Small group communication is a vital tool that is applied and used in many different aspects in everyday life. According to Beebe and Masterson, small group communication is defined as, “communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose or goal, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.”(p.6) For this assignment we were to assume positions of an actual jury and decide the fate of four young men based upon the following information given by the defense and the prosecution.

On May 22, 1999 there was a controversy in the news involving four male adolescents being charged with murder. One of their so-called friends was “murdered” and the second was hospitalized from a “back-yard brawl”. The scene of the crime took place in the backyard of Mike McLoren’s home inside his crude fort. At the scene of the crime a fight had broken out allegedly involving drugs and gang activity. In the process of the brawl, Mike McLoren and Jimmy Farris were stabbed, Jimmy’s wound being a fatal stab to the heart.

There were five suspects involved, four of them giving testimony at the trial. One of the suspects made a plea bargain and was given a sentence of twelve years. Each of the boys stated that a fight broke out and Jason Holland admitted to having a knife and stabbing Mike. However there was no conclusive evidence that he had killed Jimmy, this
is where our “jury” was to decide the fate of the accused. After watching our deliberation on videotape, it was evident that we followed the four phases of decision making, described by Fisher as orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement. Other small group concepts that were used and will be analyzed throughout this paper are supportive or defensive climate and the issues underlying such specific climate. Also, we will be evaluating the specific task, maintenance, and self-centered roles taken on by our group members and they affected the way the group. Finally, our group will explain the spiral model that had been used during the jury deliberation.

The first stage that is outlined by Fisher is orientation. During this phase group communication is focused on getting to know one another and developing trust among one another. The concept of this phase is directed at orienting oneself to the group and the task at hand. So how was orientation present in our deliberation? Orientation was not seen on camera, it actually was done before our group had gotten into the room to start the deliberation. When we met in Wallace Hall, our group had to wait a good fifteen to twenty minutes for another jury that was still dealing with this case. All of us were sitting in the hallway growling about the people in the classroom taking a long time, and making small talk with one another. Here, we began to joke about and discuss the possibility of deliberating the case at another time. It is stated in Beebe Masterson that “a group starts off with small talk, to determine whether it is safe or not to move on to deeper levels of interaction.” Our group did not progress through the orientation phase a whole lot before our deliberation because we are all familiar with one another and the level of trust was pretty high among all group members. The orientation phase is very important in small group because it helps the group develop trust and cohesiveness.
Group trust and cohesiveness are the key items for a group to survive and move on to the next phase outlined by Fisher, which is conflict.

So, what exactly is conflict? It is defined as being a persuasive attempt to influence or change others’ opinions. In the first phase group members begin to form their own ideas about the task at hand and in the second phase the group begins to express these opinions and/or ideas. At this phase all the group members are ready to just jump in and begin working on the task which is exactly how our jury began deliberating. Adam acted as an initiator to the group. This is noticeable in the beginning of our meeting by Adam asking “Where do we want to start?” and Jeana Replied, “Let’s start with the most obvious suspect.” Having asked, and answered this question the ball began to roll on the discussion of this case. Having a person or people take on the role of initiator is the most important way to start a task within a small group. If no one would have taken on the initiator role, then it is very certain that our group may have talked about irrelevant things, and or goal/goals would never have been achieved. The discussion began with a small briefing about Jason; the most obvious criminal in this case; but it did not last too long before we began to start with a discussion about the actual evidence and story of the case. As we got to this stage, each of us took turns speaking and asking other’s for their opinions. For example, This was very important to our group, because it is during the stage of conflict that a small group begins to identify the tasks issues. Once this clarification is established group norms and a climate begin to form.

Climate, in our group, is discussed as the emotional environment that is affected by interaction among members. The climate affects productivity, the positive small
group outcomes, and overall member satisfaction, according to Gibb, from an in class handout. The climate of our small group was very supportive. Our disagreement in the group was that of the sentencing and jail time of the victims. For example, the situation continued to come back after discussion which allowed others to state their claim while the rest of the group members listened. In our group it appeared that nobody was over critical, and surprisingly all of us were very open to suggestions or alternatives. This impacted our final decision because it made everyone feel like they had a final say, no one seemed shy about speaking up if they did not agree. For example, towards the final decision on what the charges should be for involuntary manslaughter one may notice that Kyle speaks up to state, “I am not sure I really like this, I think it should be less of a sentence time,” without over critical members Kyle was able to explain comfortably that he was not happy with a decision. However, if there were over critical people in our group, some members could have felt uncomfortable with a decision. With over critical people, other members might conform to others ideas so they do not look different. Even though there was obvious conflict present, none of our group members became defensive or angry with other members, it was apparent that we were all open to criticism.

