

Black, White, and Blue Collar: The Family Sitcoms of Norman Lear

CC 372/VM 300-10



"My shows were not that controversial with the American people. They were controversial with the people who think for the American people."

"I view every day as a production."

"Comedy with something serious on its mind works as a kind of intravenous to the mind and spirit."

--Norman Lear

Rich West, Ph.D.

Course Reading/Materials

Lear, N. (2014). *Even this I get to experience*. New York: Penguin.

**We will also have various YouTube screenings and other materials to review. But, you must purchase this book. It's an autobiographic testimony to the journey that Mr. Lear has undergone and continues to navigate.

Course Description

By nearly any standard, the most influential television writer/producer/creator/director of situation comedy is Norman Lear. His insights into the American family have allowed hundreds of millions of people to witness the everyday experiences of "regular" families (we will focus on this "regular family" throughout the term). Regardless of our ages, backgrounds, or geographies, "King Lear's" comedies have been the topic of many family dinners where relatives have gathered to talk about, well, pretty much everything. Nearly every American family has an Archie Bunker or a George Jefferson or a Maude Findlay or a Fred Sanford or a Jerry Hubbard or a Florida Evans or a Mary Hartman or a Dwayne Schneider, among other true-to-life characters that Norman Lear introduced to America in their living rooms over the years. Lear transformed the landscape of television from the moment he stepped on to the "TV

Scene” and even today, at age 95, he shows no interest in playing shuffleboard in a Florida city park! To wit: As we read this, Mr. Lear is completing an NBC comedy pilot for a sitcom set in Palm Springs, starring Hector Elizondo (from *Pretty Woman*, *Last Man Standing*, and (yes) a character from a very early episode of *All in the Family*) and Holland Taylor (from *Legally Blonde*, *The Practice*, *Two and Half Men*, and *Ann*). One thing seems clear to me: Norman Lear doesn’t need a lot of sleep!

The sitcoms that Mr. Lear conceptualized prompted great dialogue garnering both accolades and criticisms from all corners. Yet, most television critics agree that up until his efforts, significant cultural issues and themes were ignored, devalued, ridiculed, and/or glossed over. Indeed, Lear provided voice to the silenced and the silent in ways that were articulate, generous, realistic, and oh-so-funny. This range of commentary will be on full display as you review representative episodes of some of Lear’s work. Your goal is not (necessarily) to agree or disagree with what Mr. Lear has presented via his programs. No. Rather, your goal is to be an informed consumer of a genre that even today, has relevancy and resonance across the globe.

In the end, this course will introduce you to the lasting influence of Lear by discussing, analyzing, and reflecting upon a number of his highly successful sitcoms. The course combines both a theoretical and practical lens and you are asked to draw upon your own family experiences to interpret Lear’s television legacy.

Course Learning Goals and Objectives

By the end of the course, you will:

- a) *develop* a vocabulary and verbal skill set to assess situation comedy on television
- b) *articulate* several theoretical frameworks relevant to studying the “television family”
- c) *compare and contrast* various family representations of the American family via several Lear sitcoms
- d) *identify and explain* how family life has evolved from the 1970s to today
- e) *describe* how messages of culture pervade family life
- f) *expand* your oral and written communication skills via class discussion and written analyses
- g) *demonstrate an awareness* of the importance of the contributions of Norman Lear to the television industry

Assignments and Activities

The course will be a highly interactive experience. If you've never watched any of Lear's programs, you are in for a wonderful mediated ride! If you know of Lear, then you already know of his incredible impact.

In class, you are expected to participate each evening and come to class prepared, having read relevant material prior to our meeting. I do not take "I'm tired" or "My internship lasted longer than I thought" or "I have a deadline tomorrow" as excuses to sit back and remain unengaged. Most of you do not know my reputation of putting students on the spot in class, ensuring that there is class engagement. And, of course, who wants to hear someone like me ramble on until 10 p.m. I've always realized that Emerson students "make the difference" in whether or not a class is a success.

