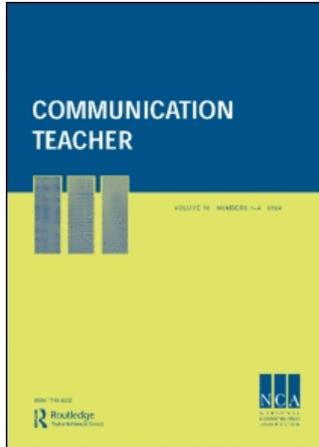


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Emotional Animals: Creating Controversy As Perspective-Taking in the Interpersonally Focused Classroom

Jessica J. Eckstein

Objectives: To increase awareness of communication theories and practice perspective-taking skills by challenging beliefs surrounding humans' unique emotional and nonverbal communication

Courses: Nonverbal, Interpersonal, Family Communication, and Communication Theory

Rationale

When students encounter opposing beliefs in college classrooms, they can opt to remain apathetic, change perspectives, or defend their position. The process of integrating theories with personal beliefs is important to students' application of theories to their lives, and an involved instructor guides students in such applications. Communication education and critical thinking are positively related (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Loudon, 1999). Adopting multiple perspectives on a single issue can help establish that link (Gayle, 2004) and is implemented in the following activity to encourage creative thinking about interpersonal concepts.

Activity

Lecture

Students in interpersonal classes are first presented with theories, including Ekman's (1992) research on nonverbal communication, facial expression, and primary emotions and Burgoon's (1978) Expectancy Violations Theory. Example concepts are summarized in table 1. Other interpersonal, emotional, or nonverbal communication theories can be substituted. Many scholars theorize that humans have unique abilities to emote and empathize in interpersonal relationships. This activity works to

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Table 1 Concepts Covered in Lectures Leading up to Film

Ekman (1992)	Primary emotions: Happiness, anger, sadness, surprise, fear, disgust (shame and contempt) Facial feedback theory: Each basic emotion associated with unique facial expression Facial expressions: Affect body in mutually reciprocal relationship Emotion does not exist without its communication
Burgoon (1978)	Expectancy violations: People hold expectations about nonverbal behavior Unexpected changes arousing and often ambiguous Interpretation depends on perception of violator Reward value of communicator Spatial violations—Hall's Proxemics

challenge both students' perceptions and interpersonal theories commonly taught in communication classrooms. Before students leave on the day lecture ends, teachers should pose the question, "Are we different from animals in our communication and relationships?"

Film Set-Up

After theory presentation and before the previous question is posed, one class period should be devoted to viewing the Discovery Channel film, *Why Dogs Smile and Chimpanzees Cry* (Fleisher, 1999). This film can be easily and affordably obtained in VHS or DVD format on any internet site (e.g., Amazon.com) selling books or movies. Because the film and lecture together form the catalyst for argumentation to follow, the film should be presented objectively. Instructors should point out: (a) the film is not objective fact; it represents one debate position; (b) it is acceptable to agree or disagree with the film; and (c) note arguments within the film with which you particularly agree/disagree.

Film Viewing

The film argues that animals possess human emotions and communication skills. It discusses interpersonal relationships, emotions, language, and nonverbal communication, presents similarities between humans and animals, and posits humans choose to ignore this communicative resemblance. If taken as valid, this film challenges a position held by many communication scholars. For example, some emotions studied by Ekman (1992) have been purported to exist uniquely in humans; Ekman's Facial Feedback Theory and Burgoon's (1978) Expectancy Violations Theory necessitate participants capable of rational thought. However, aspects of these theories can apply to animals, such as proxemics (e.g., animal territorial spaces), emotional expressions (e.g., animal body language), and interpersonal relationships (e.g., animal familial bonds, mating rituals). Thus, in addition to perspective-taking,

this activity also challenges commonly taught communication theories concerning human distinctiveness.

The film's chapter format is conducive to 50- or 80-minute classes. The activity is most successful (and enjoyable for students) with film presentation, but viewing is not necessary for debate. Animal-human similarity is a topic on which many students possess opinions.

