will go by a little easier.” The student went on to explain that it was “‘cause I had a struggle with normal English and normal Social Studies.” Another student stated that it was his choice, qualifying “...my mom agreed with it ‘cause I like couldn’t really get good marks in [English Class].” When asked why he was unable to get the good marks he stated, “I

didn't try hard enough, or I just didn't know what I was doing." It came out later in the interview that his English 10 teacher suggested that Communications 11 was a good option for him. This type of transition into a Communications 11 class appeared to be a fairly easy one for the students. Both students who chose to be in Communications 11 appeared to be either unaware or only minimally aware of the stigma associated with Communications 11. It appeared that they became aware of the stigma after entering Communications 11. Although both of these students felt that they did have a choice, it is important to note that at the school where the study took place only students who were performing low in English 10 were offered the choice. What I am suggesting here is that there might not have been an actual choice for these students rather, it might have been the perception of a choice and their choosing of Communications 11 might have been the result of the carefully crafted conversation by their teachers and/or counselors. Regardless, it appears that even the perception of choice seemed, potentially, to ease the transition.

The second type of transition was when the students were not given the choice between English 11 and Communications 11 or as one student explained, it was forced upon them. According to one student, it was a choice made by their vice principal in conjunction with their counselor. He explained that it was "because they didn't think I could do English 11." In addition, he stated, "I don't know why, but my mark wasn't good enough or something like that. Just 'cause last year I didn't bother to do it." He also explained, "I didn't find out that I was going to be in Comm until I was at the school. In the library, thinkin' that I didn't even have a timetable. So at that point I was like, ahh ohh, go to class." A second student explained the experience in a similar way. When

asked why he was in Communications 11 he stated, “It was forced upon me... Well, I didn’t fail English, but I didn’t pass it. So, it was kinda like half and half... so [my English 10 teacher and my counselor] just said ok well he doesn’t get it so we will put him in Comm.” When asked to clarify how someone cannot fail but not pass either he explained, “Well, he (his English 10 Teacher) said I handed in all my work but, I managed to fail somehow. I don’t understand how you can fail if your work’s all handed in.” For the first student, the transition into Communications was taken as if it were like going into any other class. For the second student, this transition left him with feelings of frustration and anger towards those who placed him in Communications 11.

By looking at how one becomes a Communications 11 student, a crucial part of the experience of these students is unveiled: the lead up. The choice that was offered to two of the four participants of the study, regardless if it might have been the careful constructing of a conversation to influence that choice, contributed to their view that Communications was the logical option for them given their academic abilities. There was no choice for the remaining two students; Communications 11 was chosen for them by a teacher, a counselor, or an administrator. This second type of transition had a varied effect where one student was easily able to accept his placement in Communications while the second student appeared frustrated and angry about his placement.

There are two possible implications of not involving students in the decision-making process. First, although teachers, counselors and administrators may perceive that their decision to place a student is in the student’s best interest, this placement decision might also act to cause the student’s stigmatization or lead to resentment on the part of the student. This stigmatization might be the result of the student feeling forced

into a category by their teachers. The second implication is that in this study when students were placed in Communications 11, they appeared to have difficulty coming to terms with the phenomenon and initially appeared to fight against it. What appears to be evident from this study is that student choice rather than placement has the potential to ease the transition.

### The At-Risk or Incurious Student

During the interview process, the students were asked to describe the typical or average Communications 11 student. The students came up with three answers: those who prefer less academic pressure, those who are less academically adept, and those who are stupid. In the following, we will look at all three answers along with their implications.

The assertion that Communications 11 students are those who prefer less academic pressure was described by one student as, “Ahh, I don’t know. They are all just kinda in here ‘cause it’s like less like work. So they are kinda like...I don’t know. Easier going.” “Umm, ahh. I don’t know, it’s kinda. Do your work most of the time and slack off some times like doodle on a piece of paper or something.” What seems to be clear from this description is that the idea of being “easier going” is in actuality a description of being lazy. However, seeing oneself as “easier going” may be a much more palatable pill to swallow than to be seen as lazy. These statements made by the student imply that for some being in a Communications 11 class was not so much a question of ability as rather a question of motivation.

Seeing students as those who were less academically adept was described by one student, “Hmmm, Communications student...a Communications student is probably a person who doesn’t really get grammar, or like being able to write properly so they are going into Communications 11 or 12 to get the help they need to write that...to write better paragraphs and get their punctuation up.” This suggests that if the student were more proficient in the implementation of grammar and punctuation they would not be in this course.

Viewing a typical Communications 11 student as stupid was described by one student who said, “Well, not so much stupid is they can’t do anything, is stupid is they don’t want to. They like, just not willing to put an effort into a lot of stuff that they do. Because I am sure most of the kids if they sat down and they were like alright, grade 7, I can do this and started over from like the beginning they could, they could get it good, but they’re just like naa, throw it away, don’t need it.” “They don’t think they need anything to get to where they want to go and I don’t even know if they really know where they want to go or if they are serious at all about what they say.” The assertion that Communications 11 students are stupid and lazy not because they are unable but rather because they were unwilling brings us back to the question: was their placement into Communications actually a question of motivation rather than ability?

What became increasingly evident from the experiences of these students was that there appeared to be two forces at work. The first was that Communications 11 students generally displayed difficulties in the area of academic adeptness. The second was that Communications 11 students generally lacked motivation. What is unclear is if a lack of

motivation resulted in difficulties in academics or if difficulties in academics resulted in a lack of motivation.

To explore this question further let us look at how each participant described themselves as students. The descriptions came, not from the direct question of how they described themselves as a student rather, from how they described their experiences as a learner.

One student explained his experience in Grade 10 stating, “Last year we did a lot of grammar this and grammar that, read a story and pick out all the little problems with it. That’s just where I am not good at, I can write easy fairly easy, most of it is good from what I think, reasonably logical. I guess, I don’t know. But I can’t read through and be like puuuuh that comma is not supposed to be there. Ah that word is not supposed to have a hyphen.” For this student, a difficulty with grammar appeared to have led to his lack of motivation. For him it was not that he didn’t want to improve, it was that improving his grammar skills was extremely difficult.

“I[t] was a struggle.” explained a second student. “I kept failing and it was really hard for me to do it, kept, keep up. But now this year, ‘cause I am doing a lot better in school, because I think I’m in the B.C. First Nations [course] and Comm. So, it’s a lot easier for me to do. It was a struggle though last year. Just ‘cause of all the stuff that went on with me throughout, like at home and stuff.” Later this same student explained, “...it’s hard to concentrate on school when there’s lots going on at home especially if you are in a more challenged class and just, I don’t know, some kids just have a harder times doing things.” These statements lead us back to the notion that her academic inability appeared to have led to a lack of motivation that resulted from her life circumstance.

Another student explained that they were in Communications 11 “Probably, because I need a teacher...I think...that’s strict. ‘cause you have teachers like, ya the socials teacher that left, he basically didn’t care what we did. He’d like...write a whole bunch of notes...and you’d have to do work that you don’t even know how to do, and he says if you don’t do it who cares. Like I need people saying if you don’t do this then you’re going to fail. And then I will do it.” For this student, the success he felt he was having was “Probably ‘cause I’m being challenged more, and I have actually more limits to what I can do instead of goofing around.” This student furthers the notion that their academic inability led to a lack of motivation however, this was taken one-step further as the student shifted blame away from himself and believed that it was a problem with the teacher.

The difficulties expressed by the students in the areas of home life, not feeling challenged by school, their disengagement from school, and the difficulty they were having with grammar combined to create what appear to be significant barriers for these students. It can be argued that these barriers might be explanations used by the students to shift responsibility away from themselves. The advantage for the students in shifting the responsibility of their placement into Communications class is that it would allow them to rationalize their placement in Communications 11. This attempt at rationalization might be attributed to the stigma felt by the participants of this study. So, what did it feel like to be these students? What was the stigma experienced by these students?



## What Should Be Evident at This Point is That There Was Some Version of a Negative Stigma Felt by Students 1, 3 and 4.

What should be evident at this point is that there was some version of a negative stigma felt by Students 1, 3 and 4. It was only Student 2 who did not appear to be affected by the stigma. This is not to say that Communications 11 students did not enjoy Communications 11 classes rather, that the label of Comm student (a label used by Communications 11 students, students not in Communications 11, and teachers), came with a stigma. At the same time that these students labeled others as Comm students, they seemed to have found ways in which the “stigma” of being a Communications 11 student might not have applied to them. In this section, we will look at both the stigma of Communications 11 as well as the ways in which students appeared to have attempted to distance themselves from it.

The stigma associated with Communications 11 is best understood by looking at the statements the students heard others making about them. According to the participants, other students called Communications 11 students “slackers.” They were told that they were “in the retard class” by their peers. Other students “call us stupid...like [we] don’t understand it, don’t get [our] own language.” Communications students were “challenged. Challenged with school. You can tell that the kids in this class are kinda trouble makers right?” Communications students felt that “most teachers favor other students.” I believe that these statements would not be easy to live with. However, when talking about these statements made by other students each participant ended with the statement “I don’t really care.” When the students were asked to confirm or change how I had interpreted their experience, three of the four participants stated that

their original statement was inaccurate; that in actuality they did care how they were perceived.

Looking back at each interview, all four students explained that their low attainment in English 10 lead to their transition into Communications 11. There were a variety of reasons for the students' low attainment ranging from difficulties they were having at home, to a lack of motivation, to a teacher who was unclear about expectations and was not strict enough. Although there was evidence that these claims hold some truth, they might also have been rationalizations used by the participants of this study to separate themselves from the stigma that they appeared to have been experiencing. In either case, it appears that the stigma of Communications 11 was not merely visible or invisible; it was on a continuum that was dependant on how the individual came to be in Communications 11 combined with how they interpreted the perceptions of their peers, their teachers, their counselors, as well as themselves.

