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Engaging Persuasion: What Should Undergraduate Students Enrolled in a Persuasion Course Learn?

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Abstract: In our daily activities we are bombarded with persuasive messages. From advertising on mass and social media to interactions with friends, we are constantly exposed to attempts to change or reinforce our attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Conversely, we routinely attempt to influence others and gain their compliance through persuasive attempts of our own. Without question, persuasion is a central feature of virtually every aspect of human communication and is found wherever we find people communicating. Fortunately, scholars have developed a great number of empirically tested persuasive techniques, strategies, and theories that can help students become effective producers and consumers of persuasive messages. This article outlines the foundations, content areas, and applied assignments appropriate for an undergraduate persuasion course. In addition, we outline several pedagogical issues for instructors to consider.

Persuasion courses have been an essential feature of the curriculum in communication departments for some time. The roots of persuasion can be traced from ancient Greek and Roman scholars to present-day theorists and researchers. Most any communication department either requires students to take the persuasion course or offers it as a popular elective. This article outlines the foundations, content areas, and applied assignments appropriate for an undergraduate persuasion course. In addition, we discuss several pedagogical issues for instructors to consider.

Foundations

The primary goal of a persuasion course is to provide students with a solid grounding in theories, principles, and strategies of persuasion as they apply to everyday contexts in which influence attempts

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occur. The course defines persuasion and juxtaposes that definition with related terms such as “coercion,” “propaganda,” and “deception.” Additionally, this course articulates the boundaries of ethical persuasion. Relatedly, this course should address the positive uses of persuasion that enhance the democratic process and common good as well as the dark side of persuasion wherein influence attempts manipulate, limit, or restrict free will and choice, or occur below the threshold of conscious awareness. Students will gain familiarity with findings from empirical investigations of persuasion, social influence, and compliance gaining, as well as learn about strategies and techniques of persuasion relating to a wide variety of real-life communication contexts, situations, and settings. Students also should be provided with opportunities to develop a better understanding of the many ways that persuasion theories and skills can be used as a tool for civic and political engagement.

Content Areas

A suggested organizational pattern for a persuasion course is based upon the premise that students first need exposure to what persuasion is and its ethical implications when used in a negative manner. Ideally, instructors would begin the course by exposing students to the benefits of studying persuasion, clearly defining persuasion, and providing an overview of the aims of persuasive communication. Instructors should consider covering dual process models (e.g., Elaboration Likelihood and Heuristic Systematic Models, Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1987) of persuasion early in the course to lay the foundation for how persuasive messages are cognitively processed. In addition, instructors should cover ethical persuasion early in the semester and continue to make applications to ethics throughout the remainder of the course.

The next content area should introduce students to using persuasion for the common good. Students should be exposed to the positive contributions of engaged persuasion by understanding its applications to civic engagement, campaigns, social movements, and group decision-making. Demonstrating the relationship between persuasion and civic engagement helps students better understand the pro-social applications of persuasion research and theory, and establishes the foundation for any assignments used in the course.

Students then should be introduced to the role that attitudes play in persuasive communication as well as the attitude/behavior relationship (e.g., the theories of Planned Behavior and Reasoned Action, Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010), as well as explore the research literature on production and consumption of persuasive messages. Importantly, reading materials include both foundational theories (e.g., Diffusion of Innovations Theory and literature regarding framing of persuasive messages and persuasive appeals, Rogers, 2003) of persuasion as well as contemporary theories (e.g., Psychological Reactance Theory, Brehm, 1966; the Extended Parallel Processing Model, Witte, 1992) and cutting-edge research. Beyond these social scientific approaches, we suggest that instructors draw upon Toulmin’s (2003) Argument Model to demonstrate the essential elements of persuasive messages.

Next, learning about message reception and the dimensions of source credibility will provide the more technical aspects concerning the construction and decoding of persuasive messages. Covering message characteristics before source is unique for a persuasion course, but this sequence helps students understand persuasion fully before analyzing how messages are constructed and received (conversely, covering source before message characteristics is problematic because it assumes a linear process of

persuasive communication). Theory readings can be integrated as they relate to compliance gaining and sequential persuasion, receiving persuasive messages (e.g., priming effect, piquing receivers, and the role of culture in processing messages), and theories of behavioral reactions (e.g., Cognitive Dissonance Theory, Festinger, 1957; Social Judgment Theory, Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Motivated Reasoning Theory, Kunda, 1990).

