Over the past semester I have been enrolled in an interpersonal communication class at Monmouth College. In this class I learned that interpersonal communication is a selective, systemic, ongoing process in which unique individuals interact to reflect and build personal knowledge to create meanings. At the beginning of the semester we were given instructions to take notes and follow a relationship that we were in or one that was close to us. We soon discovered that we would be writing a paper analyzing the communication in the relationship applying interpersonal concepts and theories to our relationship. The relationship that I watched over the semester was the relationship between my girlfriend and me. Emily and I have been dating since May this year and have gone through many changes in the last 4 months while I have been at school. Emily is a senior in high school, which created several conflicts in the relationship when summer ended and I had to go back to college. Due to the conflicts, we would fluctuate in the relational stages. We have even moved out of a serious relationship and are working on being just friends. The
changes in roles from a serious relationship to a friendship have been key factors to whether or not our friendship will last. Overall, our relationship has changed over the past semester and has used several key concepts in interpersonal communication that we have discussed in class.

Every relationship has conflicts. Julia T. Wood, author of *Interpersonal Communication Everyday Encounters*, defines interpersonal conflict as a situation “when people who depend on each other express different views, interests, or goals and perceive their views as incompatible or oppositional” (Wood 241). One of the major conflicts that developed between Emily and I during the semester was determining if I could go to her homecoming dance with her. Soon several other conflicts arose when we learned more about how that day would work. Her homecoming dance was on the night of Saturday October 11. I had several things going on that day as well. On that Saturday I had a soccer game against Augustana College in the Quad Cities. We both knew that one night on our daily phone conversation would bring up the issue of homecoming. I really wanted her to go to her homecoming because it was her senior year and I did not want her to miss out on having a great time because of my commitments. I could have made it to her dance, but I would have been a little late and felt awkward being a sophomore in college at a high school dance.
We knew that this conflict could be detrimental to our relationship. As the conversations continued prior to homecoming, we came to the conclusion that one of us was going to have to sacrifice something for the other. Emily began to show more emotions and really began to force the issue that I could make it and she would not be mad if I came late. I on the other hand explained to her how I would feel being at her dance and the problems with school having to be at school to partake in a prior commitment I had made to the house that weekend. In the book, *Making Connections*, it states, “People who have different individual ways of responding to conflict can develop a variety of strategies for talking about tense topics without harming their relationship” (Wood 249).

Emily and I took different roles in how we wanted to solve this conflict.

We were able to talk about how we wanted to resolve the conflict. According to Wood, we came up with a win-win orientation to our conflict. Wood describes a win-win as “an orientation toward conflict that assumes everyone can win, or benefit from engaging in conflict and that it is possible to generate resolutions that satisfy everyone” (Wood 250). Emily and I decided that she would skip her homecoming and she would come up and go to my soccer game and then go out to dinner afterwards in the Quad Cities. We both were able to achieve something that we wanted. Overall, we really wanted to spend
that special day together. We were able to successfully solve this conflict and move onto others.

Throughout the summer we spent a lot of time trying to find something fun to do. We were always going places, meeting new people, and having a good time. Because we started dating in the summer we did not know what it would be like not being able to see each other as much as we had been doing before. Being busy with our own lives relational dialectics became more evident. Wood defines relational dialectics as “opposing forces, or tensions that are normal parts of all relationships” (Wood 216). As the semester continued, novelty/predictability was a dialectic tension that was beginning to have a toll on both of us. We knew each others daily routine to the minute even though we were apart from each other. Wood states that novelty/predictability “is a tension between wanting routine, or familiarity, and wanting novelty in a relationship” (Wood 217). We talked on the phone at the same time every night. We got bored of the same pattern day after day. We also saw our phone conversations become similar. We always asked the same typical daily questions to see how things went that day. We asked these questions even though we both knew what the other person’s answer would be. As the relationship began to fall, we looked back at those times when we were bored and how there was not much we could have done to change this novelty/predictability tension.
As the semester continued our relationship began to take a turn. We were both busy with different parts of our lives and felt that we could not be there for one another as we were in the summer. I participated in soccer here at Monmouth College which took a lot of my free time away from her. I also am a member in a fraternity and enjoy spending the weekend with my brothers. She on the other hand is a dance team captain, has night classes at ICC, and holds a weekend job working as a cashier at a gas station. We began the process of moving away from each other. Mark L. Knapp and Anita L. Vangelisti have developed stages for relationship decline. Just like they have five stages for coming together they also have five stages for relationships that are breaking up. These stages are differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. As we began to break up we hit every one of these stages, but two most specifically.

The first stage that was most obvious was the differentiating stage. According to Knapp and Vangelisti, differentiating is “mainly a process of disengaging or uncoupling” (Knapp and Vangelisti 273). After we both ended summer and went back to our schools, we began to spend a lot of time debating some of the differences that each of us had. Our conversation decreased while we were in school. We spent more time talking on the phone, but less time actually seeing each other and communicating. Knapp and Vangelisti state, “The
most visible communication form of differentiating, of affirming individuality, is fighting or conflict, although it is possible to differentiate without conflict” (Knapp and Vangelisti 273). Emily and I were in a constant conflict. I knew that I could not be there for her all the time and prior to coming to school I had mentioned breaking up and still remaining friends. She stated that she liked me enough that no matter what we did not need to break up. I being in college and living in a fraternity knew that I was not ready to be tied down in a relationship unless that person was in college herself and could understand college life. It was hard to explain to Emily what I was doing on the weekend here at school because she could not come and visit. This brought on arguments and disagreements of how the relationship would be understood between us. I felt torn between my brothers, home, schoolwork, and Emily. I also felt that she was too involved with me and it was causing her to slack in her school work and her duties as a captain on her dance team. As the differentiating stage came to a close we also hit another one of Knapp and Vangelisti’s stages.

The terminating stage is the last stage of Knapp and Vangelisti’s stages. Emily and I spent a large amount of time in this stage. Over the semester we decided that the relationship was a struggle to keep together when the communication was so minimal. Termination is the final act of the breaking up in the relationship. Emily and I decided that we would take a break and see how
things ended up for us in the future. We spent a lot of time in this stage because I wanted to break up and she did not want to end the relationship. I promised her that we would still be great friends and be around for each other when we need it. Her main argument was that we could make it work. But my investment to the relationship was having an impact on life as a college student which kept me from wanting to get involved in a long term relationship. As of now, the communication has decreased greatly. We still talk on the phone, but not every day. We also have opened up a new form of communication; being involved in a friendship rather than a relationship.

As the semester comes to a close in my interpersonal communications class here at Monmouth College, I am now able to integrate several of the concepts I have learned into my everyday life. I was assigned to follow a relationship for a semester and to analyze that relationship by integrating concepts and patterns from the class. Emily and I began dating at the beginning of summer. As I left for school we would came across several complications in the relationships which led us to where we are today. It has been a journey to compare concepts from class to what has happened in my relationship with Emily. Today, Emily and I look forward to becoming great friends. Because we were very close at one time, we do not have much to hide and will be able to help each other in future relationships. A true test to our friendship will be
proven when I am home again for a month over Christmas break. We were a stable couple when I was home and around her everyday. We are going to see if we can be just friends and how that will affect us in the future.

Works Cited