Now that the experience of students as they transitioned into Communications 11, an informal label, is better understood, what ought to be done? The focus of the next section is to offer a better understanding of this phenomenon by: revisiting the stigma associated with Communications 11 classes, looking at the roles peer academic reputation and academic self-concept appeared to have played in the students' lives, explaining the educational implications of the study, outlining some limitations of the study, and offering a personal reflection on the study.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of four students as they transitioned into Communications 11. This study focused on students who had neither a current nor a previous learning or behavioral designation and were in Communications 11 either by their own choice or due to a placement decision made by their previous year's teacher, counselor, or administrator. It is important to reinforce that for the participants of this study, Communications 11 was not a foregone conclusion based on a clinical diagnosis of a learning disability or an IEP. In chapter 5, the presentation of the data section, the experience of each participant was described to create an understanding of the experience at the individual level. The participants acted as co-researchers by being given the opportunity to add or omit any information that they felt was either not representative of their experience or created a better understanding of their experience. From these individual experiences, themes

emerged and these themes were discussed in the section titled Consolidation of the Experience.

In the following, I revisit the stigma that three of the four participants associated with their placement in Communications 11. I examine the roles peer academic reputation and academic self-concept appear to have played in the creation and maintenance of the stigma associated with Communications 11. I will then discuss some educational implications of the study, outline some limitations of the study, and offer a personal reflection on the study.

### Stigma: Communications 11 Revisited

Three of the four participants in this study seemed to experience a negative stigma that resulted from their enrollment and on-going participation in a Communications class. What was apparent about the stigma was that it was not simply visible or invisible; it was on a continuum that was dependant on how the individual came to be in Communications 11 combined with who their direct peer group appeared to be and with how they interpreted the perceptions of their peers, teachers, counselors as well as themselves. For the participants who were involved in the decision to be in Communications 11, the stigma appeared to have only a minimal or no effect at all. When no choice was offered to the participant, the stigma of Communications 11 had a greater effect on the student. What was especially intriguing was how different the experiences were for each participant as they explained their choice or placement into Communications 11. Students not only accredited their placement into Communications 11 to poor grades, but

to the difficulties they were having at home, their lack of motivation, and the inability of their previous teachers to be clear and strict. In the broader context of the school, each participant believed that their peers saw Communications 11 students as ones who lacked motivation and exhibited challenging behaviors. The participants in this study agreed that these generalizations might have been accurate about other students in the Communications 11 class however, all but one participant felt they were not accurate characterizations of themselves.

Further, experiencing the transition into Communications 11 was a very complex process. The participants appeared to have felt as though they were in a netherworld of sorts between shifting perceptions. The participants who seemed to have been affected by the stigma of Communications appeared to be grasping at ways to make sense of themselves as they experienced a newly acquired peer perception, that of being considered “stupid.”

### Peer Academic Reputation

One recurring theme that emerged from the experiences of the participants was that students in the Communications 11 class appeared to have a negative peer academic reputation. This theme materialized in two ways: through the explicit statements they reported hearing from their peers and through their perception of how they were being treated by their peers and teachers.

All of the participants provided examples of, at times, painful statements that suggested a negative peer academic reputation. One participant explained, “[t]hey call us

stupid...like don't understand it, don't get your own language." A second participant stated, "[English 11 students] still look at you and think ohhh woohoo (you're not very smart)". These overlapping statements suggested that other students believed Communications classes were for students who were less intelligent than themselves.

I find it troubling that English 11 students state explicitly that Communications 11 students are stupid. In my experience as a teacher, students are unlikely to create generalized interpretations about a class or students in a class on their own. It is unclear when, where, and why students began seeing Communications class as "stupid English." What was also troubling was the idea that the ability to speak a language is correlated to a person's ability to meet the academic expectations of an English or Communications course. This unfounded perception suggests that students in a Communications class lack the basic English language skills that one would expect of any native speaker. Statements of this nature have the potential of devaluing a student's abilities. In addition, they can act to perpetuate negative generalizations, suggesting that being in a Communications class warrants a poor academic reputation. A reputation, as the participants experiences suggested, that might not be an accurate representation of why they were in a Communications class. Furthermore, research suggests there is cause for concern in this entrenching of an academic reputation since students on the receiving end of that negative reputation begin to "meet" those lowered expectations. In doing so, the negative reputation becomes all the more difficult for them and potentially carries extended long-term effects on the student's self-awareness, efficacy, and future educational opportunities.

The second way that students appeared to have experienced negative peer academic reputations went beyond the explicit statements of their peers and extended into their perceptions of how they had been treated by other students and their teachers. One participant expressed, “It really bothers me that people see me as *less intelligent* just because I am in Comm even some teachers treat you like you’re stupid.” Continuing along these lines, a second participant explained that teachers have different expectations for Communications students and that these expectations favor the “smart kids.” These statements strongly suggest that the negative peer academic reputations of these students were not solely attributed to the words and actions of other students, rather that teachers were equally complicit in the negative reputation as they differed in the treatment and expectations of Communications students. This realization is troubling because the experiences of these students bring into question the professionalism of some of their teachers. It appears that the students’ right to be treated in an unbiased manner, where they are offered the same opportunities, treatment, and consequences as all other students, might not have been occurring in the case of those labeled as Communications Students.

The statements of one student brought to light the possibility that the negative academic perception of Communications students might extend beyond the classroom and be imbedded within the education system itself. This is evident in Student 3s statement, “[s]he (the school counselor) just said to take the easy classes for grade 11 so grade 12 will go by a little easier.” In the interview, Student 3 also compared Communications class to “normal English.” The statements made by this student’s counselor suggest that Communications classes are “easier” and that it is abnormal in

comparison to “normal English” classes. These statements cause me to question where these ideas are rooted. Could it be that the idea that Communications classes are easier and abnormal as compared to English classes might be the perception given by the B.C. Ministry of Education? Possible evidence of this is in the marking rubrics of the Communications 12 and English 12 composition sections of the British Columbia Provincial Exam. To score 5 out of 6 on the Communications 12 provincial exam composition section:

This **effective** response is generally well developed; however, it may contain one area of minor weakness. The writing is purposeful and the development logical. Supporting details are well chosen. The writer takes some risks, but the results may be uneven. Sentences are controlled and varied; subordination is generally effective. Vocabulary is appropriate, but expression may be awkward. Mechanical errors do not interfere with comprehension.

As compared to 5 out of 6 on the English 12 composition section:

The five paper is **proficient**. The composition displays some manipulation of language to achieve a desired effect and exhibits a clear sense of voice and of audience. Content is thoughtful and interesting. Vocabulary and sentence structure are varied and serve the writer’s purpose successfully. Errors may be present, but are not distracting.

An English student who receives a 5 out of 6 uses “[v]ocabulary and sentence structure [that] are varied and serve the writer’s purpose successfully” (N.A., 2006). A Communications student who receives this same mark uses “[v]ocabulary [that] is appropriate, but expression may be awkward” (N.A., 2006). How can one ignore these differences? If a course sees a proficient paper as one where the student’s written expression is awkward, what does that expectation suggest about the course? It appears as though the expectations laid out by the M.O.E. expect less of Communications students and as such, might contribute to the idea that it is a lesser course.



It appears that the rhetoric of the Communications 11 IRP's, that place special emphasis on ensuring that students graduate with strong basic language skills, does not align with the expectations of the composition section of the provincial exam. What is troubling is that this misalignment might have contributed to the negative academic reputation that the participants of this study associated with being a Communications student. What if these students were to believe that the educational system they are a part of expected less of them than of English students? Might they not feel that the stigma they associated with being in a Communications class reached beyond the class or the school? If this were to be the case, is there not the potential that this could be detrimental to the students self-concept as well?

#### Academic Self-Concept

The second recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was that at least three of the participants had negative academic self-concepts. This negative academic self-concept was evidenced in how the participants expressed the variety of difficulties they had in English 10. One participant stated, “[I]ast year we did a lot of grammar this and grammar that, read a story and pick out all the little problems with it. That’s just where I am not good at.” Another explained, “I feel more comfortable in a Comm class because English is really hard for me.” This participant openly expressed feelings of inadequacy as an English 9 and 10 student as compared to Communications 11 stating, “[in Communications] I don’t have a lot more smarter people around me to kinda be like

oh wait you don't get it. And it sucks when everyone else is writing away and you're just like what do I do with this?"

What appeared to be apparent from the interviews was that although the academic self-concepts of each participant as they entered into the class were low, each student showed evidence that their academic self-concepts were in a process of change. This was seen in how the participants talked about their previous school experiences as compared to their experience in the Communications class. For Student 1, it was expressed in the follow-up interview where he explained, "I really enjoyed the Communications class and I did very good, if only I did that good through all of high school." In the interview, Student 2 explained, "I learned a lot in Comm this year. In the past I'd like forget English, but I understand it better, the materials, and I remember what we did in class." Student 3 saw Communications 11 class as, "a good thing...it keeps you on track 'cause I am not doing too bad in class. So it's a lot easier for me." With confidence and pride, she exclaimed, "I am really into school this year." For Student 4, the change in academic self-concept became evident in his statement that he believed that in Communications 11 class you experience "a different style of learning. It's a better style of learning actually." He found, "some parts are really challenging, I have to get help. I mean like half the time it's like ok I can do this." The statements of these students suggested that their placement in the Communications class, over time, appeared to have helped improve their academic self-concepts; at least within the context of the Communications class. Further studies would need to be done to determine if the improvements that were noted were temporary or long lasting and if they were subject specific or if they extended into other courses.

