As the 2015 USP moves from the old sequence of “writing” and “oral communication” courses to a new sequence of “communication” courses, the following definitions may help faculty think about what this change means for their classes, their assignments, and their teaching.

**What is “Communication”?**
A focus on communication means a focus on not only producing effective texts and messages but also receiving them as well—and thinking about others who will produce and receive texts. In other words, “communication” includes products as well as the processes through which communicators create an identity for connecting with others in and across the disciplines. Additionally, helping students to read and listen is as much a part of good communication as writing and speaking. Developing students’ ability to communicate effectively means both raising awareness about the multiple channels of communication they might use as well as the techniques that can help them participate in those channels.

**What is “Disciplinary” Communication?**
The idea of disciplinary communication takes for granted that the characteristics of “good” communication change from setting to setting. Strategies that may be effective and appropriate in one field may be seen by another field as entirely inappropriate. Thus, good communication assignments are often also good methodology assignments, since they help students become more able to understand the “right” ways to gather and present evidence, apply analytical/interpretive frameworks, draw conclusions, and suggest change within the field. Similarly, assignments that ask students to explore existing documents and participants in their field can also help them become more adept at communicating in the accepted styles of the discipline.

**What is “Written Communication”?**
In USP classes, it may be helpful to think about two key categories of written communication:

*“Writing in the Disciplines” (WID).* This term refers, generally, to the written texts that are common within a specific discipline or field. Many faculty already have very good assignments which help students imitate the formats that meet the expectations of the field (lab reports, research proposals, critical essays, business plans, etc.). Good instruction for Writing in the Disciplines means helping students to recognize the often invisible standards that determine why one field prefers one document or style over another. Good instruction for WID can also mean working to create realistic writing contexts for assignments—contexts that mimic the actual settings for which real disciplinary writers might be expected to create texts.

*“Writing to Learn” (WtL).* In contrast to WID’s focus on building students’ expertise with common disciplinary formats/genres, Writing to Learn is focused on the cognitive benefits of writing (and communication activities more generally). Here, the goal is to get students to write in order to extend and clarify their thinking. Writing to Learn is based on the theory that knowledge must be personalized/internalized, and that writing is one of the best ways for students to convert information into knowledge. An additional advantage of Writing to Learn assignments is that they can reveal where knowledge gaps exist and even potentially why they exist—information which in turn can help improve instruction.
What is “Oral Communication”?
USP Communication courses should provide students with a basic foundation for formal public speaking and the ability to listen and respond effectively. A foundation in public speaking includes a variety of structures, strategies, and conventions for speaking as well as a range of approaches to interacting with audiences. Good instruction in oral communication should encourage communicators to be attentive to the process of developing messages as well as the interactive nature of speaking, listening, and adapting to context. Oral communication strives for natural delivery that is supportive of the oral message, including elements such as vocal characteristics, eye contact, gestures, appearance, and expression. In addition to formal individual and group presentations, oral communication can take a variety of other forms, such as speaking and listening in discussion settings, interaction in collaborative work teams, and interviews.

What is “Digital Communication”?
While written and oral communication are often thought of in terms of specific formats/genres (like a 6-page lab report or a 10-minute speech to the class), faculty might instead think of digital communication as tools and techniques that students can call upon as they produce other texts and messages. In other words, requiring a “digital product” (a 3-minute YouTube clip) is certainly not the only way to incorporate digital communication into COM classes. Instead—since digital technologies already infuse a great deal of written and oral communication—it may be sufficient to draw students’ attention to the ways that those technologies offer them new opportunities to collect, analyze, synthesize, compose, present and respond to texts and messages around them. From this perspective, developing “digital communication” is a matter of helping students understand, explore, and apply the digital habits, skills, and knowledge that can help them become more effective and efficient communicators.

From a more theoretical perspective, it’s worth noting that scholars of digital communication argue that multimedia texts (texts which incorporate print, sound, images, movement, etc.) convey meaning in ways that are different than more traditional, print-focused texts. One illustration is the difference between the relatively linear logical structures of journal articles and the nonlinear (or multidirectional) structures of multimedia texts.

Additionally, as the university increases its commitment to online learning management systems (like Canvas), teachers may discover that their own pedagogies and feedback mechanisms can be improved and made more efficient as they develop their understanding of digital communication.

How can integrating communication instruction and activities into “content” courses benefit your students?
Elizabeth Moje argues that participation in a discipline or discourse requires three key aspects: content knowledge, an understanding of the discipline’s conventions, and a desire to identify with or belong to the discipline. Many undergraduate courses focus on the first aspect (“content”), often at the exclusion of the other two aspects. If we truly want our students to become historians, engineers, wildlife biologists, nurses, political scientists, accountants (and so on), then Moje suggests that testing students’ content knowledge is not sufficient. Instead, USP Communication courses are good places for us to ask students to not only communicate “content” but to also understand the identities and discourse conventions of our disciplines. In other words, communication is a bridge that helps students move from merely knowing content to actually being able to do the work of the discipline.