Most evenings will be comprised of viewing a comedic episode, discussing its overall themes, framing the episode theoretically, and applying (family) communication terms and concepts to the program. At times, guest speakers will be present. Other times, we will focus on Lear's compelling story, told through his own words. In addition, most classes will include looking at the various nonverbal features embedded in a particular episode (e.g., character's clothing, voice, facial expressions, etc.) as well as the specific language used in a particular episode to understand how Lear's characters grappled with difficult situations and challenging cultural events.

The course's evaluation rests upon *four* areas (we will have more information on the assignment particulars later in the term):

I. Participation (20%)

This is self-explanatory, but be prepared not only to speak in class, but also to be an effective listener and supporter of your classmates. This is more than attending class; this is becoming an active learner and leader in the course. To me, after more than three decades in the academy, a communication student who doesn't participate is just another member of a passive and uninformed society. Regardless of whether or not you are in CommStudies, you are still part of a College with global recognition in the study and practice of Communication.

II. Reshuffling the Deck: Paper Analysis (20%)

This 3-4 paper requires you to analyze a specific episode of one of eight sitcoms (*All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, *Fernwood 2Night*, *Maude*, *One Day at a Time*, *Sanford and Son*) and reframe it for/in the 21st century. You will have to determine the "theme" of the episode and from there, rewrite it to make it aligned with similar or divergent themes taking place in the U.S. and/or around the globe. Race relations in the 1970s are different from today. Or are they? In the 1970s, details related to sex were avoided. Today, are they? Feminism, during Lear's early career, related to women's rights. Is that still a primary goal of feminism? You should make an effort to "reshuffle" the words and characters of the older episode and contemporize it. The goal here is NOT to refashion a Lear success. Your goal is to illustrate the lasting impact—nearly 45 years later—of shows that were developed during a very different time period. You must work toward honoring Lear's original

voice and simultaneously adding your voice to the episode. Once you determine the show and episode, let me know asap. Lear's words provide the impetus for this assignment: "Humanity doesn't change. The foolishness of the human condition continues, but the details are different."

III. Showrunners (35%)

I'm always eager to witness the creative and enduring spirit of the Emerson student—a spirit known all around this city and the country! To this end, I'd like you to develop your own show that is *an extension* of one of the Lear comedies (I do not refer to this as a "spinoff" since Lear, justifiably, believes that this term makes "too light of a far more thoughtful and innovative approach to birthing a show.") This is a TEAM-BASED written and oral presentation (teams of 5-6). You will be pitching this show to the class near the end of the semester. I'm envisioning a short video of either the final discussions of your plot or a snapshot of an illustration of your plot. Of course, you're not overseeing a production as a showrunner would, but I'm asking you to *think and develop* as if you are a showrunner. Consider this:

Los Angeles Times columnist, Scott Collins, interprets the showrunner this way:

"[They are] 'Hyphenates,' a curious hybrid of starry-eyed artists and tough-as-nails operational managers. They're not just writers; they're not just producers. They hire and fire writers and crew members, develop story lines, write scripts, cast actors, mind budgets and run interference with studio and network bosses. It's one of the most unusual and demanding, right-brain/left-brain job descriptions in the entertainment world....[S]howrunners make – and often create – the show and now more than ever, shows are the only things that matter. In the "long tail" entertainment economy, viewers don't watch networks. They don't even care about networks. They watch shows. And they don't care how they get them."

IV. Final Exam (25%)

You will receive a take-home exam. We will have much more information on this, but suffice to say that it is a comprehensive final.

A Word about Class Format

The course will feature discussion starters (based on the readings), lecturettes, in-class showings of show clips, class discussions/debates about a particular show or episode, and at times, viewings of relevant news/entertainment stories and featured programs that showcase Mr. Lear.¹ This classroom is set up to be an opportunity for all of us to explore part of Norman Lear's body of work, his influence upon television (and America, in particular), and the "back story" of how he conceptualized and developed some of the most outstanding comedies in television history. We are a communication-centered classroom and to this end, we should all "stumble toward clarity." That is, none of us have all of the questions and answers and we will

¹ A number of videos will be required viewing. These and many other viewings will help further our understanding of what *Entertainment Weekly* called "one of the greatest entertainers of the century."

work toward establishing a transactional environment where we learn from each other as we dialogue about this comedic genius.