### Discussion: Why I Chose to Write

By understanding the lived experiences of the participants of this study as they transitioned into a Communications 11 class, it is hoped that English 10 teachers, counselors, and administrators will reflect on these experiences as they make decisions about the future placement of others. The placement decision becomes increasingly important as one takes into account the potential stigma and its influence on academic self-concept that may be felt by the students as they transition into the Communications 11 class. Further, when participants in this study expressed that it was their choice to go into the Communications class they appeared to be less affected by a stigma than for those who were placed into it. It is particularly important for students to have this choice when considering the role that research suggests academic self-concept appears to play in a student's academic achievement.

From the experiences of each participant, it appears that a low academic self-concept was common. Participants commented on the difficulties they had in the areas of reading, writing, and comprehension. The participants appeared to compare their abilities with others in the class as well as with their peers in English 11, expressing feelings of helplessness and frustration with their academic abilities. Further, the low academic self-concepts of the participants might have resulted in their low academic achievement. This low achievement necessitated the student's English 10 teacher, counselor, or administrator suggesting Communications 11 as an option, or directly placing the student in Communications 11.

The finding that the participants felt as though they were considered to be "stupid" by their peers, a label they also assigned to some of their classmates, can be seen

as evidence of a negative academic reputation among peers that is associated with Communications students. Studies in the area of peer academic reputation have shown that a negative perception of an individual's academic ability by their peers tends to be detrimental to the student's self-concept and their future academic achievement.

This study introduced a complexity about the Communications 11 course the participants were part of. Although the participants received a negative peer academic reputation by being in Communications 11, their academic self-concepts appeared to have shown slight improvements over time due to their placement in the Communications class. It appears that the success each participant expressed they were experiencing in Communications 11 might have attributed to these improvements; however more research needs to be done to confirm this. This being said, it is difficult to determine if the improvements in the students' academic self-concepts were subject specific. As a result, more research would need to be done to determine if this improvement moved across all subject areas for these students. It is also unclear if the stigma and negative peer academic reputation attributed to being in a Communications class outweighed the success felt by the students and the resulting improvements in their academic self-concepts.

Regarding Communications 11, this study emphasizes the need for careful consideration about the climate of the classroom. The participants of this study expressed that having clear expectations and consequences in their Communications 11 class aided them in becoming successful. This realization brings to light that the participants felt that part of the reason for their previous low academic achievement was because little was expected of them. This coincides with the research done on students' academic self-

concept where Gerardi (2005) explains, “teacher expectations of student performance tends to pace academic advancements, since teachers treat those they expect to be academically successful differently than students they expect little” (p. 295). This argument illustrates the importance of creating expectations of student academic performance that encourage students to be academically successful. Such expectations appear to have a trickledown effect, first improving the student’s academic self-concept and in turn improving their motivation and engagement. In a Communications classroom, the curriculum ought to be both challenging and engaging in order to fight against the negative perception of the course. The participants of this study indicated that the positive atmosphere that was created in their class, where they were talked to like “equals,” helped them to feel involved in learning and respected as individuals.

This study implemented units that were structured using the Imaginative Education Frameworks (Egan et al.) to encourage students to deal with a stigma that they might have been experiencing. The content of these units offered all of the students of that class the opportunity to become empowered to improve their academic self-perception. Participants in this study reacted positively to the I. E. strategies stating, “It opened my brain to new spectrums” and “it’s a better kind of learning.” It was demonstrated throughout the course that these students appeared to be enjoying the class expressing that it was in fact their favorite class. What is difficult to determine is what played a larger role their enjoyment: the I.E. units, the different expectations of the course, their feeling that they were treated as equals, the personality of the teacher, or if it was a combination of these factors. In any case, it is essential that the teachers of

Communications 11 classes explore options that are engaging and empowering to motivate their students in learning.

The findings of this study highlight several areas in which educators must pay careful attention. First, teachers, counselors, and administrators must consider their potential involvement in the development of the stigma associated with Communications 11. A stigma that appears to have been influenced by the inconsistency students saw between the treatment of themselves as Communications students and the treatment of others. Second, the assessment practices that lead to the placement of a student in Communications 11 must be a reflection of the students' academic ability rather than due to truancy and missed assignments. Third, the decision to place a student into a Communications Class must be the result of a collaborative conversation involving the student, the parent/guardian, the teacher and the counselor. This conversation should empower the student to choose either Communications 11 or English 11. Finally, educators must consider the potential impact of the specific language they use when talking about Communications 11. Using phrases such as "an easier version" of English and "normal English" carry the implication that Communications is a lesser version of English and is abnormal in comparison.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

It is important to identify that this study is limited to four Communications 11 students who have no learning or behavioral designation and were in Communications 11 either by choice or through placement by their English 10 teacher, their counselor, or an

administrator. The study did not address the role that gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, geographic location, or school culture might have played in the experiencing of this phenomenon. As such, more research ought to be conducted to address these issues.

This study is further limited by the reality that the policies associated with the placement of students and the implementation of these policies, in my experience, is quite different. As was previously discussed, the B.C. Ministry of Education states that all students have the choice of either Communications 11 or English 11 as their language arts equivalency course. However, in practice the choice ranges from genuine choice to structured choice, to no choice at all. It is possible that in other schools and districts only genuine choice is offered. If this is the case, the findings of this study are limited to schools where structured choice and no choice are offered.

A third limitation is found in the limited vocabulary of the participants. This might have made it difficult for them to articulate their thoughts, interpretations, and feelings about the phenomenon they were experiencing. It was for this reason that they were asked to act as co-researchers by reviewing my interpretations of their experiences where they could add any information they felt was needed to better understand their experience or omit any information they felt was unrepresentative. This provided the participants an opportunity to clarify the meanings behind some of the statements they made during the interviews as well as reinforce themes that appeared to have emerged.

A final limitation is the role of teacher-as-researcher. When the teacher of the students is also the researcher of the phenomenon, there is the potential that the students involved in the study could look to offer information that they would consider to be pleasing to the teacher. This is commonly referred to as the “halo-effect.” As a result,

the information given might not have been an accurate reflection of the phenomenon. This possibility was weighed against the potential ramifications of a negative stigma if one were to be brought into the consciousness of the participants. It was also considered that the Communications 11 teacher-as-researcher would possess practical knowledge about the participants and the course that a researcher would lack. A final consideration was that if a stigma were brought into the consciousness of the participants, the teacher-as-researcher would be in a position to offer extra support to help the participants deal with the stigma. It was determined that the teacher-as-researcher role was in the best interest of the students who participated in this study.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study has reinforced my belief in the importance of classroom structures that support student learning by offering clear expectations, deadlines, and consistency. It appeared that the participants in this study needed and wanted these structures. As one student explained, “I need people saying if you don’t do this then you’re going to fail. And then I will do it.”

This study has brought an assumed stigma to light. Originally, I assumed that the stigma of feeling or being seen as *stupid* was associated with Communications 11 classes. Now, I understand that the stigma is not felt by all students in the same way; that the stigma appears to be on a continuum that is dependent on how the individual comes to be in Communications 11 combined with how they interpret the perceptions of their peers, teachers, counselors, as well as themselves. Although the participants of this study



acknowledged that they felt as though Communications 11 students were seen as stupid, they all tended to offer reasons (home, motivation, etc.) that would suggest they were finding ways of not seeing themselves as such. Taking the experience of these students into consideration, I now place an emphasis on creating units such as those in appendix A. These units act to offer students ways in which they are able to deal with the stigma of Communications 11 and actively attempt to eliminate the creation of a stigma in the process.

Through this study, I have become much more aware of the importance of giving students a choice between Communications 11 and English 11. It appears evident that the impact of placement is significantly greater than the impact of choice. Therefore, I am better able to advocate for future students to be offered the choice between Communications 11 and English 11.

Finally, during this study I have become much more aware of the impact that a label can have on a student's academic self-concept as well as their peer academic reputation. I have become increasingly aware of the potential stigma that might be created by calling a course an easier version of something. Further, I have become purposeful in using language that encourages students to see Communications as different from English 11 instead of easier than English 11. I now explain that in Communications 11 students will not only explore grammar, stories and poetry, they will learn how to effectively use forms of business and technical communications as well as visual designs. I explain that the knowledge students will receive in Communications 11 will be immediately applicable to their lives.

This study has truly been a journey for me. By looking at how these individual students experienced this phenomenon, I feel much more aware of what I can do in easing their transition into Communications 11. I feel as though I better understand how to help the Communications 11 students in my class deal with a stigma if one exists for them. I feel I have a better understanding of the role teachers, counsellors, administrators, and I have played, and the role we ought to play, in the lives of students as they transition into the informal label of the Communications 11 student.

