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GIFT: Great Idea for Teaching Speech

Exploring Expectancy Violations Theory and Proxemics with the *Impractical Jokers***Andie Malterud, MS**

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Abstract

Proxemics and expectancy violations theory (EVT) are the groundwork for understanding interpersonal and nonverbal communication. Previous research has indicated students retain information long-term when humor and videos that form memorable messages are incorporated into the classroom. The activity discussed in this GIFT uses the popular comedy show, *Impractical Jokers*, to help students apply abstract concepts to real-life examples. Several discussion questions are suggested to help students critically analyze the videos and recognize proxemics and EVT. The second set of discussion questions asks students to consider their expectations, how their expectations are formed, why some individuals have different expectations, and why expectations may vary in some circumstances based on proxemics. Limitations of this activity are discussed, and alterations are suggested to address the limitations.

Courses

Interpersonal Communication, Communication Theory, Nonverbal Communication, or Basic Course

Objectives

1. Explain expectancy violations theory and proxemics
 - a. Differentiate between positive and negative reactions to EVT
 - b. Identify different social distances and how they relate to proxemics
2. Recognize instances of proxemics and EVT in the video
3. Apply principles of proxemics and EVT to their lives
4. Evaluate what contributes to people reacting positively or negatively when their expectations are violated.

Introduction and Rationale

In daily life, interpersonal expectations guide our communication with others. These interpersonal expectations focus on how we expect others to behave and communicate (Canary, Cody, & Manusov, 2008). Individual's reactions to violations are numerous, but a common response is to create distance between oneself and the offender. This distance is called proxemics, which is a form of nonverbal communication (Burgoon, 1993). Proxemics refers to the organization, use, and interpretation of space and distance (Burgoon, 1993) and can apply to various topics such as behavior, communication, and social interactions. Essentially, proxemics is a hidden aspect of culture that is used to express a universally known message that transcends a single culture (Hall, 1959). An individual's expectation of acceptable proxemics varies based on dimensions of space and the appropriate space changes based on social interactions (Burgoon, 2015). For example, interactions within a personal proximity are reserved for intimate interactions, while greater distances are used in social interactions (Burgoon, 2015).

Burgoon's expectancy violations theory (EVT) expands on proxemics. EVT explains that individuals have expectations for someone's behavior, and we form these expectations based on past encounters and social norms. These expectations and social norms change depending on the relationship with an individual as well as factors such as gender, culture, race, and the setting of the encounter (Burgoon & Walther, 1990). When someone deviates from these social norms, they violate expectations (Burgoon & Walther, 1990), resulting in a positive or negative reaction (Burgoon, 1993).

Proxemic expectations can vary depending on a variety of factors such as culture, gender, and age (Burgoon, 2015). For example, when men interact with other men, they tend to stand further apart compared to when two females interact (Aiello & Aiello, 1974; Burgoon, 2015). A common misconception is that if an individual violates our expectations, our reactions are negative. Such as the case if a stranger invades an individual's intimate space would invoke a negative reaction. However, if two people are romantically interested in each other, entering one's intimate space may invoke a positive reaction to the expectancy violation. Both proxemics and EVT build a theoretical foundation for interpersonal and nonverbal communication.

Instructors can use various methods to teach proxemics and EVT. One method shown to be effective is the use of humor in the classroom (Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan & Griffin, 2015). Goodboy et al. (2015) explained that when instructors incorporate humor into the classroom, students report higher levels of cognitive learning, experience increased motivation, and are more interested in the material. In conjunction with humor, incorporating videos into a learning activity can be a useful tool. Berk (2009) explained that videos have potential positive outcomes such as, grab students' attention, generate interest, increase understanding, and create memorable messages. Utilizing humor and videos to create a memorable message can help students recall concepts of proxemics and EVT.

Additionally, there is a biological reason to incorporate videos due to their ability to engage both hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere processes dialogue and plot, while the right hemisphere processes visual images and relationships (Hebert & Peretz, 1997). As long as the relationship between the content being taught and the videos are made explicitly clear, engaging both sides of the brain can promote long-term memory as opposed to using one hemisphere alone (Berk, 2009). Furthermore, using meaningful videos in the classroom is an appropriate way to introduce complex topics to students in an introductory course (Berk, 2009). Videos are excellent tools that appeal to a wide variety of learners specifically, visual and spatial

learners who may not succeed in a course that relies heavily on traditional methods of teaching such as lecture alone (Berk, 2009).

Proxemics and EVT are crucial building blocks to understanding interpersonal and nonverbal communication. By incorporating humor and videos into a lesson, instructors can create memorable messages that ensure students will remember important theoretical concepts long-term. Lastly, this activity can be used as a building block for instructors to find other meaningful humorous videos that relate to other communication theories.

Description of the Activity

To prepare for this activity, an instructor can use YouTube to search for *Impractical Jokers* clips and choose two that illustrate proxemics and EVT. *Impractical Jokers* is a comedic series on truTV about four men who complete ridiculous and embarrassing tasks in front of strangers. Most clips available will suffice; however, we recommend using “Murr Tries to Kiss Strangers” (truTV, 2012) and “Joe Creeps Out Everyone at the Gym” (truTV, 2016). Both suggested videos are under four minutes and demonstrate aspects of the proxemics and EVT.

