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The American Pickers Demonstrates Communication Skills

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Abstract
This activity prepares students to identify persuasive communication practices in non-classroom environments and to view reality-based television programs as a learning platform for understanding communication theories and concepts. Using selected scenes or an entire episode from a popular reality-television program, *American Pickers*, students can observe how Mike and Frank establish a rapport with new customers, get to know them and their stories, negotiate sales, interact with each other as a team, and leave with a new relationship (client) and connection intact. The purpose of this exercise is to help students observe these initial contacts and relationships as they develop on the show in order to better understand persuasion theory and practice.

Courses

Interpersonal Communication, Communication Theory, Persuasion, Introduction to Mass Media, and Argumentation

Objectives

- To demonstrate persuasive communication skills when interacting with strangers.
- To learn the role of narrative and personal stories in order to add value and identity to individuals and objects.
- To expand the students' perspective on visual communication and how different audiences view the same artifacts.
- To demonstrate students' understanding of Cialdini's Seven Principles of influence techniques and their capacity to identify them during an episode of *American Pickers*.
- To expand the students' understanding of reality television for the purpose of modeling and learning communication concepts.

Introduction and Rationale

There is a natural gap between persuasion theory as presented in the classroom and persuasive performance in public. There are a variety of ways to bridge that gap in order to prepare students to use academic knowledge during their interactions with others. Performance courses, such as public speaking, provide students with a place to model and experience the

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challenges of reaching audiences. We can also send students into the campus and community to apply communication theory during interviews, internships, and class projects that provide opportunities to apply, study, and reflect on communication concepts.

Mediated presentations, such as reality television, are an additional resource for the instructor who is looking to bridge theory and practice. Baruh (2010) has argued that reality television serves as a form of voyeurism that provides viewers with exposure to information and experiences that might not be personally accessible. Reality television might also provide a way for viewers to engage in social comparison between themselves and their assumptions about how others communicate and relate to each other. Ouellette (2010) has also advocated for the role that reality television plays in translating "broader sociopolitical currents and circulates instructions, resources, and scripts for the navigating the changing expectations and demands of citizenship" (p. 68). DiGregorio (2006) recommends teaching by using television programming: "shows that have something to offer can provide the material for a fruitful analysis of the world around us, and a successful deconstruction of the ways in which people accept, reinforce or resist dominant ideologies and the status quo" (p. 58).

Scholarship about the implications behind the popularity of reality television has been growing as this genre of television programming has expanded. Collins (2009) identified at least 19 book-length projects, in multiple disciplines, concerning reality television over a 9-year period. Journal articles and other scholarly outlets have also contributed to discussions about the role of reality television in people's lives. This research supported the importance of reality television in the classroom as a means to study the relationships between theory and practice as they are modeled on the programs. For example, a recent study of self-disclosure and liking on reality television by Tal-Or and Hershman-Shitrit (2015) found interesting relationships between viewers and mediated characters, and recommended recognizing reality television for what it can teach us about audiences as well as how such research can contribute to more successful television programming.

This activity recognizes the relationship between reality television and persuasion theory, encouraging the faculty to seek creative ways to accomplish the goal of teaching these principles and concepts by using reality-television programs. This activity has selected a particular program, *American Pickers*, as an exemplar of how to proceed. Other programs can also contribute to this instructional goal, depending on course content and purpose.

Description of the Activity

Start the exercise with a discussion about reality television, why these programs are popular, and what viewers might learn from them. Introduce the *American Pickers* television show; explain the show format; and set the scene to allow students to concentrate on the persuasion concepts that are displayed. For a background on the show or a reading about its development, have students read Ankeny (2011) or other reports of the series. Limited scholarly work has been published on the show. One essay that is critical of the series as a form of commodity fetishism provides an additional perspective about the series but may not be needed for this activity (Jenkins, 2015).

When viewing the show, there are common activities and themes that are easily recognized, regardless of the specific episode. For example, a common challenge in the show is often described as "breaking the ice" with a client. This exchange represents the first sale and agreement. The process of negotiation and price agreement is always a present challenge in the

series. How to find agreement on a price, to offer justifications for a higher or lower rate, or to argue successfully for one perspective or another is an ongoing challenge. When describing the items that are being bought and sold, references to their appearance or aesthetics are common. The story, or narrative, behind the items is also a sought-after part for both the valuation and interpretation of the featured items. Examples of persuasive communication tactics in the show's exchanges are numerous and varied.

Students should be prepared to view the television episode through the lens of a persuasive communication theory. This exercise recommends Cialdini's (1993) work on influence techniques. His identification of Seven Principles can serve as a framework for students to view the episode and to relate it to persuasive-communication approaches. Cialdini looks at contrast, reciprocity, consistency, social proof, authority, liking, and scarcity as techniques to understand persuasive communication (Simons, Morreale, & Gronbeck, 2001, p. 136). Cialdini's work has been referenced in a variety of persuasion textbooks and can be used as a supplemental theory for class. Students can be introduced to the seven principles; a handout or matrix can be created to allow students to define and to identify the various principles that are depicted in the show.

After viewing the episode or show segment, have students, in groups, identify the specific influence techniques and practices that they observed with reference to particular moments in the broadcast. Students should be able to explain the technique they observed and attach that description to the action that is taking place in the show.

Debriefing

Debrief the groups by having them identify the persuasive tactics and practices that they observed. Discuss techniques, and compare the results with other groups. Discuss the differences between the persuasion concepts in the abstract and the actual demonstrations that were viewed in the television show. This activity can take place over one or two class periods, depending on the instructor's goals and the content that is evaluated. Prescreening the episode is necessary to prepare instructions for the class and to facilitate discussion. This exercise could be repeated with additional scenes or at another point during the semester in order to illustrate other persuasion theories and to reinforce the relationship between theory and practice.

Evaluation

In addition to the classroom discussion and debriefing on the show, a follow-up project can be assigned to require students to select a different reality show. Then, students can identify and justify their analysis of persuasion theory for the episode. Students use their critical-thinking skills and their accumulated knowledge of theory to evaluate actual communication practices. An alternative assignment might be to have students study the similarities and differences between various reality programs and/or types of programs. Such an assignment could explore the role of persuasion or communication theory and practice in reality television as a genre. These assignments might be useful early in the course to evaluate a specific area of persuasion theory or might be used as a summary or assessment of a student's success with internalizing an entire course or select groups of principles. Through this activity and assignment, students can demonstrate critical thinking, creative interpretation, and communication-research skills.

Note: Episodes or scenes from the show can be found on the History Channel, YouTube, iTunes, or Netflix.

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