Course Policies and Expectations

Because the syllabus is a *contract* between the teacher and student, it's important that I clearly provide my expectations up front. Each of the following is rooted in my belief that I must be forthright about what I expect in a class of this nature. When I was in college (last century!), I hated professors with "surprises" in policy and to this end, I'm pretty transparent about my classroom values.

- I believe that the classroom should be viewed as an ongoing dialogue between teachers and students. We must continue to learn from each other. I don't know all of the answers; you don't have all of the questions. To accomplish this classroom goal, participation in this course is essential. Whether offering beliefs, attitudes, past actions and/or behavior, you must become an active member of this very large learning environment. However, no one's comments should be undermined by words that are loaded with bias and discrimination. I cherish First Amendment rights (proud ACLU member), but also ask my students to maintain credibility in our society by using language and espousing ideas that reflect the diversity of population.
- Please come to class each night and on time. I do not have an attendance policy in my classes. I feel it's up to you to attend a college class or to miss it. I will tell you that if you miss class, your absence necessarily affects your participation grade. Further, there may be activities that will find themselves as test questions; being in class makes you more inclined to respond to those questions correctly. If you do plan on missing class or being late, please send me an email. Make your own decision, but be very clear of the consequences. Thus, participation necessitates both a quantitative (absences) and qualitative (classroom engagement levels) assessment.
- You must complete all graded assignments in here in order to pass this course. If you are not here for the dates that these events occur in the class, you fail the course. No questions, no excuses. Unfortunately, I've heard students blame their printers, their family, and even their roommates! I hate being so demanding, but my goal is for each student to be treated fairly and equitably and therefore, personal excuses won't do.
- Emerson is committed to providing equal access and support to all students who qualify through the provision of reasonable accommodations, so that each student may fully participate in the Emerson experience. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS) at SAS@emerson.edu or 617-824-8592 to speak to an SAS staff member.
- At any point in this course, if you encounter difficulty with the course or feel you could be performing at a higher level, please see me. Students experience difficulty in courses

for a variety of reasons and I will do what is possible to assist you.

- There is no extra credit in here. I never understood why some students wish to do something *extra* when they haven't achieved what's *required*.

- Do not print out your paper on the day it is due; the obvious consequences exist and I will never accept a paper later than the time due (unless an extenuating circumstance exists...and that is rare). Here's what you should know about printing out your paper on the day it is due: Every printer around the globe shuts down the day a paper in this course is due. There will not be one printer available to anyone in the world. Turn it assignments at the TIME that I collect them and there won't be a problem, otherwise, you forfeit receiving credit on the paper and in the course. I will not accept any papers later than the time that I collect them in class. In the past, several students have received an F in the course because they have been late with their papers to class (I'm going as far back as December 2017). I won't abandon this policy this semester, so be forewarned.

- Only the most extenuating circumstances will allow an exam or paper to be made up in this class. Be prepared to arrange your flight times in accordance with the times that the course meets. It's very awkward to receive a call from a parent or partner asking me to change the submission date of a paper or test because the Jet Blue flight conflicts with that time! If you're not in class on the day an assignment is due: OUCH! You won't be a happy camper because you'll fail the course (see the previous policy on consequences on not being in class when assignments are collected). Remember, you don't have "permission" to miss assignment deadlines simply because your family has a family event or trip planned. Your family, despite the fact that they are important, does not overrule expectations. The LA campus, as you know, does not have a Spring Break. That means, YOU do not have a spring break.

- Please don't whine.

- Cheating/Plagiarizing will result in the maximum penalty of such an offense. After all, you violated College policy. I might add that taking information off the internet without identifying your web site or author is not ethical. More information can and should be accessed at Emerson's official website: www.emerson.edu/policy/plagiarism.

- Written work should reflect a commitment to proper grammar, a thoughtful layout of content, and a paper with a creative title (no graphics please). Top papers will avoid common writing deficiencies, including lapses in logic, misspelled words, or sloppy organization.