Prior to class, students should read about proxemics and EVT. During class, instructors should give a brief overview (i.e., about 10 minutes) of these concepts before showing the *Impractical Jokers* videos. Additionally, instructors should tell students to take notes about the concepts of proxemics and EVT illustrated in the videos as well as the reactions of the unknowing participants in the challenges.

Debriefing

After showing the videos, instructors can ask the following questions as a large group discussion or think-pair-share based on time and preference. The humorous nature of the videos should prompt a lively class discussion where students can gain a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts by analyzing the videos and providing specific examples to support their responses. After the discussion on specific theoretical concepts, instructors should pose the following questions that allow students to apply the theoretical concepts to their lives. This entire activity will take approximately 20-25 minutes to complete.

1. What types of expectations were the Jokers violating?
2. How did the unknowing participants respond to the violations?
 - a. Were the responses positive or negative?
 - b. What makes some people react positively and others negatively?
3. What factors contribute to the creation of our expectations? (e.g., gender, race, age, geographical location).
4. What proxemic expectations did the Jokers violate?
 - a. Do you think violation in the intimate or public space elicited stronger reactions?
5. If you were one of the unknowing participants, how do you think you would have responded to the Jokers' behavior?
6. What factors would make you react positively or negatively (e.g., attraction, setting, rapport, gender, age)?
7. If you were a Joker, would you perform these tasks? Why or why not?

8. If you ever violated a social norm, what happened, and how did the person react?
9. Has anyone violated your expectations, if so, how did you react?

Assessment

This activity utilizes humor and videos to help create memorable messages for students and provides a concrete example of an abstract theory to help students understand proxemics and EVT. Students should view the videos with some background information of proxemics and EVT in order to meet the objectives. Students can meet all objectives from watching the videos and engaging in the discussion questions.

Objectives 1 and 2

If instructors use the suggested videos, both depict instances of negative and positive reactions people have when their expectations are violated. For example, in “Murr Tries to Kiss Strangers,” a man is visibly upset when Murr tries to kiss him. This interaction can lead to a discussion about masculinity expectations. A positive reaction to an expectancy violation occurs when a woman does kiss Murr, thus violating his expectation that no stranger would kiss him.

The video “Joe Creeps Out Everyone at the Gym” can help students understand social norms and violations of these norms in social places. This public space compares to the violations of expectations in an intimate space with the “Murr Tries to Kiss Strangers” video. The individuals in these videos experience different reactions to their expectations being violated. For example, Murr is threatened with violence when he violates expectations in an intimate space while Joe is stared at while violating expectations in a public space.

Objective 3

Objective three focuses on students recognizing proxemics and EVT in their lives. Discussion questions 7-9 ask students to consider their expectations and actions. With time permitting, instructors could consider making some of the discussion questions written reflection questions instead to have students consider their behavior in more depth.

Objective 4

The last objective requires students to evaluate what contributes to people reacting positively or negatively when their expectations are violated. According to Bloom’s taxonomy, the act of evaluation requires higher comprehension. Therefore, instructors should use the discussion questions to encourage to critically think about why some people would react certain positively or negatively. Instructors should direct students with probing suggestions like attractiveness, personality, rapport, and age, to get students to consider how norms and expectations are fluid.

Limitation and Activity Alternatives

A variation of this activity is to have students reflect on their own before discussing. Have students write down answers to the discussion questions before discussing with the class.

This encourages students to self-reflect and apply theories to their lives. Students may feel more comfortable contributing to the class discussion if they have prepared responses. Overall, by reflecting and then discussing, students can make proxemics and EVT relevant to their experiences and then learn from other students' diverse perspectives during the discussion.

Instructors may also have students search for examples of proxemics and EVT in other media videos on YouTube in small groups. Students can then show the video to the class and discuss proxemics and EVT instances in the video. This alternative requires reliable technology in the classroom and for students to use laptops.

As with all activities, there are two main limitations. First, technology issues may arise in the form of removed videos from YouTube or failing internet access. Instructors should consider backup activities if this occurs. One suggestion and possible variation of this activity are to have students spend ten minutes walking around campus or the building and try to violate a stranger's expectations in a safe, respectful, and creative way. For example, students could ride an elevator and face other individuals in the elevator instead of the door or stand too close in line to someone. When students return, it is essential to discuss the students' experiences. The discussion questions and time allocated for the activity may need to be altered.

A second limitation is the cultural implications of using the suggested videos. The *Impractical Jokers* show is based in the United States, and cultural violations may not translate to diverse students. Burgoon (2015) explains these cultural differences by comparing the Mediterranean culture, which allows for closer proxemics to the Scandinavian culture, which expects greater space. In the suggested video, "Murr Tries to Kiss Strangers," some students from different cultures may not recognize kissing strangers as an expectancy violation. To account for this limitation, instructors should consider the background of their students and select a video which is applicable to a variety of cultures. Alternatively, the class discussion could include questions about intercultural differences. A potential question could ask: how do proxemics and EVT differ based on culture? This question could lead the discussion towards gender differences, ethnocentrism, and the importance of cultural intelligence.

Overall, instructors should feel free to explore other videos that include humor and depict proxemics and EVT. In order to meet the objectives for this activity, instructors should feel comfortable leading a thoughtful discussion and further probe students when necessary. The benefits of humor and videos to form memorable messages can transcend to other aspects of the classroom and instructors should utilize these strategies to help explain abstract or complicated ideas to students.

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