

A Pioneer Among Online Extension Courses: A Decade in Review for CoupleTALK 1998-2007



An informal personal study course

Report prepared by Charlotte Shoup Olsen
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Overview

In 1996, Kansas County Extension Agents in family and consumer sciences requested a marital and relationship building Extension course that could address relational needs of adults in committed and marital relationships. At that time, the Kansas divorce and marital dissolution rate had been surpassing the national rate since 1951. An Extension advisory group was organized to facilitate the development of an Extension curriculum that was named *CoupleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationship*. Within a year of the release of the initial curriculum and teaching resources, written by Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Trudy Rice, the course was written for the internet purported to be the first Extension non-credit online course in the nation. The internet course was created by Marsha Weaver, Sandy Flores, and Charlotte Shoup Olsen. This report summarizes data gathered from the internet course being offered twice a year and the results of a longitudinal study conducted among a sampling (N=30) of internet enrolled participants. Other feedback on the *CoupleTALK* resources is also provided.

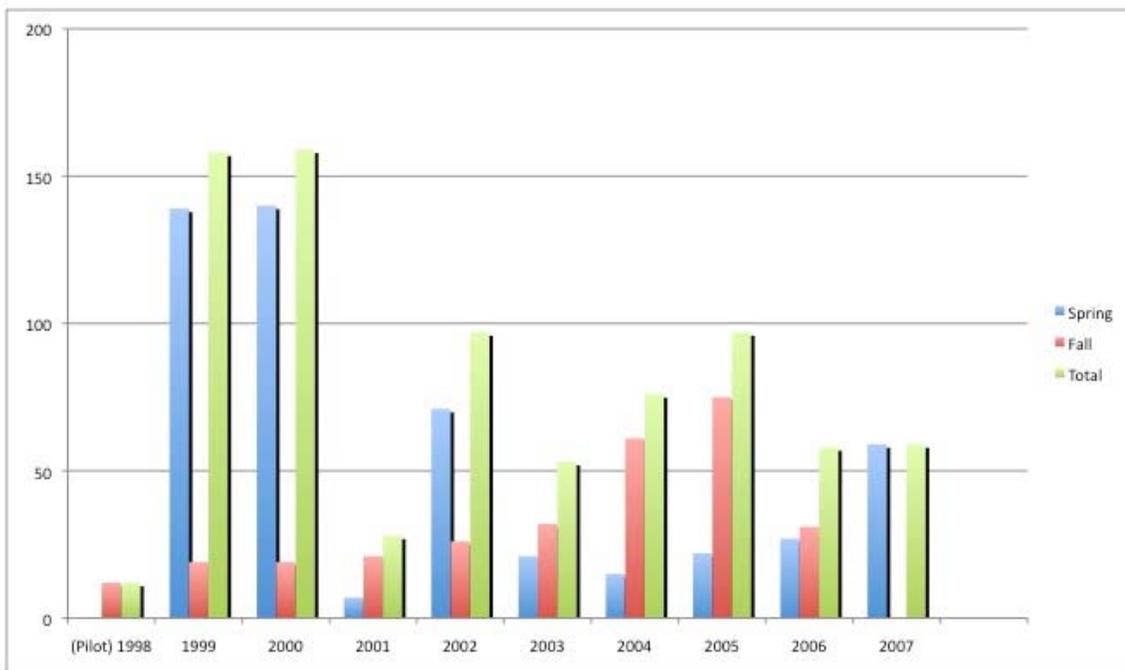
How was the internet course conducted?

A public access website (www.oznet.ksu.edu/ctalk) allowed individuals to peruse the general requirements for participating in the course. The *CoupleTALK* personal study booklet and activity cards could be downloaded or picked up at a Kansas county Extension office. Once persons completed the online enrollments, they were notified prior to the beginning of the three-week course of the password protected course website. Each Kansas County Agent was notified of the number of participants registering from their respective counties. A module menu defined the assignments for each of the six modules and allowed the participant to easily link to the module objectives, reading and activity assignments and study questions. Threaded online class discussions were held asynchronously for classroom introductions and each of the six modules. Discussion questions were posted regarding course assignments and *CoupleTALK* content, but the questions also reflected ongoing marital research findings not included in the original personal study booklet. The discussion postings allowed each participant to respond to each other's reply with the responses being threaded rather than being posted chronologically. Also included in the course resources were audio scenarios to explain a particular concept and online course evaluations, both continuous evaluations and final course evaluations. Course instructors over the years were Charlotte Shoup Olsen and Marsha Weaver, K-State Research and Extension (KSRE), and Kathy Bosch, University of Nebraska (UNL)-Extension, as UNL-Extension collaboratively marketed the internet course with KSRE for three years. In addition, the internet course was translated into Chinese and the class was conducted by a K-State graduate student in Family Studies and Human Services, Wen-Chi Chen, through a Chinese-language marital education website.