With an open-minded group we were able to be more supportive rather than be defensive, which seemed to help all members speak their mind without being shy or intimidated. Everyone expressed empathy for other members because they were genuinely concerned with others’ feelings about the conflicts. For example, Matt Dabbs was asked to speak up several times in order to know his viewpoint on certain issues. Jeana and Michelina; the only females of the group; seemed to be the gatekeepers during the deliberation. There could be several reasons for why the girls took over the
gatekeeper role, one being that Jeana and Michelina were sitting next to some of the quieter members of the group: Matt Dabbs, and Brain Pinkley. It seemed almost necessary for the girls to be gatekeepers because the guys would talk over one another and not really pay a lot of attention to the quieter members. With two gatekeepers, it seemed as though many members were easily able to ask about what they did not understand. For example, Brian asked about the difference between voluntary and non-voluntary manslaughter, and Jeana took the time to explain it to him by stating, “voluntary is where you intentionally hurt someone, like knowingly stabbing them, and involuntary could have been beating someone up and they die. You may have been punching them, but you might not have realized that you were hurting them so much as to kill them, do you understand now?” This is how our group demonstrated spontaneity by answering questions for other members, rather than just moving on with the task. The group treated everyone else like they were equal, nobody put themselves on a higher “pedestal” than anyone else. This idea was illustrated because there was not yelling, or attitude during any point of our deliberation, which showed that all members could equally discuss the conflicts that arose and no one got really upset. Another part of the supportive climate is provisionalism which is defined by Beebe Masterson as that they appear flexible and genuinely committed to solving problems rather than to simply take sides on an issue (P. 106). With regards to the group being provisional, everyone in the group looked at each comment of each other member in a new way, the group was very open-minded. Due to such an open climate, many of our members took on quite a number of roles during the deliberation.
According to Beebe Masterson, “as members of a small group people bring with them their own perceptions, expectations, and experiences they have had with others. Ones self-expectations assume there roles in their small group,” (P. 74). Roles are assumed because of what others interest are and their abilities that fulfill the needs and expectations from the rest of the group, and sometimes roles are given. For example, Matt Dabbs assumed the role as a secretary by writing conclusions down in his notebook, during the reinforcement stage of our deliberation. Adam was assumed the role as recorder-secretary, when he was took the initiative to record information for the group on the white board for all members to see and maintain group organization. Adam recorded throughout the conflict and emergence phase, so that our group would stay organized, and be able to see what we had and had not discussed and concluded about in this case. Other members took on task roles as well, such as Jeana’s role as clarifier-summarizer during the conflict phase. This can be noted in Jeana’s discussion with Brian about voluntary and non-voluntary manslaughter, she can be quoted by saying, “…that is what Adam was saying,” and “…Pink gets it now!” Having Jeana take on the role of clarifier-summarizer did not slow our group down at all because she was able to discuss one on one with Brian until he had gotten an answer the question, while other members continued to vaguely discuss the other issues at hand. Another person that made it extremely clear they took on task roles was Michelina. She took on the roles of information giver, opinion giver, information seeker, opinion seeker and clarifier-summarizer. It was noticeable that she took on these roles because the way she interacted with the other group members during the deliberation. In all small groups, many members taken on roles as information and opinion givers and seekers, however
Michelina took on these roles more so than most of our group members. Michelina showed this by mainly providing other group members with factual information from the case and giving personal beliefs involving the suspects and what had occurred.

Along with task roles, maintenance roles were also taken on by several members. In the beginning of the deliberation when the group was discussing whether to charge each member as a minor or as an adult, Kyle was a follower. He repeatedly uttered statements that said “That’s what I think” and “I agree totally.” This role impacted our climate by giving positive reinforcement towards others ideas and helping to alleviate any tension that may rise. There were many of our members that took on the tension releaser role, such as Matt Floming by trying to ease things with small jokes after conflicts, so people would relax and get back to the main task. A few sporadic times throughout the meeting, Mr. Gibbs made the situation lighter. He played the part of the tension-reliever with a few “Rrrr’ noises and a joke about the officer who pulled the boys over earlier in the day; he referred to him as “Chief Wiggam.” Our tension did not necessarily become too high, but having other members of the group take on roles of tension releasers was helpful to the group. It seemed as though everyone relaxed and laughed at bit at the comments made by Kyle, and Matt, which kept the climate positive and upbeat. This positive climate helped the group progress and come to easier decisions with one another on disagreements and needed clarifications. There were two people that took on self-centered roles, however those two people did not seem to slow down or hold back the group. Brian Pinkley was the main group member that took on these roles. For instance, Brian asked Matt Dabbs to repeat a certain phrasing because he thought it was funny the way he was saying it. Brian injected inappropriate humor, which appeared as more
goofing off. It can even be seen in the video that Brian was drawing on his shoes, as though he looked bored with the deliberation and he only gave input when other members asked for a consensus on a certain issue. However, Brian’s self-centered roles did not slow down the group, because none of the other members seemed to focus on what Brian was doing during the deliberation, in fact it was not until we re-watched the video that we seen Brian was taking on a lot of self-centered roles. With our group ignoring what could have been a problem, we just progressed on through, trying to come to an agreement during the conflict phase. With a lot of the roles from task, maintenance, and self-centered taken on, conflict was present, but was not strong in the group, this making it easier for emergence to arrive.