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## **Appendix A**

The following are two lessons created using the Imaginative Education framework used in the Communications 11 class.

| <h1 style="margin: 0;">Philosophic Framework</h1> <p style="margin: 0;">Topic: Self-Perception</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                             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| <p>What great organizing or causal principles can be used to explain the topic? What gives the importance for around this topic an importance far beyond their own particulars?</p> <p>Who am I? Why am I here? What do I believe about myself? What do others think about me? What type of learner am I? What are my greatest strengths? What are my weaknesses? What can I get out of school?</p> <p>Who we are as individuals can be seen in two ways, the first is that we are born into an existence where external forces are enacted upon us and we are formed by these forces into who we are. The second is that we are who we are not because the external forces have forced a life upon us, rather we are formed by the choices we make as we react to these forces</p> <p>When we come to grips with our own understanding of why we are who we are we are better able to enact changes</p> | <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">Close observation</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Seeking and applying general schemes</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Tracing implications</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>What features of the world pose the problem to be investigated and explained? What information about them best reveals the organizing power of general schemes?</p> <p>C. S. Lewis writes: "Between the idea and reality is the shadow" Our self-perception is the shadow that obscures our ability to see ourselves as others see us as well as who we truly are. When the perception is negative we limit our participation in academic, social, and recreational activities, we become distant distracted, and discouraged as we face life</p> <p>On the other hand, when our perception in positive we become increasingly more involved in all areas of our life.</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>How can general schemes be developed, applied and tested within the unit? What features of these schemes make them particularly interesting, useful, or significant?</p> <p>To enable us to define our self-perception as either positive or negative we need to examine what we believe to be true about ourselves and of the world around us.</p> <p>Some questions we will ask are:<br/>                     How do we define Responsibility?<br/>                     How do we define Respect? How do we define ourselves as students?<br/>                     What type of friend am I?<br/>                     What type of son, daughter, brother, sister am I?<br/>                     What type of citizen am I?<br/>                     How do I respond to conflict?<br/>                     How to I respond to authority figures?<br/>                     What's my personality type?<br/>                     What effect does my personality type have on your learning?<br/>                     My ability to make friends?<br/>                     My job?</p> </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <p>What does this way of thinking imply about the nature of the world and our relationship with it?</p> <p>Is my self-perception positive or negative? What have I forgone because of my self-perception? What would be different about my life if I had an increasingly positive/negative self-perception? 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| Deepening Understanding                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Conclusion: Theory Made Visible                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Assessment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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| <p><b>Introducing anomalies</b></p> <p>What problems confront the general schemes developed so far? How might they be dealt with?</p> <p>1. What is the role of fear in our self-perception?</p> <p>"38 people who saw a murder and didn't call police" Martin Gansberg</p> <p>2. What is the role of graffiti in our self-perception?</p> <p>"A Hanging" George Orwell</p> <p>3. How do stereotypes affect our self-perception?</p> <p>"Talking to Americans" CBC-TV from This Hour Has 22 Minutes</p> | <p><b>Alternative schemes</b></p> <p>What other general schemes have been or might be advanced to challenge the reigning narrative?</p> <p>What occurs when we think too highly about ourselves?</p> | <p>How can the overall development of understanding in this unit be summarized and represented?</p> <p>How we perceive ourselves as individuals acts as either a barrier or a gateway to opportunities. The ability to see ourselves in a positive light enables us to move beyond the limitations negativity sets for us.</p> | <p>How can we know whether the content has been learned and understood, whether students have developed a theory or general idea, elaborated it, and attained some sense of its limitations?</p> <p>The following methods of assessment will be used in this unit:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Group discussions based on readings, videos, and special topics.</li> <li>2. A personality profile will be completed and discussed</li> <li>3. Guided writing questioning student reaction to the readings and videos.</li> <li>4. Students will write paragraphs identifying themselves as a student, a friend, and a family member. Students will, in essay form, identify, describe, and explain their self-perception and what they would like to change about themselves and why.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol> |

| <h1 style="margin: 0;">Philosophic Framework</h1>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p style="margin: 0;">Topic: <i>The "Truth" and the Truth</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| <p>What great organizing or causal principles can be used to explain the topic? What gives the events or ideas around this topic an importance far beyond their own particulars?</p> <p>Humans by nature are seekers of truth. The proposition that truth is relative or a construct of the individual tends to evoke strong emotions about a subject. Throughout history "truths" have changed. Whether it is the earth being round, the earth being the center of the universe, or some of the many existing conspiracy theories, for many the "truth" has changed. What events lead to these changes?</p> <p>As an alternative, in the case of conspiracy theories, what would have to happen for these questions to become truths?</p> | <p>What features of the world pose the problem to be investigated and explained? What information about them best reveals the organizing power of general schemes?</p> <p>The search for the truth is a continual process of digging beyond the obvious and discovering what aspects of the current "truth" do not measure-up.</p> <p>To this end, students will begin by examining the flat-earth theory and what lead to it's disfavor as truth, as well as the earth as the center of the universe theory. Through this process they will read primarily print materials that discuss these two theories and attempt to find the general schemes that were used to disprove these theories.</p> | <p>How can general schemes be developed, applied and tested within the unit? What features of these schemes make them particularly interesting, useful, or significant?</p> <p>Once these general schemes are found students will choose from a list of world events that have a related conspiracy theory. Using the scheme that was previously discovered they will attempt to balance the current truth and the potential future truth. Further, students will make adjustments to their schemes as they delve deeper into the process.</p> | <p>What does this way of thinking imply about the nature of the world and our relationship with it?</p> <p>The ability to apply general schemes and make adaptations allow us to think about the world in different ways. The world at a young age is black and white, this unit endeavors to develop the student's ability to see the shades of gray. It is this development of critical thinking that opens many doors in the mind for the students.</p> |

| Deepening Understanding                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Conclusion: Theory Made Visible                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Assessment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
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| <p><b>Introducing anomalies</b></p> <p>What problems confront the general schemes developed so far? How might they be dealt with?</p> <p>As students process the versions of truth they are presented with and make adjustments to their schemes, they will look for the limitations of applying the scheme that they created.</p> | <p><b>Alternative schemes</b></p> <p>What other general schemes have been or might be advanced to challenge the reigning narrative?</p> <p>Due to the diversity of abilities in the class, students will have the opportunity to work in a group for the purpose of editing and explaining the scheme they have developed. The group will be purposeful in asking questions for clarification and have students explain their rationale for their schemes.</p> | <p>How can the overall development of understanding in this unit be summarized and represented?</p> <p>The development of understanding will be developed by creating multiple drafts of the schemes that the students have created. As changes are made they are tracked and rationalized by the students.</p> <p>Students will be asked to attempt to apply their final scheme to another world event (the Iraq war) using their scheme they will decide upon a "truth" based on their findings. These "truths" created by the class will be discussed and tested in a debate.</p> <p>After the debate a final scheme will be created, rationalized, and explained.</p> | <p>How can we know whether the content has been learned and understood, whether students have developed a theory or general idea, elaborated it, and attained some sense of its limitations?</p> <p>Assessment in this unit will be separated into three categories:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The research component where students gather, summarize, and categorize information is a critical skill. This process will be continually monitored and all notes, summaries, as well as a bibliography will be handed in.</li> <li>2. The processing of information into a general scheme will be assessed by having students write justifications for its comparisons as well as the tracking of any changes that have been made to it through the application process.</li> <li>3. The application of their scheme to the Iraq war and the debate surrounding it will be the final method of assessment. This will include a mark for participation, depth of understanding, and a final written assessment of the event.</li> </ol> |

## Appendix B: Transcriptions:

Interview 1

R: If at any point you feel uncomfortable with a question you don't have to answer it and if you feel at any point that you would like to stop the interview, that is totally fine. OK?

Student 1: OK

R: So, how long have you been at H\*\*\*\*\* P\*\*\*\*\*?

Student 1: Since grade 8.

R: Since grade 8, and now you are in Communications 11. Why are you in communications 11?

Student 1: Because they didn't think I could do English 11.

R: Who is the they?

Student 1: The vice principal lady, and Mrs L\*\*\*\*\*, I think, my counsellor.

R: Your counsellor, your English teacher last year ....

Student 1: M\*\*\*\*\*

R: Did he recommend that you go into communications?

Student 1: Ummm, I don't know why, but my mark wasn't good enough of something like that. Just cause last year I didn't bother to do it.

Student 1: What do you mean you didn't bother?

Student 1: It was easy, I was like I'll do it later, and later rolled around and I was like whatever.

R: Given the choice, would you be in English or Communications?

Student 1: I don't know...I kinda like comm, lots of essays, it's all easy.

R: It's all easy.

Student 1: Ya

R: What is the difference between English and Communications for you?

Student 1: The exercises you do in English. Last year we did a lot of grammar this and grammar that, read a story and pick out all the little problems with it. That's just where I am not good at, I can write easy fairly easy, most of it is good from what I think, reasonably logical. I guess, I don't know. But I can't read through and be like puuuuuh that comma is not supposed to be there. Ah that word is not supposed to have a hyphen.

R: Its those editing skills I guess, is what you're saying?

Student 1: I mean, ya my main problem.

R: Ok. When you found out you were going to be in communications how did you feel?

Student 1: I didn't care.

R: You didn't care?

Student 1: I was like ahh what ever. I didn't find out that I was going to be in Comm until I was at the school. In the library, thinkin that I didn't even have a time table. So at that point I was like, ahh ohh, go to class.

R: Ohh, so you found out like last, basically in September you showed up to school and you were in comm.

Student 1: I was at school when I found out what classes I had.

R: wow. And obviously you had to tell your parents, what did they think about you being in communications?

Student 1: I didn't have to tell my parents anything, my parents live in Princeton.

R: Oh I see, do you have a guardian you live with that you had to tell?

Student 1: My grandmother

R: And what did she think?

Student 1: I don't know, She didn't really, she like, what's that? And I was like, well basically it's an easy form of English. And she was like OK.

R: Ok. SO if you were to describe the average communications student, how would you describe them?

Student 1: Stupid, lazy.

R: Give me more detail than just stupid and lazy.

Student 1: (laughs)

R: What do you mean, why do you say they are stupid?

Student 1: Well, not so much stupid is they can't do anything, is stupid is they don't want to. They like, just not willing to put an effort into a lot of stuff that they do. Because I am sure most of the kids if they sat down and they were like alright grade 7 I can do this and started over from like the beginning they could, they could get it good, but they're just like naa, throw it away, don't need it.

R: Why do you think that is?

Student 1: I don't know. Just they way they think.

R: Do you feel that applies to you as well? That description?

Student 1: To me. That is exactly what I think of myself from grades 1 through 10. This year I am trying to turn it around because I'm sitting here and I'm like well if I don't turn it around I gotta go to Princeton and if I don't turn it around I can't join the army. And that's what I wanna do, that's what I wanted to do my whole life. So I have to turn it around.