What was the enrollment for the internet course?

Figure 1 gives the data for enrolled participants during the ten years in which the internet course was offered.

Figure 1: CoupleTALK Internet Course Enrollment Data 1998-2007



The majority of the home addresses listed by enrolled participants in the English version web course represented the states of Kansas and Nebraska. However, other addresses were from Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Wyoming, as well as Brazil, Argentina, Ghana, Palestine, Israel, and Canada. News releases were sent through the K-State Research and Extension Communications to 500+ media outlets prior to each class. During the three years that Nebraska Extension participated, a similar news release was sent from its communication office. Enrollment information from two of the larger classes indicated that 50% learned about the internet course from a newspaper, 12% Extension personnel, 9% other sources, 8% internet search, 7% brochure, 5% magazine article, 3% spouse/partner, 2% counselor or therapist, 1% work supervisor, 1% TV, 1% friend, and 1% listserv.

What was the most valuable idea that they gained?

Participants had the opportunity to complete online course evaluations with the response rate being low: six percent of enrolled participants. Of the 44 participants who completed the final course evaluation, 70% (n=31) were female and 20% (n=9) were male with no indicator from the remainder; 75% (n=33) were married, 16% (n=7) were not married,

and four did not answer the question. The length of their current relationship ranged from 1.5 years to 50 years with an average of 16 years.

The answers the respondents gave for the most valuable idea that they gained from the course generally revolved around being intentional in communicating with each and using communication skills that protect their relationship. Here are some of the responses:

- How to communicate with each other no matter what
- Listen to what each other has to say
- Try to communicate more with my partner
- Be aware of an emotional bank account
- Paraphrasing – listener/speaker technique
- Listen closer and not jump to conclusions
- Stop fighting unfairly.
- Attack the problem, not each other.
- Make time for each other to talk.

What were other benefits of the course?

Ninety-five percent of the respondents indicated that the **CoupleTALK** class had been helpful. Only 2% (n=1) indicated that the course had not been helpful and one person did not answer the question. Results from the ‘Comments’ section were encouraging. Participants reported various benefits that were categorized as benefits to the couple relationship, family relationships, and personal and professional development. They also commented about the course in general. Below are the unedited comments.

Benefits for the COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

Mainly, I believe this has been a wake-up call that shoving our marriage aside in order to be parents is not a good idea. We are talking more and have some new tools to use when we have discussion.

It was a good tool to try and re-focus on our relationship. I had access to a cassette tape from our extension office and found it easier to “listen to” the module lessons while driving/walking than reading the material.

I will talk with my partner and spend time alone with him at least once per week. We will discuss things before they become an issue.

Even though we didn’t always do our lessons together, we did discuss them and gained insight into our communication problems.

Housework has been a major conflict and also the fact that he doesn’t talk to me and give positive comments to me. I think that we have not communicated effectively and positively in the past and because of hurts have at times stopped communicating.

Thank you for the tools for me to begin working on some of these areas. It is not easy after these many years, as you have stated. We are however committed to each other for life, but we need to make it more joyful.

I did get behind because of the increased work load that comes in November, but I still gleaned some benefit from the class. With having a copy of the book, I can still benefit from it. I love to read and am a person who learns from reading and reviewing better than just listening. I probably responded more by internet than if it had been a classroom experience because of being anonymous to those participating. It would have been much better if my partner had also participated.

We will think before we speak and sit and discuss issues more openly. We will also try and put aside a longer period each evening to talk.

This course has been great for our relationship and we wish everyone had the opportunity to go through the course.

Benefits for FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

We are sharing this information with our college daughter, either working together on it when she is home or forwarding it on to college. She also thought it was very good material, looking at it from a different perspective. She and her boyfriend come from different faith backgrounds and found the lessons very helpful in talking through some difficult issues.

My wife and I and my two children all participated in this process at different levels. My step children are all married, but we are close. I do think we may share some of this material with them as well. We also made some copies of lessons for a couple of friends. They too found them very helpful. I'm just sorry that many others haven't yet seen this material. If this program is offered again through our county, I will encourage several others to participate.