Emergence is when a group begins to settle on norms and move toward a consensus that will start to wrap-up a task. It was noticeable from our group that emergence was occurring, because Michelina, and Jeana stated “Let’s start writing down the information,” while Adam, Kyle and Matt Dabbs decided that coming to a conclusion about charging the boys with minor or adult sentencing would be the best place to start. From that the group members emerged on what to charge each boy with and there sentence term. At one point in time during the deliberation, our group could not decide on the sentencing for involuntary manslaughter, but Jeana stated a story about a car accident and the victim ended with seven years in jail for both deaths. Bringing in that outside information from real life helped the group to realize that fifteen to twenty years might be too long and we began to come to a closer, happier, more agreeable sentence to be served. However, Matt Floming had told a story right after Jeana’s, explaining that some girl died from a baseball bat beating and the guy is in jail for life. That story did
not seem to have as much relevance to the situation as Jeana’s did, so instead of ponder
on Matt’s story, our group just pressed on and ignored Matt’s story for purposes of not
getting sidetracked. Even though our group was coming to a consensus, we still had
conflicts within the emergence of deciding the fate of the boys.

Finally, as a collective whole the boys were sentenced and the group was asked if
the decisions made were acceptable. Asking this question gave signal to the last phase
described in Fisher’s as reinforcement. This is described as a group gathering around the
final decision that has been made. From that our group agreed on the outcome, wrote
down the final decision on the white board and on paper, and then ended the deliberation.

Our group was able to explain, analyze, discuss and form a final decision
because we unknowingly followed the four phases outlined by Fisher as: orientation,
conflict, emergence, and reinforcement. This allowed the group to decide the best course
of action regarding the boys being put on trial for the murder of a peer. Furthermore, it
allowed group members to listen to the opinions of others critically without being
judgmental and allowing them to be open-minded toward other options that otherwise
would not have been brought into consideration.

Upon watching the video tape our group noticed that our decision making
process resembled that of the spiral model. Unknowingly using the spiral model, our
group found that it was effective in coming to a decision regarding the verdict for each
one of the boys. We noticed that the spiral model was used by our group because we
would start conflict for a specific topic and then become side tracked and rush to another
topic, which made our group bounce back and forth. Our group spiraled through the
phases for each issue about the boys, there age, and the sentencing. We used thoughts
and opinions from prior discussion to transition into the following phases, allowing the group to show other members different sides of each argument. The final verdict was reached by the group collectively after all information had been presented and discussed by each member in the group.

The group felt that our final verdict was a just one that was based on the age, prior criminal records and the actions of each suspect involved in the crime. The group also took into consideration each individual testimony given by the accused and the victims, determining what was factual information, what was circumstantial evidence and what information was given, only to sway the jury in favor of the victims and their families.

The charges given by our group are of less severity than those decided by the actual jury. In the actual verdict, three of the boys, charged as adults, were given life in prison, and the fourth, being a minor, was sent to a juvenile detention facility until the age of 18, thereafter serving a term of 25 years in prison. The actual jury based their verdict on the felony murder rule which according to www.cbsnews.com is, “[a law] which goes all the way back to old English law, treats people who are guilty of lesser crimes as murderers if they are with murderers when the murder occurs.” On the other hand, our group did not have the same resources as the original jury, therefore basing the verdicts solely on the facts and evidence given in the trial and not on the high emotions set by the victims’ families. Also, our decisions were not affected or swayed by any media interference or gossip among peers outside of the trial.

The interaction among the group could have been improved if the members had not allowed the conversation to go in “circles.” For example, the group
debated over the same points repeatedly, even if a decision had already been made and all members were in agreement. Some of the points that were repeatedly argued about was if Jason Holland’s accused stabbing was voluntary or involuntary, and the difference sentencing time for each boy seemed to be argued over and over again. Another way that group interaction could have been improved was by allowing only one person to talk at the same time, allowing that person to finish their thoughts without being interrupted by any of the other group members.

Collectively the group was satisfied with the discussion and the outcome of the deliberation. However, there were some unresolved questions that remained about the trial and the manner in which the investigation was conducted. Even though there were these remaining questions, the information that would have answered these questions would not have had any direct effect on the final verdicts given by the “jury,” our group.

What our group learned about small group communications was that each member in the group needs to learn to be patient and to listen to others’ opinions without being bullheaded or critical. Our group learned to open up and to hear what others had to say, and not to have predetermined notions, ignoring other members’ opinions.