R: mmhmm

Student 1: But for them, they're like well, I live with mom, she buys my food, she buys this, she buys that, she gives me money when I want to go to the movies, and I party every weekend so life's good, this is what I want it to be my whole life. Right? They

don't think they need anything to get to where they want to go and I don't even know if they really know where they want to go or if they are serious at all about what they say.

R: umm humm, do.. what do you think that other students think about communications, like what did you think about communications class before you were in it? Like what did you think about comm students?

Student 1: I didn't really think any...I didn't really think about them. It was just another class to me.

R: Ok, and right now do you think that others perceive you differently because you are in comm of is..

Student 1: I think that some of the English 11 kids perceive us differently. Like cause they are sitting there they can pick out the comma that's not supposed to be there and the hyphen that's not supposed to be there and then I'm sitting over here and I'm like writing it down there like that's not supposed to be there and I'm like oh well thanks, there like oh well it's ok you're comm you don't know that.

R: So, describe what they would say about, about how they would describe a communications student? Like, you described it in one way.

Student 1: They call us, um, stupid.

R: ya, um, how do you mean...like just...

Student 1: Like don't understand it, don't get our own language.

R: Ok. Given that you are in Communications, and that you are going to be in communications 12 next year...

Student 1: or next semester..

R: or next semester...

Student 1: I don't know, I'm thinking about that...

R: do you think it's going to affect your future choices?

Student 1: I think that being in this class, you know, listening to you talk, you've got a lot of interesting views, and it gives me stuff to think about when I'm bored. And it opens my brain to different spectrums, I guess, I don't know how to say it. That's one of the reasons I'm here. And it's, it'll be better, I think than sitting in M\*\*\*\*\* class listening to him talk cause he doesn't talk the same.

R: what do you mean by talk the same?

Student 1: Like when you talk, you talk to us like...we're at the same level, and when he talks he talks to us like we're students and he's the teacher. Like he is just explaining it because it's like his job...like he's a good teacher I liked having him but, you're better because you talk to us like...I know where you're coming from and I can see where you're gonna go, and... you jus' talk like you know better.

R: SO do you, do you think that...

Student 1: I think that you are more of a world view, and he's more of a...jus' do this, jus' do that, no excuses...

R: Why do you think that is? That I would teach that way or be that way when I teach Communications?

Student 1: It's jus' who you are.

R: Ok.

Student 1: You...you're jus' yourself...an'...your like the...I would expect you to be the same person when you're at work as you are out with you're wife or you're friends playing hockey, talking about A&W and four levels of crunch.

R: Yes.

Student 1: You actually talk to us...you don't...like...

R: I think I understand what you are saying...um...do you feel challenged in a communications class?

Student 1: At times.

R: At times? Describe what you mean by at times.

Student 1: Spelling..

R: Spelling.

Student 1: Spelling and when we're doing those kindergarten activities. (laughing). The arranging the words, I would always have my words arranged an' then you'd be like, it should be like this and I'd be like move it around quickly ya it's like that I got it right.

R: so, so you know there is no specific way it should be it is a focus, I try to focus it around different ways to look at the words. Do you, are you interested in what we work on?

Student 1: For the most part.



R: For the most part.

Student 1: This business memo is well like...I'm trying to get a job and with the typing up the resume and the cover letter, it's a good idea. I never thought of a cover letter. I'll put it on my resume. An' I'll hand it in an' get my job an' then mm be kick'n.

R: Umm hmm. Do you enjoy the stories and everything else as well or is that...

Student 1: Yep, I enjoyed that of mice and men. That was a good book. I was done it when you guys were like on chapter 4 but, I didn't bother rereading it. Well mind reading it I should say cause...bother is the wrong word.

R: Did you...last year how many books did you read?

Student 1: Lots.

R: Can you put a number on it?

Student 1: No.

R: This year in comparison, how many have you read? The same amount? Less? More?

Student 1: More because I have been going to the library and actually taking them out. Last year it was more I just read the books I had at home an' I just read them repeatedly. Jus' like one book an' I finish that book move on the next book, an' the next book, an' the next book, and it goes back to the first book. Just cycle through.

R: Why is it that this year you're reading more books, talking out more books and exploring more books? Why is that?

Student 1: I don't know. Just because...I'm not..I've got more time to read different books. Like last year I was hanging out with my friends a lot more than I am this year, So I go to the library and I take out a book and I get through the first 100 pages and then it be, and then I take it back an' then I'd jus' go renew it an' it was jus' too much a bother for me but, this year I'm like at home most of the time or I'm at my girlfriends house and that's only till dinner then I gotta go home. SO, I got more time to read. So I read more books and I don't have any books at my house this year so, I read them all.

R: How do you think your reading level is right now? Do you think you read basically around the same level as other students or better or what?

Student 1: As comm students or jus' students...

R: Just students in general. At your age, including English students.

Student 1: Maybe the same. A very small bit better. I know I can read a lot better than some of the English students I know. Their reading skills aren't very...like they can't read through it very fast, but they can pick out all the different things.

R: And compared to comm students how do you feel?

Student 1: Probably better reader.

R: Better reader?

Student 1: Then most of them at least.

R: Ok. And do you feel that it makes it easier for you in class in general or does it matter?

Student 1: that I read faster?

R: Ya.

Student 1: I think it makes it easier because I can read through like all the instructional paragraphs and read through it quickly and then go through it again pick out what I need and somebody else is just finishing the first reading through it. And I'm already starting the work first so...

R: Ok. What do you enjoy most about communications and what do you enjoy least about communications? It doesn't have to be the content or anything.

Student 1: I enjoy being here, I enjoy listening to your views on everything. And I don't enjoy those kindergarten activities you stopped making us do.

R: Ok. Ahh, What do you think about the other students in class?

Student 1: For the most part they're all right.

R: Can you be more specific about it?

Student 1: Well, the people I sit with I like and the people I don't sit with...it's not I don't like them it's...I don't want to be around them.

R: Why is that?

Student 1: Negative influences. Like C\*\*\* and T\*\*\* and all them...ya if I hang out with them...I don't know... influence me I'll stop doing my work. I just stay away from it. It's easier to get my work done. Pass the course.

R: Do you feel there is anything else that I need to know about Communications class

that you would like to say? Or that would be interesting for the study? The study is about what it's like going into Communications class for a student because it hasn't really looked at before.

Student 1: It's pretty much the same as going into every other class.

R: Ok, so you see no difference.

Student 1: Not really, I mean, the teachers a little bit different. This is a classroom I was in once in grade 9 trying to get into French and you told me I couldn't.

R: That's true.

Student 1: Other than that, you know, it's pretty much, it's just another class.

R: Ok.

Student 1: Just do the work, learn it, forget it over the summer break an' come back and do it again.

R: Great. Well thanks very much. If I have any other questions I will come back and confer with you and get you out of class again.

Student 1: Excellent!

R: So [student 1], How long have you been at H\*\*\*\*\* P\*\*\*\*\*?

Student 2: Ahh, grade 8 and I moved away and then grade 11 till now.

R: And you have been here the entire year so far, in grade 11.

Student 2: Ahh, no. Two weeks in I think.

R: Two weeks in? And before that you were in Westbank and where you in Communications in Westbank?

Student 2: Ahh, ya, in grade 11 for the first two weeks and last year I was in English 10.

R: Just regular English 10.

Student 2: I don't think there is a comm 10.

R: No there isn't. So, who chose for you to be in Communications?

Student 2: Ahh, I did cause, well, my mom agreed with it cause I like couldn't really get good marks in the other one.

R: Ok. Umm, why couldn't you get good marks?

Student 2: I didn't try hard enough, or I just didn't know what I was doing.

R: You just didn't try hard enough...

Student 2: Well actually I had, my teacher last year was like, she'd like mark on anything. So it was good. Like she'd like give you marks for like all your stuff. So she was like a really easy marker. So I didn't, I think I got like 60% or something. But other than that year, all other years were not even close to that.

R: Ok, and like...so you chose it. Did your English teacher influence your choice at all?

Student 2: Ahh, she just kinda mentioned it, like mentioned Comm and stuff.

R: Like as a good option for you?

Student 2: ya

R: Ok. And your parents thought it was a good idea?

Student 2: Ya

R: Ok. What do you think about Comm class so far?

Student 2: Pretty good. Ahh, I like the books. The book of mice and men was pretty cool.

R: Ok. What about the assignments? Do find them to be...How do you find the assignments?

Student 2: Ahh, not like too hard, but like they are still challenging and that's good.

R: And do you feel that Communications class is something that... do you feel that there is a major difference between Communications and English for you so far?

Student 2: Ya there is a pretty big difference. Its like kinda, it seems like its kinda...there's not so many assignments going on at the same time. So it's like you focus on one thing instead of like three different projects, so it's just...

R: Ok, and anything else that's different?

Student 2: uhh, no. I don't think so?

R: No. Umm. What do you think about other people in the class?

Student 2: Ahh, are you talking about like R\*\*\* and J\*\*\*\*?

R: Anybody.

Student 2: Ahh, I don't know. They are all just kinda in here cause its like less like work. So they are kinda like...I don't know. Easier going.

R: Ok. So just correct me if I'm wrong, so you think that because the work is easier that that is why they're here.

Student 2: Well and maybe they are having a really hard time in English 10.

R: So, if you were to describe a typical Comm student, how would you describe a typical comm student? What I mean by that, is tell me like, the things they do in generally in the classroom...like anything you can think about it.

Student 2: Ahh, I might mess around a bit. Ahh, I don't know if that's just because were a Comm student or you just got a bad class. ( both laugh). Umm, ahh. I don't know, its kinda. Do your work most of the time and slack off some times like doodle on a piece of paper or something.