Applied Assignments

A persuasion course should include three types of assignments: civic engagement projects, engaged persuasion activities, and a podcast journal assignment. Civic engagement projects are group-based, semester-long assignments wherein groups select a topic (with instructor approval) and design a persuasive campaign to enhance the common good. Possible topics would spring from an issue, cause, or organization pertaining to a social, political, or civic concern. Groups would work through the project logistics to implement a persuasive campaign that raises awareness and changes the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of an intended target audience. For instance, a civic engagement project could entail a group raising awareness about stem cell donation and obtaining commitments from target audiences to get tested and become potential stem cell donors.

Engaged persuasion activities, completed independently or in groups and embedded throughout each unit of the course, require students to make applications of course content to multiple personal and professional contexts. These instructor-developed activities take an issue such as anti-vaxxers and ask students to apply persuasion theories and research to understand how to counter the arguments against childhood vaccinations; students might be asked to play the role of a hired communication consultant for such a persuasive health campaign. In this instance, students are asked to provide recommendations that are firmly rooted in persuasion theory and research.

The podcast journal assignment helps students make connections to persuasion theory and research beyond the classroom, bolster their awareness of current events, and become more civically engaged. This assignment requires students to construct a podcast journal documenting that they listened to a minimum of 14 podcasts over the course of the semester selected from the following podcasts: BBC Global News Update, NPR Hourly News Summary, NPR Up First, PRI The World, or Decode DC. In the journal, students identify the name and date of the podcast to which they listened, write a brief paragraph noting the relevant connections to persuasion theory and research, and indicate the larger significance of the topic to local, national, or international politics.

Issues to Consider

There are several substantive issues that communication educators should consider when constructing their syllabi. Initially, instructors should consider how they will address persuasion theory and research in the post-truth era. Oxford Dictionary named “post-truth” the word of the year in 2016 and defined it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). The term received a great deal of attention following the 2016 Presidential election, but has applications far beyond political

communication. As Waisbord (2018) argued, the post-truth era marks the “difficulty, if not impossibility, of sustaining rational, fact-based, scientific claims about reality as categorically true and dominant at a time when any assertion about truth and reality can become public, reach wide audiences, and get broad attention in the Internet” (p. 20). Students should come to an understanding of the implications of the post-truth era for persuasion by exploring research examining the origins of post-truth persuasion and how claims are disseminated as well as the strategies used for producing and consuming persuasive messages in a post-truth world. We agree with Waisbord that communication scholars and educators should “articulate communication ideals and the critique of new forms of mass deception with a viable, evidence-grounded roadmap for truth-telling in public life” (p. 31).

Persuasion instructors also should consider carefully the profound influence of new digital and social media on persuasive communication. As Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, and de Zúñiga (2017) noted, individuals are increasingly turning to social media to communicate, consume, produce, and distribute messages on a wide variety of topics, including politics. Simply put, online persuasive communication is ubiquitous and students should learn how message construction, reception, and dissemination in online environments differ from face-to-face persuasion. As a result, the course should introduce students to the most current research available on new media and persuasion.

In addition, students should be encouraged to envision how they could use persuasive communication to become civically engaged and advance the common good through social movements, communication campaigns, small group decision-making, and persuasive public speaking. This content helps prepare students to communicate effectively as citizens in a democracy and to avoid being victimized by manipulative messages and fake news. Several scholars (Hikins & Cherwitz, 2010; Hunt & Woolard, 2016; Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 2012) have made the case that communication faculty are well positioned to promote civic learning. Importantly, Hillygus (2005) argued that training in persuasive communication can play a significant role in encouraging students’ future civic and political engagement. While civic engagement is a unique characteristic of this suggested persuasion course, it also addresses more traditional ways in which studying communication can benefit students’ lives.

Finally, depending on the place of the persuasion course in the department curriculum, instructors may want to select a textbook that offers an appendix or chapter about delivering persuasive public speeches and/or group discussions.

Conclusion

The course described in this article is designed to enable students to become informed and critical consumers of persuasive messages. In addition, a better understanding of persuasive communication enhances students’ efforts to persuade others. In sum, this course should be constructed to introduce students to a wide variety of empirically tested persuasive concepts and theories that will aid them in every facet of their lives—from influencing friends and family to resisting the persuasive attempts of others to using their knowledge of persuasive communication to become an active citizen in our democracy.

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