- Before submitting your final paper to me, please make a copy of it or have it available on your hard or USB flash drive. This will avoid difficulties should they emerge.
- There are no “free days” in this course. One time, I do need to be out of town for a conference, so in essence, that’s your free day.
- To get a sense of my grading, see the following grading criteria for papers submitted in class. Although we will have more specific information on what the paper should cover, here is a breakdown of my grading values:

An “A” PAPER will be SUPERIOR AND EXCEPTIONAL. It will address the topic assigned. The writer will demonstrate exceptional fluency and use of language. It will be distinguished by the quality of its content, the amount of detail/examples used to support or illustrate central ideas, and the coherency of the analysis presented. It will contain few, if any, errors.

A “B” PAPER will be of HIGH QUALITY AND ABOVE AVERAGE. It will be well organized and well developed. It will demonstrate a clear understanding of the assignment. Although it may contain minor flaws, the writing will exhibit an ability to use the language effectively. It may be descriptive, but mostly analytical.

A “C” PAPER will be ACCEPTABLE AND AVERAGE. It will demonstrate acceptable organization and development. It will also contain enough specific information to illustrate that the writer knows “what’s going on” with respect to the assignment. Although a “C” paper will contain writing errors, the errors will not be serious or frequent enough to distract the reader from the content.

A “D” PAPER will be UNSATISFACTORY AND BELOW AVERAGE. It will reveal several of the following weaknesses: the objectives of the assignment haven’t been met, serious problems in organization or focus, insufficient examples or information, serious problems in sentence structure, and/or errors in writing that are sufficient enough to distract the reader.

An “F” PAPER will be an indication that something is very wrong. The paper normally demonstrates that there is a far-reaching writing problem and/or that the writer is not capable of understanding the assignment. There will be several persistent writing problems and intellectual confusion.

A Word About Phones and Laptops

Well, let’s get this out of the way on the first class session: Being mindful about using your electronic devices in class is now as important as being mindful about turning in a graded assignment on time! Here’s what you don’t know:

Phones: Unless you’re awaiting an organ transplant, have a family emergency, or receive a text from an employer wanting an interview, you are prohibited from using your phone in class. During a class break, that’s fine. During class discussion, I will strategically embarrass you (yep, I do that in these sorts of circumstances!).

Laptops: If I see, or if a student reports that you are on a website that is unrelated to class, you will cause the entire class to forfeit their use of laptops! Believe me: I’ve seen it all over the decades! I know when you’re working on class-related questions and when you’re Instagramming or Facebook-ing. Again, you will be the “class spoiler” and I will inform the class that you single-handedly prevented them from using their laptops.

A Final Word

This course is the first of its kind at Emerson as there has been no meaningful effort to unpack Norman Lear's contributions to television via a semester-length course with a focus on family. So, that means we have a responsibility to make this something that will resonate. As some of you already know, Mr. Lear attended Emerson College in 1940 for a few years, before leaving to serve the country during WW II. Since that time, he has been recognized in ways that others in the entertainment industry could only imagine, including being recognized last year with a Kennedy Center Honor. He has been nominated for 22 Emmy Awards and received several. In addition, he is the recipient of the Peabody, the People's Choice Award for Favorite TV Comedy, one of the first inductees into The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame, and it goes on and on...and on. Norman Lear's roots are quite humble and as you read his words, you will be taken on a journey filled with so many emotions. I've been preparing for this class for nearly a year and each time I read about him or watch an interview, I remain astounded by his tenacity, other-centeredness, and yes, sense of humor. Even closer to home, for many of you, I believe his progressive thinking and ideologies will be of particular importance. I hope you will feel as much joy celebrating this artist—this Emersonian—as much as I have enjoyed collating materials for this exciting semester!

“In my ninety-plus years, I've lived a multitude of lives.”