Benefits for PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

I took this class to get a feel for how an internet type of class would work, as I also teach adult education. I will try to put some of these tips to use in my personal relationship, but will find it more useful as professional development.

I learned much from the written materials.

The "I" messages were a very valuable insight into proper relationships. Many of the other ideas I had heard before but have not been able to implement them on a regular basis. Because of this course, it will give me the impetus to try again.

I enjoyed reading the materials, especially the section on balancing work/family issues. Although I didn't have time/access to participate in all discussions, I learned much from the written materials.

Benefits of the COURSE IN GENERAL

The tools for communication in this course have helped a lot.

Excellent program and I'm glad that it was offered to people over the internet.

I found the course well-planned with good, realistic materials.

The suggestions were helpful and given in a step-by-step progression.

The course emphasized trying out the ideas, not just reading about them.

The information is right on target for our today times.

Thank you for the course. The booklet and exercise cards will be valuable to me. I will begin and continue to work on many of the items and suggestions that were given in the course. I also have some young married friends that I believe would enjoy the course.

Very informative. Lots of opportunity for review. Provides good insights.

It has enlightened my insight a lot.

Who participated in the CoupleTALK phone interviews at least six months after taking the course to determine the course's longitudinal impact?

In the fall, 2005, a participant list was compiled of persons enrolled in the course more than six months prior. Phone calls were made, beginning with the spring, 2005, class enrollees until 30 phone interviews were scheduled and conducted. It took multiple phone calls to reach this goal. The sample included 20 females and 10 males. Twenty-seven were married, two were unmarried as was the case when taking the course, no one was married but separated, and one respondent was no longer with the partner. The length of the relationship was from nine months to 60 years with an average length of 20.2 years. Highest educational attainment was: high school – 5 (16.7%); technical school – 2 (7.6%), some college – 3 (10%), bachelor's degree – 7 (23.3%), some graduate work – 3 (10%), other – 1 (3.3%), no answer – 9 (30%).

How had they participated in the course?

In the following tables are responses on how they remember participating in the course.

Table 1: How many modules out of the six do you remember completing?

# of modules completed	# of responses	% of total possible responses (n=30)
1	0	0
2	3	10.0
3	9	30.0
4	0	0
5	1	03.3
6	12	40.0
Don't remember	5	16.7

Table 2: What class activities do you remember doing?

Type of activity	# of responses	% of total possible responses (n=30)
1. Reading assignments - yes	27	90.0
Reading assignments - no	1	03.3
Reading assignments – sometimes	1	03.3
Reading assignments – no answer	1	03.4
2. Assigned activities - yes	16	53.3
Assigned activities - no	6	20.0
Assigned activities - sometimes	7	23.3
Assigned activities – no answer	1	03.4
3. Complete assignments with partner - yes	11	36.7
Complete assignments with partner - no	9	30.0
Complete assignments with partner – sometimes	7	23.3
Complete assignments with partner – no answer	3	10.0
4. Online threaded discussion - yes	7	23.3
Online threaded discussion - no	11	36.7
Online threaded discussion - sometimes	9	30.0

Online threaded discussion – no answer	3	10.0
5. Final evaluation - yes	11	36.7
Final evaluation - no	15	50.0
Final evaluation – no answer	4	13.3

What was the most valuable idea that they gained?

The majority of respondents indicated that the benefit to their couple relationship was learning how to listen – 17 responses (57 percent). Seven (23 percent) commented on learning how to fight in ways that would not harm their relationship. Other ideas that emerged were: communication in general, being a friend with each other, and not one thing in particular. One respondent indicated that nothing was learned from the course.

What is a major issue in their relationship and did the CoupleTALK help in addressing this issue?

The following table lists the issues presented by the respondents and their responses on whether CoupleTALK helped or not.

Table 3: What is the major issue that usually causes conflict with partner?

Major Issue in Relationship	# of responses	% of total possible responses (n=30)
Money/finances	8	26.7
Communication	6	20.0
Life Balance Stressors	5	16.6
Nothing in particular	3	10.0
Children	2	6.7
Housework	2	6.7
Sex	2	6.7

Table 4: Did the CoupleTALK information help you and your partner deal with this issue?

YES	NO	No Answer
22 (73.3%)	3 (10%)	5 (16.7%)

What were other indicators that showed course impact?

Table 5: Please rate the level of satisfaction and effectiveness of the course for you.