R: Ok. And is that what most comm students do?

Student 2: Ahh, from like the people I know. Maybe that side of the class, think might think, I don't really go see what they do like.

R: Ok, so its like the class is more almost like social groups, so like segregate in your social group.

Student 2: Ya.

R: Ok, so in your social group in the class you like doodle and chat and whatever.

Student 2: Ya

R: Good to know.

Student 2: I don't know what they do.

R: umm, what's your impression of how other people perceive you as a Comm student?

Student 2: ahh.

R: Do you know what I mean by that question?

Student 2: Like look at me sorta?

R: Like how...Do they look at you differently or the same is it...what?

Student 2: Oh, ahh, I don't know. It's still like, it's still like a good English class a respectable one I think so like they still look at you and think ohhh wooh, I mean you are still going to school and like getting it done so it's good.

R: Ok. If you had the choice between being in Communications or English, which one would you choose?

Student 2: Ahh, I probably say, if I could get good marks in English, I gonna probably still say Comm jus' cause I like just like I like to focus on one project its kinda not having to go so fast.

R: So, why do you think you don't get as good of marks in English, regular English as in a comm class?

Student 2: I don't know, it's like once you miss a couple of assignments it just kinda goes down hill from there. Like, it's harder. So it's like you miss a few it's like ahh it sucks. Then like you get a different attitude about it an struggle so much more.

R: So, if a regular English class was... segmented the work like you said, put it in like, we work on one thing at a time. Do you think that you would be fine doing English?

Student 2: Umm, I don't know. Some of the assignments, like, I don't even know do we do Shakespeare in this one?

R: No.

Student 2: Ok, cause all like that stuff, I couldn't get interested in, like I tried and stuff but just...

R: So you find the material a little more boring?

Student 2: Ya. Like all these big words and stuff. Its harder...the projects.

R: Ok. How do you feel about your reading ability?

Student 2: Ahh, not, ohh well like this year I read like 5 books I think. And before that I only read like two throughout my whole life. So, I'm pretty proud of that. So guess it's getting better actually.

R: Why have you read 5 books now and only two before?

Student 2: Ahh, silent reading.

R: Silent reading? So because you have silent reading you read more?

Student 2: Ya and then I started reading and I started to like it, so it's good.

R: ok, and do you find that there's any...does it help you with your assignments at all?

Student 2: Ahh, I don't know. Like the last book I read it like had street talk so I guess I couldn't really use that on my assignments but do you mean like literature and stuff?

R: No just any...do you find it's easier to do assignments as you are reading more?

Student 2: Well I guess I have been doing like quite of work this year. So maybe that's because I'm reading.

R: I don't want to lead you to answers, but I am just curious if that's making a difference for you, just as your teacher, not for part of the study though. So, what are you going to do after high school.

Student 2: I've already kinda started, well I have started my apprenticeship as an electrician, so that's it.

R: That's it. So you will be an electrician. Do you think that Communications is helping you with becoming an electrician.

Student 2: Umm, oh actually ya. Like, I don't know, cause we will probably like learn like write like letters and essays and stuff. And I know that when I get older, I gonna like, when I get high up in a company I'll have to write letters to other companies. I don't want to look like an idiot when writing it. So...

R: Ok, so, given the choice, again like we said before, between being in the English class and the Communications class, do you think that one gives you more advantages than the other, and which one?

Student 2: Ahh, I don't think that it gives you more advantages. It might teach you a little bit more details. But I mean like Comm probably gives you like the basics that you need to have for communicating.

R: Ok. If you could describe your experience as a Communications student, when you first decided to go into communications. What was your expectation of a communications class when you decided to go into comm instead of English?

Student 2: Ahh, probably less work, homework. I don't really know. Basically that's what like everyone thinks. It's just kinda laid back. But like it's still, I don't know. It's like not like I thought like you still do a lot of work, just different types of work.

R: And what did you think about Communications students before you were one, like did you have an idea of what... You probably saw them in the past in your school and what did you think of those people who are in communications.

Student 2: Ahh, they're probably my buddy. Ahh, ya. Just seems normal, like me maybe, I don't know if I'm normal.



R: So, normal like you?

Student 2: ya.

R: What about, what do you think about people in English class?

Student 2: Ahh, a bunch of Shakespeares.

R: A bunch of Shakespeares.

Student 2: I don't know there just whatever, they want more of a challenge. It's cool.

R: Do you think that, people who are in English class think about you differently than you think about yourself?

Student 2: Ahh, they probably do. They're probably like ohh, those slackers. But they don't really know cause there not in class, so it's...

R: So basically, so you think that they don't see anything...it's not an issue to you?

Student 2: Ya I don't really care.

R: You don't care. Given the choice again, between English and Communications and you were told you had to go into English class. How do you think that would it be different than what you are doing now?

Student 2: Ahh like, the work wise?

R: Just any way.

Student 2: Probably wouldn't be as fun. I don't know. Cause I'd be ahh, less knowledged about the stuff.

R: Ok. So you think that being a little more knowledgeable about the subject, like reading of mice and men, like we said before, that you understand a lot more about what is going on there compared to like a Shakespeare...

Student 2: ya, ya

R: So you find the Shakespeare hard to understand and handle and don't see it as worthwhile?

Student 2: Ya ya, it's boring.

R: Umm, how does the communications class you are in now compare to the one you were in when you were in Westbank?

Student 2: Ahh, pretty much the same we just started well, actually, I was there for like a week and a bit and ahh, we just started reading of mice and men so...

R: So it's basically the same, same material just...

Student 2: Well we had like different worksheets I guess but they're still the same like worksheet just different layout I guess.

R: How do you feel about your writing ability?

Student 2: Ahh, it's not the best, ahh, like for writing like essays and all that. I don't know, it's probably...sometimes I can think of like really good things to write but sometimes I cant.

R: So, when you think of good things to write is it that you have difficulty writing it down about what your thoughts are or just how to organise it or how?

Student 2: Ya, like how to organise it and like how to start like paragraphs and stuff and how to start and essay.

R: Ok. So if you were to rate your experience as a Communications student, are you happy with the choice of being in Comm?

Student 2: Ya.

R: And ok. Is there anything else you think would be important for me to know about Communications class, weather it be about other students, weather it be about how you perceive it or others perceive it or anything like that?

Student 2: Ahh, I think it'd be like, like others like think probably think like way different than me, I don't know. But ah like some might think a lot less of Comm and like some might think of it as a really good class, I don't know.

R: Ok. Why would you think that others might think of it as a lot less?

Student 2: They might just have a different attitude about school.

R: So, what is your attitude about school?

Student 2: Ahh, I don't know. I just wanna kinda get it done. Just and that's it, just finish. And I'll probably go do some post secondary stuff, I know I'll have to but, other than high school I just want to get out.

R: You just want to get finished.

Student 2: Ya, and pass.

R: And pass, of course. Um, ya good. I don't really have anymore questions for you. Thanks very much for coming and talking about it. I know it's hard to talk about exactly how you feel about Communications. Have you thought about it much before?

Student 2: No.

R: No. It's just like what you do. Comm class is what you do.

Student 2: Ya just wing it.

R: Do you ever get really frustrated with comm or angry or anything like that?

Student 2: No.

R: Do people ever make fun of you for being in comm?

Student 2: No. I don't think so.

R: You don't think so, well not that you're aware of anyway.

Student 2: Well if they do I don't really care.

R: You don't really care anyway so it doesn't matter. Awesome. Thanks [Student 1].

Student 2: Well thank you.

R: Are you nervous?

Student 3: Ya.

R: Why are you nervous?

Student 3: Because it's weird.

R: Recording your conversation?

Student 3: Ya.

R: Ok. So if I write anything down, just so you know, it's just because I'm trying to focus my thoughts and when you say stuff if it sparks a question in my mind I'll quickly write it down. So it's not like there are right or wrong answers or anything.

Student 3: Ok

R: If at any point you feel uncomfortable or want to stop the interview you can.

Student 3: Ok, I can't?

R: You can.

Student 3: Oh ok, I'm not going to I'm probably won't feel uncomfortable.

R: First question. What do you think about Communications class?

Student 3: Umm...I think it's a lot easier than English and it's ahh, I don't know it's just

it's easier. I feel more comfortable in a Comm class because English is really hard for me. Well actually it's not just vocabulary, I'm really good with that kind of stuff and essays and stuff but it's just in normal English class it's difficult so, I like Comm class.

R: Ok. How do you feel about the people?

Student 3: You really want me to answer?

R: I want a full accurate answer.

Student 3: I hate R\*\*\*\*\*. I hate him. I hate J\*\*\*\*\*. The other kids I don't have a problem with but I can't stand the immaturity in the class. It drives me nuts.

R: For yourself, given the choice between being in an English class or a Comm class which would you choose?

Student 3: Communications.

R: And why exactly?

Student 3: It's just. I don't know. It's a b... Well like English is such a serious subject. Right? Like you have to do it and it's just there's so much pressure in a normal English class. And in Comm it's more in a laid back and it's at your pace that you can do. So I...ya.

R: Ok. You had mentioned that your vocabulary is a problem for you.

Student 3: Well sometimes it is when it comes to poetry, but like I'm a really good speller and stuff like that. Like my vocabs not bad but some stuffs really hard to understand cause I have a hard time remembering things.

R: Ok. Do you think there's a difference between a Comm student and an English student?

Student 3: Umm. Well I notice that in this class it's just the kids that are in it are a lot ahh, oh what's that word. More umm...

R: You don't have to be politically correct just say what you're thinking.

Student 3: Challenged. Challenged with school. You can tell that the kids in this class are kinda the troublemakers right. Do you know what I mean by that?