--Norman Lear

Tentative Schedule²

Jan 24:	Week 1	Introduction Syllabus Review/Course Expectations What is Communication? What is Family Communication? A Glimpse into the Legend (yes, Legend)
Jan 31:	Week 2	he Situation Comedy and Norman Lear Interpreting “Funny” in the 1970s and today Norman Lear: The Interviews
Feb 7:	Week 3	A Comedic Legacy: <i>Even This I Get to Experience</i> (Part 1: <i>Alone in a Going World</i>)
Feb 14:	Week 4	“Newsweek and Rolling Stone: The Comedy Nuances” Sit Com: <i>Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman</i> Sit Com: <i>Fernwood 2Night</i>
Feb 21:	Week 5	“The Groundbreaker” Sit Com: <i>All in the Family</i> A Comedic Legacy: <i>Even This I Get to Experience</i> (Part 2: <i>Those Were the Days</i>)
Feb 28:	Week 6	Sit Com: <i>All in the Family</i> (continued)
Mar 7:	Week 7	“If you want to send a message, use Western Union: Sit Com: <i>Maude</i>
Mar 14:	Week 8	“Let’s Talk” Sit Com: <i>Good Times</i>
Mar 21:	Week 9	A Comedic Legacy: <i>Even This I Get to Experience</i> (Part 3: <i>Joyful Stress</i>)
Mar 28:	Week 10	“Movin’ on Up” Sit Com: <i>The Jeffersons</i>
Apr 4:	Week 11	“We saw the first act...and howled.” Sit Com: <i>Sanford and Son</i> A Comedic Legacy: <i>Even This I Get to Experience</i> (Part 4: <i>Over and Next</i>)
Apr 11:	Week 12	“Program Practices? Screw Them” Sit Com: <i>One Day at a Time</i>
Apr 18:	Week 13	**Showrunner Pitches

² Clips and screenings are subject to change.

Biography of Professor

In the communication discipline, Rich's leadership spans several areas and he has been recognized for his teaching, scholarship, and service to the profession. At the national level, Rich is a former President of the National Communication Association (NCA), an 8,000- member organization that promotes the teaching and scholarship of communication. He is also a past President of the Eastern Communication Association (ECA), the oldest professional communication organization in the country. Rich has chaired or served on over 2 dozen ECA committees and is a recipient of ECA's Distinguished Service Award as well as being recognized as a Distinguished Research Fellow. He is currently on the Academic Board of Directors for the Global Listening Centre, based in London. His scholarship intersects family, communication, and identity and he has co-authored research with his colleague/friend of three decades, Lynn Turner (past NCA President). Rich has also written in the area of classroom communication and has been recognized as a "Leading Scholar" in classroom communication by the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship.

Rich is the co-author of 5 books in multiple editions (IPC: Interpersonal Communication, Gender and Communication/3rd edition, Understanding Interpersonal Communication: Making Choices in Changing Times, Perspectives on Family Communication/5th edition/2017, and Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Applications/6th edition/2017). His theory book has been published in 6 languages and his family book has been translated into 3 languages. He is currently completing two books: Communication: A Primer (Cambridge University Press) and The Handbook of Bullies and Communication (Routledge), both due out this year.

Rich is also co-editor of The Family Communication Sourcebook which was awarded the Outstanding Book by the National Communication Association. Rich has been appointed three times as Guest Co-Editor of the Journal of Family Communication. In addition, he has (co)authored dozens of articles and book chapters and is a current member of five journal editorial boards in communication studies and family studies.

He (and Lynn Turner) are also co-editors of the acclaimed Handbook of Family Communication, which has been recognized as "the leading compendium of scholarship in family communication" by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Rich has received a number of accolades over the years. He was awarded Emerson's prestigious Norman and Irma Mann Stearns distinction and was recognized as Distinguished Faculty. In addition, NCA bestowed its Bernard J. Brommel Award in Family Communication for his family communication research. He has also been awarded "Outstanding Alum in Communication" by both Ohio University and Illinois State University; ISU also recognized him for "Distinction in Forensics" and "Outstanding Graduate in Teacher Education."

Rich's Emerson's service is expansive. In 2007-2008, he served as the Interim Dean of the Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson. During that year, he was also the Founding Project Director for the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning. From 2008-2012, Rich served as the College's Chair in the Department of Communication Studies and from 2008-2014, he was the first Director of the College's Washington, D.C. Internship Program. In addition, he has also served as Chair of the Institutional Review Board and the Faculty Development and Research Committee.

Rich's research has been featured in a number of very diverse media outlets including the Toronto Globe & Mail, Boston Globe, New England Cable Network, Vanity Fair, USA Today, PBS, Christian Science Monitor, NPR, www.cbsnews.com, among many others. When he has some free time, Rich also enjoys working on his 115-year-old home on the coast of Maine where he is an avid gardener.