Rating	Level of Satisfaction N (%)	Level of Effectiveness N(%)
Extremely	1 (3.3)	3 (10.0)
Very	12 (40.0)	6 (20.0)

Satisfied or Effective	13 (43.3)	13 (43.3)
Somewhat	2 (6.7)	6 (20.0)
Not	0	2 (6.7)
No Opinion	2 (6.7)	0

Other comments:

Several indicated their appreciation for the class and suggested that more couples need to take it. Four persons liked the internet, but three indicated they would have preferred a face-to-face class. Three others indicated that working on the computer is not easy for them. A couple of persons said that it would have been more effective if their partner had participated. One person indicated that it would have been helpful at a younger age. Time commitment to the course also was brought out in the comments section. Nine persons had no additional comments.

What were the results with the Chinese language version internet class?

Twenty-two signed up for the Chinese language class on May 6, 2006, and it ended around July 2, 2006. The moderator weekly posted a lesson/discussion topic to promote discussions and exchange of ideas among class members. Only five participants persisted until the conclusion of the course as evidenced by threaded discussion participation and completion of the final course evaluation. These response rates reflected a similar trend with the English language version. The five completed evaluations were from female participants with 40% being married – the rest were not - with an average of 5.6 years in the relationship. On a scale of 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied), the respondents' rating averages for each module were:

Lesson 1	How to Fight Right	4.0
Lesson 2	Learning to Listen	3.8
Lesson 3	Expressing Yourself	3.8
Lesson 4	Managing Expectations	4.0
Lesson 5	The Balancing Act	3.8
Lesson 6	Best Friends	3.4
Overall Rating		4.0

Representative responses, edited only for reading clarification, were:

I think I learned a lot by having the opportunity to examine the differences between my thoughts and my husband's thoughts. I also learned to see things from different perspectives through online discussion. I was able to use other people's relationships to see whether I made the same mistakes.

To us, learning how to fight right is very important. I also learned how to find the reasons behind our arguments. I learned to observe sensitive topics and be more careful when we are handling similar subjects.

I learned:

- 1. "Emotionally forgiving (your partner) is more important than pursuing an understanding. Listening is more important than finding out what happened. Trusting is more important than guessing what will happen. Appreciating is more important than being in control." (a quote from discussion)*
- 2. People usually like those who "take the initiative to send out invitation by being nice."*
- 3. "If we don't take care of ourselves, it will be hard for us to interact actively with people around us, especially our spouse or partner."*

My husband learned:

The lessons provided a way to examine the couple relationship. Be sure to examine your couple relationship regularly.

Some of the CoupleTALK information was helpful. Through the lessons, I discovered mistakes I make again and again in our communication. I discussed the situation with my partner and we figured out how to deal with it (the vicious cycle). Partner indicated that it was not helpful.

Managing expectations and balancing acts (was the most value idea). Learned whether our ideals/values are compatible.

I will use this information by taking care of myself first. When I know what I want, I then will have the ability to know what my partner wants.

I don't know how to discuss some of the questions under managing expectations. Men don't want to think too much about life after marriage. He thinks it's alright to handle the issues when they happen, if they happen. Even though he can give me an answer, I feel like he may not do as he says, everything is unpredictable.

Thanks for the hard work. I'm glad that everyone is willing to share personal experience.

I hope everyone can at least make three to five comments per discussion – it can be a question or description of feelings. I hope the discussion for each lesson can be more in-depth.

I didn't discuss with my partner. I read my reading assignments and used the suggested activities to analyze my relationship with my partner. When I discuss about my situation with members from online, I discovered a lot of feelings and details I didn't pay attention to.

I don't think it will be helpful. Although I think some of the communication skills in CoupleTALK can resolve conflicts, but I didn't invite him to participate in this group because he doesn't like things like these. After I met him, I tried my hardest to learn to "communicate" with him by practicing nonverbal skills. Otherwise, I

can talk as much as I can and change however I say things, but he doesn't receive any signals from me.

Your Partner's Good Qualities (lesson 6) practice helped us understand each other better than before.

Only time will tell how the information will be helpful.

Develop more measurements and make the assessment specific so the discussion can be diverse, but connected and interactive.

What is the future of the CoupleTALK internet course?

The results of both the course evaluations in English and Chinese and the longitudinal survey were encouraging. The limited amount of data indicates that the course information was helpful and was being used in partner relationship behavior for a majority of the participants, especially if both partners participated. The longitudinal survey was more meaningful since such a low percentage of enrolled participants completed the online evaluation at the time they were enrolled in the course. This was true for both the English and Chinese versions. Also, since there was declining threaded discussion participation for the latter modules, it can be assumed that enrolled persons may have had difficulty in completing the course on a timely basis or felt no need to be a part of an online class cohort. Thus, it appears that CoupleTALK as a noncredit online course can be beneficial, but with limited expectation for discussion among class participants. It is interesting in the longitudinal survey that participants more readily remember reading the materials than any other suggested assignment.