R: I do.

Student 3: With in an English class it's the more not troubled students. I wouldn't say that I, I got put in this class for a reason.

R: So who chose for you to be in this class?

Student 3: B\*\*\*\*

R: B\*\*\*\*, the community counsellor?

Student 3: Ya

R: The counsellor suggested that you be in this class?

Student 3: Ya

R: Given the choice would you choose Communications or English?

Student 3: Well now that I have been in the Comm class probably Comm. She just said to take the easy classes for grade 11 so grade 12 will go by a little easier. 'Cause I had a struggle with normal English and normal Social studies.

R: When you were making that choice, originally, did you want Communications or did you think English was better for you?

Student 3: I didn't, I didn't know how comm was I had never been in it so I didn't know the difference but I am glad that I am in this class.

R: Ok. Do you think other people perceive Communications...well for yourself did you think that there is different about Communications students before you came into Communications class?

Student 3: Mmm, I just thought it would be like just a normal easier class like essentials math and stuff. It's just easier, it's at a slower pace, and it kinda starts from the beginning all over and goes slowly to the end. So...

R: How did you feel that English went for you last year?

Student 3: I was a struggle. I kept failing and it was really hard for me to do it, kept, keep up. But now this year, cause I am doing a lot better in school, because I think I'm in the B.C. First Nations and Comm. So, it's a lot easier for me to do. It was a struggle though last year. Just cause of all the stuff that went on with me through out, like at home and stuff. So just.

R: So home life interfered with school?

Student 3: Ya big time!

R: So did your parents, I don't know if you have both mom and dad...

Student 3: Just my dad.

R: Just your dad. Did your dad help you choose to be in Communications or does he even know?

Student 3: He. I don't know if he knows... I don't know I don't really... He doesn't know that... I don't know if he knows the difference between Comm and English. I told him that it's a little bit easier, but he thinks that it's fine for me to be in it.

R: Ok. Do you think other people... is there like an opinion that you think other students have about Communications students in general?

Student 3: No, well when there just say like what class you have it's like English, Comm and they'll just kinda like giggle a little bit but I don't care.

R: Why do you think they giggle?

Student 3: Because it's kind of more... they say it's just a stupider English.

R: Ok.

Student 3: For kids but I don't agree with that.

R: But you don't agree with that.

Student 3: No.

R: Umm, do you think that there is... like do you think that just the name Communications is the reason why? Like if it was called something else would it matter?

Student 3: No probably not. I Comm, well just, everyone says like comm and like I never knew what it was last year I thought it was just Comm whatever that is. My sister said it was an English cause she was in it too. So, but I don't... maybe it's the name but I don't know.

R: You don't know. Ok. Given the opportunity, if you didn't have the struggle with, like you were saying the struggle with poetry, those types of things, if you didn't have those struggles do you think you would be in English class?

Student 3: Ummm, I don't know, it's hard to concentrate on school when there's lots going on at home especially if you are in a more challenged class and just, I don't know, some kids just have a harder times doing things and...

R: For you that was the case.

Student 3: Ya.

R: Ok. So do you think then that...is it a positive or negative thing for you to be in Communications?

Student 3: It's a good thing.

R: It's a good thing?

Student 3: It keeps me on track cause I am not doing too bad in the class. So it's a lot easier for me.

R: What do you think...what do you like about Communications?

Student 3: umm, it's, I like it. I feel more comfortable being here because I don't feel a lot of pressure in having to do things. I don't have a lot of more smarter people around me to kinda be like oh wait you don't get it and it sucks when everyone else is writing away and you're just like what do I do with this? Right?

R: So, like, to use the idea of the level playing field, do you know what I mean by saying that?

Student 3: Mmm, kind of...

R: Like you all start at the same spot.

Student 3: Ya.

R: So you feel that that helps a lot because everyone's around the same spot..

Student 3: Ya

R: Compared to in an English class where there would be some people who are academically better than you. Ok

Student 3: Ya

R: That makes sense. Umm, there is stuff that we read in Communications, the stuff that you have to do as assignments, give the opportunity is there anything you would change?

Student 3: At first the book we were reading, of mice and men, I didn't want to do that. But then I started reading it, just because of the way that they talked in the book it was really hard to go with. But then once you started reading it more I understood it and it's just I liked reading it. I...ya.

R: How much did you read before last year?



Student 3: Last year...the... I just...I only read the same books I've ever read which was Go Ask Alice and Holes which I read Holes in Elementary school and I just kept rereading it because it was a good book. And Go Ask Alice I read it in grade 8 and I just kept reading it so. Last year I read 2 novels in my entire life and this year I've read 6.

R: 6. And so what made the difference for you?

Student 3: I don't know, I'm really into school this year. Last year I was doing so bad, I skipped everyday. Sometimes I just didn't go...every...ahh...all day and I just hated school. And now it's just like when you do your work it's not even that bad.

R: So do you find that, if you were in an English class, do you feel you'd be as success as you feel you are now?

Student 3: Probably not.

R: Probably not. And so Communications is just a really good thing for you?

Student 3: Ya

R: Even with what people say?

Student 3: Ya, I don't care what they say.

R: You don't care what they say. That's good. That's good. I think you have answered my questions. Is there anything else you think it is important for me to know about Communications class? About the material you use? About how you feel about Communications class? How other people perceive it? Do you think teachers look at you differently if you are a Communications student?

Student 3: Well if they do then that's stupid.

R: If they do that's stupid...ok.

Student 3: Because it's...some people just can't really do anything about it. Like if I want, like I want to be more smart than I am but I'm just...I'm not. It's just the way it is right? Some kids just aren't no matter how hard you try...you just the way you are.

R: umm hmm.

Student 3: I don't have a good memory and Barb knows that too and that's why I've been put in this class is because I can't...I have a really hard time learning. And so I think it's a really good thing that you have a Comm class.

R: ok. But you don't have any...like official learning disability, designation or anything

you just...

Student 3: No not really bad ones, I just have troubles with that...I haven't found my learning...my learning...my right learning...

R: Your learning style?

Student 3: Style.

R: Ya ok. And, so you haven't found it yet?

Student 3: Ya no. Like with studying, it's why I don't. It's because it's...I used to study, I used to study and it's it's nothing. It really doesn't help me.

R: It's just blocked.

Student 3: It's, it's has to be there. If it's there, it's there, if it's not, it's not.

R: You were saying that Communications is a bit easier, do you feel challenged in the course still though?

Student 3: Mmm, no. I think I have got everything...something's hard but once I ask it's pretty clear.

R: So not necessarily in how difficult the assignments but does it challenge the way you think or about what you are thinking about? It is more my question.

Student 3: Mmm, no.

R: No. It goes along with how you feel about things?

Student 3: Ya.

R: Ok. Good. That's all the questions I have. Thanks.

14:00

R: Alright, J\*\*\* couple things I have to tell you: To start off is that if at any point you feel like not answering a question, you don't have to answer it. If you feel at any point uncomfortable feel free to say I want to stop the interview, we can, no problem at all.

Student 4: I'm comfortable.

R: Basically, do you know what the study's about?

Student 4: Ya.

R: Ok. First question is, can you describe a Communications student for me?

Student 4: Hmm, Communications student...a Communications student is probably a person who doesn't really get grammar, or like being able to write properly so they are going into Communications 11 or 12 to get the help they need to write that...to write better paragraphs and get their punctuation up.

R: Ok. What are the differences between an English class and a Communications class?

Student 4: I'd say the only difference so far, that I've heard, is that there's more writing in Comm then there is in actual English class. Like English they, they get you to like write out, but in comm they teach you like actually paragraphs and do like full essays.

R: So it's more about...

Student 4: Writing, like actually doing the writing.

R: Improving the writing skill rather than just response?

Student 4: Ya improving the skill rather than just response.

R: Ok. Did you choose to become a Communications student or was it chosen by your English...

Student 4: It was forced upon me.

R: It was forced upon me, can you explain what that means?

Student 4: Well, I didn't fail English, but I didn't pass it. So, it was kinda like half and half.. so they just said ok well he doesn't get it so we will put him in Comm.

R: Ok and who made that decision?

Student 4: I'm thinking D\*\*\*\*.

R: So it was your teacher?

Student 4: Ya.

R: Ok. You said that you didn't fail it but you didn't exactly pass either, what did you exactly mean by that?

Student 4: Well, he said I handed in all my work but, I managed to fail some how. I don't understand how you can fail if your work's all handed in.

R: Ok

Student 4: So then he just said go to Comm 11.

R: Ok. When you heard that you had to be in Communications 11, how did you feel?

Student 4: Maa, I didn't really care.

R: You didn't care?

Student 4: No because I'm still getting the learning I need...not like it's like going down to failing a grade. Like I'm still going to the next level but I'm not like staying at the same level I am.

R: mmm hmm. Do you feel there are differences between a Communications student and an English student?

Student 4: No. But they'll think there's a difference. They'll think they're smarter then Comm students but they're not.

R: Ok. So when you say they all think they're smarter...like what do they say?

Student 4: They'll be like ohh you're in the retard class and they'll say stupid things like that. But then people that are in comm can do better writing and they can do grammar more properly then people in like English 11.

R: Ok. So do you feel that it's like a negative thing to be in Communications?

Student 4: No. I think I'm still getting the learning, so there is no negativity.

R: There is no negativity for you. Umm do you feel that people treat you differently at all for being in Communications?

Student 4: No, plus even if they did I wouldn't care.

R: You wouldn't care?

Student 4: No.

R; How do you feel about, just Communications class in general? Like, how do you feel about the people in the class?

Student 4: I don't like a lot of people in the school but the people that are in this class, I don't care for basically any of them.

R: You don't care for any of them?

Student 4: Basically, no.