Debate

Following the film, students choose a group based on their beliefs in response to the question, "Are humans unique in their interpersonal communication abilities?" For this activity, students should choose the position *opposite* their own beliefs. Students defend the position with which they do not actually agree, enhancing perspective-taking skills. Ultimately, students align with the (1) "Completely, Yes," (2) "Absolutely Not," or (3) "In Some Ways, Sure" belief positions. Visually reiterating perspectives, students sit in groups based on the position enacted. Because the "middle ground" is often easiest to assume ideologically, students can be instructed to eventually adopt one of the extremes.

Students brainstorm arguments in groups. Each group presents all their position-points at once. After both extremes have presented arguments, back-and-forth, point-by-point debate commences (sometimes organized chaos). This is not a formal debate activity with forensic rules of order and organization. Middle-ground conflict negotiation skills and formal debate procedures can be taught in advanced classes. Teachers act as moderators, keeping debate appropriate, yet spurring controversy when necessary by playing devil's advocate.

Teachers continually remind students to argue in terms of the theories taught. Students should be asked to consider the "truth" of these theories in terms of what they know, what the video argued, and what classmates say. For example, students use Burgoon's (1978) theory to argue that animals do not go through the complex decision-making process of humans to assess Reward Value of communicators. Opposing groups then respond that even humans have different ways of communicating, so it is entirely possible humans do not know animals' languages. In other words, if they can learn ours (as chimps have done with ASL), we can learn theirs if we deign to do so and empathize with their perspective; students here challenge knowledge structures as commonly taught—namely, what makes a claim true in interpersonal theories?

Throughout the debate, middle-ground group members can be encouraged to side with an extreme position. Instructors can choose to have middle-ground members not participate vocally unless siding with an extreme, eliminating "it depends" arguments that do not challenge critical thinking or perspective-taking skills (Allen et al., 1999). Critical thought exists when students are challenged to adopt perspectives contrary to their own, viewing multiple and diverse opinions (Gayle, 2004). Some instructors may worry that forced choice of extremes silences students choosing compromise positions. While nuanced positions are beneficial in everyday

life, they are also easier to adopt and may not involve critical thinking to the degree of adopting extremes. Thus, encouraging students to choose a position with which they may not necessarily agree is a contribution of this activity.

Adjustments

Students may pick extremes up front, eliminating middle grounds altogether. Adjusting for time constraints, students can write position arguments as outside homework after film viewing, giving additional time for argument contemplation. The in-class debate remains crucial, and group collaboration is ideal, but preliminary individual perspective-taking may be conducted.

Debriefing

When debate nears conclusion (or time is running out), instructors reiterate the interpersonal concepts formerly lectured. Possible questions to spur discussion include:

1. How do communication concepts vary in terms of animals and humans? Are Ekman and Burgoon [or whomever] still accurate?
2. When taking positions of the “Completely, Yes” group, do theories still apply? When taking positions of the “Absolutely No” group, does construction of communication change?
3. Does one divergent example make theories null? How many cases are necessary to validate theories/positions?

Example discussion questions vary according to the level of debate and communication knowledge of students. Further discussion for advanced groups could include questioning perceptions, anthropomorphism, intercultural communication, and/or meanings of knowledge acquisition—all ideas introduced in the film and during debate. These questions can also be used to spur lagging discussion throughout the activity.

Appraisal

This activity effectively elicits class involvement, as students enjoy classmate collaboration when allowed to do so during class (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002). Utilizing this activity early in the semester benefits subsequent discussions, as it induces less talkative students to participate by using topics about which many students have opinions. Time constraints can be limited by film omission and homework, suggested previously.

As a primary benefit, this activity increases active participation and moves even formerly reticent students to participate. Additionally, debating a topic on which many people have opinions allows students to feel competent participating with

personal experiences. Students realize diverse beliefs are valid and, when supported by theory and research, reinforce critical thinking. Incited to defend beliefs in an interpersonally educated manner, students react with perspective-taking skills benefiting them both in academia and in their daily lives.

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