State-of-the-art online educational design principles were used to create the course in 1998, but the course design needs updated to conform with today's distance education standards. Course content continues to be relevant and was augmented in the threaded discussion questions with more recent research findings on stable and satisfying couple relationship behaviors. However, since participants put minimal effort into the threaded discussion, they were not exposed to the new information.

Based on the information synthesized for this report, CoupleTALK's online format will change. It will no longer be offered as an asynchronous online noncredit course, but the self-study course material and activity cards are available through the K-State Research and Extension *Families!* web site (uplinked in August, 2008). Additional links to couple relationship materials and online resources through the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN) will also be available. In closing, K-State Research and Extension was the first in the nation to offer such an online relationship-building course. We were proud to build upon that legacy by being a part of the beginning efforts to establish a nation-wide outreach of Extension faculty in relationship and marriage education that has evolved into an established and recognized national network. The original group produced the first Extension national satellite conference on marriage and relationship education in 2000 with CoupleTALK being highlighted as a

premier Extension program (http://www.nermen.org/satellite_2000_video.php). K-State also edited a national resource package, the first in the nation, that can be found at: http://www.nermen.org/documents/Marriage_and_Couples.pdf

Now as part of NERMEN, K-State continues to be part of the executive group in partnership with other land grant universities for providing research-based resources to “advance the knowledge and practice in relationship and marriage education” throughout the nation.

Appendix

CoupleTALK: Enriching Your Relationship began with a self-study course, activity cards, and teaching guide on how to offer a face-to-face community education program. This program was adopted by Extension systems with Extension faculty and community collaborators trained in Kansas, Ohio, Maine, Florida, and Nebraska. Personnel from other states are known to have requested the materials, but no assumptions can be made on statewide adoption.

How have Kansas Extension agents used the CoupleTALK program in their local community educational programming?

County agents have continually reported or shared anecdotally the use of *CoupleTALK* information in news columns, newsletters, radio programs, resource fairs, and workshops. Here is one of the more recent email messages:

Fall, 2007

I have used it as a topic twice for my radio programs on the local radio station. Following both programs in the past year and a half, two gentlemen called from their tractors. I sent them the information from the web and urged them to sign up for the net class.

The third time that I have used it was for a local businessman who had been having relationship issues. I gave him the same "starter" materials as previously. He was not able to go through the process with his "girlfriend", but he reported that for his own mental health, it was most useful. He said it should help in future relationships.

County agents have collaborated with ministerial alliances, family therapists, Head Start, SRS, and church groups in delivering the *CoupleTALK* resource. Anna Mae Brown of Crawford County delivered an annual six-hour Saturday workshop for engaged and newly married couples in cooperation with the Pittsburg ministerial alliance for several years. Participants consistently indicated a high level of satisfaction with the workshop and materials and all indicated that it had helped them understand and learn ways in

which they could strengthen their relationship. One couple who attended a Pittsburg workshop agreed to give a videotaped testimony, along with the CoupleTALK instructor (a minister) on the benefits of the CoupleTALK program for a national satellite program as noted previously.

In Johnson County, Karen Elliott delivered couples communication classes organized through SRS, Headstart, as well as Extension. Diane Nielson of Atchison County found the ministerial alliance as well as local family therapists requesting **CoupleTALK** resources. Lori Spooner of Logan County had no persons willing to sign up for a workshop, but the local newspaper expressed interest in running a weekly column on couple relationships after a positive response to Lori's news releases. Additionally, Agricultural Experiment Station faculty used **CoupleTALK** to conduct premarital and marital enrichment groups in Clay and Pottawatomie Counties. Over the years, 4,209 personal study courses have been distributed through the Department of Communications as well as 3,810 sets of activity cards, 1,324 teaching guides, and 1,813 posters. Furthermore, Charlotte Shoup Olsen has been interviewed for regular interviews with K-State Communications with news releases sent to 500+ media outlets. Thus, the CoupleTALK information has regularly been featured in news articles and radio programs within the state of Kansas and throughout the nation. For more specific information on its usage in the news media, please contact Charlotte at colsen@ksu.edu, keeping in mind that impact data on behavioral change through media sources cannot be quantified.