R: Why is that?

Student 4: They annoy me. And they just piss me off.

R: Ok. Given the opportunity to be in English or Communications which would you choose?

Student 4: Communications.

R: Communications. For sure? The assignments that you're doing, you had said already about the writing assignments, we do a lot more writing in Communications...

Student 4: Mmm hmm.

R: Compared to what you hear of people doing in English. Do you like the stuff you are doing in communications?

Student 4: Ya it's fun.

R: It's fun. Can you explain what you mean by that?

Student 4: Well instead of sitting in class and just like copying down notes on how to do grammar properly we get to like do like full paragraph essays and write stories and stuff. Instead of just like sitting there learning.

R: So, but do you feel that you don't learn in Communications or is it just a different style of learning?

Student 4: It's a different style of learning. I think it's a better style of learning actually.

R: Ok. Do you feel that the material that you are being shown, the activities that you are doing are challenging you?

Student 4: Ya, some of them are, ya.

R: Some of them are, which ones are?

Student 4: Probably the ones that are making you put like the quotation marks. I think that's quotation marks. The one with the little circle and the comma. The one that's quotation mark.

R: Ohh, circle and the...ahh semi colon.

Student 4: Semicolon, I hate those things.

R: Oh ok, so the work...the work...the grammar work is challenging.

Student 4: Ya the grammar is challenging.

R: Do you feel that the way you think about things is challenged at all in Communications class?

Student 4: Not really. There's like some parts that are really challenging, I have to get help. I mean like half the time it's like ok I can do this.

R: umm hmm,

Student 4: 'cause I follow along, half the time.

R: What do you think lead up, other than the teacher saying that you are going to be in Communication's, are there things that lead up to you being in a Communications class?

Student 4: Probably, because I need a teacher...I think...that's strict. 'cause you have teachers like, ya the Socials teacher that left, he basically didn't care what we did. He'd

like...write a whole bunch of notes...and you'd have to do work that you don't even know how to do, and he says if you don't do it who cares. Like I need people saying if you don't do this then you're going to fail. And then I will do it.

R: umm hmm. Do find that you are doing better now than you did in the past?

Student 4: Ya, way better.

R: Way better? Why do you think that is?

Student 4: Probably 'cause I'm being challenged more, and I have actually more limits to what I can do instead of goofing around.

R: Do you think that...did I ask you already if teachers treat you differently being a Comm student? I think I did ask that didn't I?

Student 4: No.

R: No, do you feel that teachers treat you differently?

Student 4: Yep.

R: How?

Student 4: Most teachers favour other students. Like ahh, what is it. There's math, right. He only picks on half the people, that are like people that come late and there not good at work. He'll only pick on them a little bit and then he will be like with the other side of the class he'll help them more. Or you get umm, let's see, I guess science last year...all the... like I'd say all the smart kids...that did all their work...they get all the stuff, but like some of the not so smart kids do their work but don't hand it in he gives them more time to hand their stuff in than the other people who are actually doing their work.

R: um humm, and is that for just, those two classes, the math and science or is there anything else?

Student 4: There's other classes but it's just basically the same thing over again...just choosing favorites. Or if someone's like late to class they'll get in trouble but if another person's late they will just laugh and be like ok just sit down.

R: ok...what are you going to do when you graduate?

Student 4: Me?

R: ya.

Student 4: Well I wanna be a cop so I'm probably going to go to the RCMP place down

on...on where 711 is.

R: Ok.

Student 4: But before that I'm probably just gonna chill out for a very long time.

R: Do you think that Communications is putting you in a good spot to be able to graduate compared to English would have? 'cause of the trouble you say you were having in English.

Student 4: Ya. I'd say it's basically normal. The only time I really don't feel like...like essentials and stuff...I don't think that is good enough for me.

R: Ok.

Student 4: Like I think if they're gonna say fail, you fail, if you're gonna pass you pass. But in like Communications ya that helps more because they're challenging you more in Communications than math it's...it makes you feel dumb in a way. 'cause then you go to like a normal math class, like people that are like in as in principles that's just normal math. You look at their work and it's like half a page long questions and are questions are like a sentence long. Like two thinks and that's it and their question's like half a page.

R: Ya. And you feel...how do you feel about that?

Student 4: I think it's just ridiculous.

R: ya. And why do you think they do that?

Student 4: I have no clue why they do that. Probably because they think the people that need more help should get easier work but I think if they don't get the work then they should just stay back and then do that work again.

R: So you would be for failing people if they needed to be failed?

Student 4: Ya basically.

R: Ok. How do you describe the way you learn? Can you describe the way you learn for me?

Student 4: What do you mean describe, like say how I teach myself, like how I can...

R: How you best learn.

Student 4: I listen to music basically, if the teacher's talking, I'll listen to the teacher but as soon as he's done talking I'll do my work and then I'll get the work done by myself.



Like I like working by myself but I like being near people. 'cause if I'm stuck by myself beside people I don't like then I won't get my work done at all. But if I'm near people that I like and I'm like not so close to them then I'll get my work done.

R: ok. Given the opportunity to be in either English or Communications, which one would you choose?

Student 4: Communications.

R: Without question?

Student 4: Without a question, Communications.

R: Ok. Do you feel that Communications is putting you in a good spot to fulfil your desire to become an RCMP officer?

Student 4: Ya.

R: Ya. Why?

Student 4: Because normally what an RCMP officer does is they fill out forms but they don't like they don't need all those fancy stuff I think all they do is fill it out and then they will put like the comma and stuff. They don't need like the brackets and everything else, which they teach you in English.

R: ok. Are you happy at school right now?

Student 4: In high school?

R: ya.

Student 4: Oh ya, I love high school.

R: ya.

Student 4: I hated elementary.

R: You hated elementary, why?

Student 4: I don't know, I just felt like it's the same class every for like, I don't know, seven years I guess you go is it eight years? Same class every day with the same teacher and you get sick of that teacher so much that you just don't want to be there. But in high school...now that we're doing semesters it's ok 'cause we still have four classes. Like last year in linear we got like classes in each day right we got like switch it all around which is good. Plus you get, you don't get treated like a dumb like you're dumb here, you basically get treated like an equal except for in elementary school.

R: How do you feel about...since you said about how you feel like you are equal...how do you feel...do you compare yourself to other students when you are doing your work?

Student 4: ya.

R: How do you feel in the class, how do you feel you're doing compared to other students?

Student 4: I feel I'm doing pretty good.

R: You do.

Student 4: 'cause there's a lot of people that don't really understand the work and they just goof off.

R: And when you were in your English class how did you feel?

Student 4: I felt like a genius.

R: oh, really?

Student 4: A genius. 'cause no one everyone would sit at the back of the class and just sit at the back where it's like all dark and then...in the annex you know where there's that room that cuts in half?

R: yep.

Student 4: They'd stay behind that and people that wanted to learn would stay up front. And there was only like four of us of like 25 kids.

R: Hmm, and why was it like that in the class?

Student 4: 'cause he didn't give a seating plan he is like k where ever you want to sit sit.

R: So you think it was the teacher that was the reason for that?

Student 4: Ya.

R: Ok. And do you think that teaching...the teacher's style was a big role in you becoming a Communications student?

Student 4: Ya.

R: How did you feel...how much do you feel you learnt last year?

Student 4: I didn't feel like I learnt that much and the same with a lot of people they felt like they didn't learn anything at all.

R: Compare that to this year, how do you feel?

Student 4: I feel like I am learning a lot more...like I mea...from last year to this year. From being here for like three months I feel like I have done way more than last year in that class.

R: How many books did you read last year? Or actually how many books did you read...do you read a lot?

Student 4: No.

R: Did you read anything last year?

Student 4: Ya I read some things. I read ahh four or five books.

R: And how about this year so far?

Student 4: One, two...

R: Just one or two...and why the difference was it just over the entire last year you read four?

Student 4: Because, like I said, he didn't do anything so instead of just sitting there I just read. So I'd just read so I'd be like...and the books I read it took me like months to like read those things 'cause I'm not really a person who just sits down and reads a book.

R: umm hmm.

Student 4: I procrastinate.

R: Ya. Ok. In the end, how do you rate your Communications experience, like years from now when you talk to your friends about your Communications class, what would you talk about?

Student 4: I don't know. Probably all the dumb things I did in the past. It probably wouldn't be like what I learned.

R: No. Ok. Is there anything else you think it is important for me to know about Communications or about your learning or anything like that?

Student 4: Everything's pretty good. I mean like...how, how it should be is there should be like groups of people that work so it is easier for the teacher to get around and for the people that are like... what is it...delinquent lets just say. You know who those are...

R: Ya.

Student 4: They should be separated from each other because alls they do is they like...do...they just do stupid things. So they should be like put around. Not in my group 'cause I don't want them in there in like other groups.

R: Um hmm. So do you feel that last year, even though it was an English class, did you feel it was like a comm class?

Student 4: Ya, basically except for it was worse than a Comm class.

R: Ok.

Student 4: It was pretty bad.

R: How do you mean?

Student 4: Like he'd give us the work and he'd be like do it. And he'd have like...there's the chalkboard he'd fill up half the chalkboard...then he'd say something. Basically he's like monotone so you can barely tell what the heck he's saying. So like doing your work and then you'll do it and you'll think that you're doing it right and he will say it's wrong. But then when you check it over it is right like some things were right and some things were wrong too.

R: Hmm...So that made it frustrating.

Student 4: Ya.

R: And you said before about it being...you need something stricter to be able to get everything done...

Student 4: Ya

R: ...and be more successful. And this year you feel more successful is what you were saying too before.

Student 4: Ya.

R: Ok good. That's all the questions I have for you for now. If I've got more I'll ask ya to come in again.

Student 4: K

R: Great thanks.