TEACHER'S WORKBOOK

A Precarious Prediction: Applying Predicted Outcome Value Theory to Classroom First Impressions

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Abstract

First impressions have a significant impact on our initial and long-term communication interactions. The predicted outcome value theory suggests that the initial impressions we make upon meeting someone new stimulate us to make predictions about potential outcomes and values of continuing or terminating a relationship (Sunnafrank, 1986). This classroom activity provides an opportunity to explore predicted outcome value theory through application and discussion-based learning. Students have praised the activity and demonstrated growth in the learning outcomes.

Keywords: Communication Pedagogy, Predicted Outcome Value Theory, First Impressions

Courses: Introductory Survey Course (provides an overview of public speaking, interpersonal communication, and small group communication) and Interpersonal Communication

Objectives:

- Students will recognize the significance of first impressions in initial communication interactions.

- Students will apply predicted outcome value theory to communication interactions.

- Students will evaluate the consequences of focusing on outcomes and values of a relationship during initial interactions.

Introduction and Rationale

Berger and Calabrese (1975) contended, "When strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction" (p. 100). Predicted outcome value theory (Sunnafrank, 1986) further contended that first impressions, the initial assessments made upon meeting someone new, motivate us to predict the extent to which investment into the relationship will be worthwhile. "When we first meet another person, we predict the probable outcome of our relationship and try the hardest to develop relationships we expect to be rewarding" (Gamble & Gamble, 2013, p. 62). For example, if we form an initial positive judgment of an individual, then we are likely to engage in more communication with them and seek additional information. On the contrary, if we form a negative judgment of an individual, we might restrict our communication with that individual (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004).

Horan et al. (2011) found that students' first impressions of their instructor affected their judgments about future instructor interactions. Other research has documented the impact of first impressions on students' relationship development with their classmates (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Therefore, considering the significance of initial interactions on interpersonal communication, the first day of an academic course allows a unique opportunity to illustrate and discuss the importance of first impressions, both of one's instructor and one's classmates. Thus, to demonstrate the significance of first impressions and an application of predicted outcome value theory, this classroom activity instructs students to make relational predictions based on these initial classroom interactions. Then, later during the semester, the students discuss whether initial interactions affected their relational formation with fellow students and with their instructor.

The Activity

This classroom activity requires approximately 50 minutes of class time divided among three class periods over the semester: the first day, a day about two weeks into the class, and a day close to the end of the semester. The time requirements and processes are detailed below.

Activity Part One

Time one, the first day of class (20 minutes): Like many instructors, I spend a significant portion of my first class introducing the course and engaging in activities designed to introduce the members of the class to their classmates and me. For the student introductions, I prefer to have the students form dyads, spend a few minutes getting to know one another, and end by having them introduce each other to the class. I also engage in other introductory activities and ice-breaking activities that allow students to meet and have initial interactions with their new classmates. Following the student introductions, I introduce myself by sharing information about my background, including my academic journey. After all of the introductory activities are complete, I provide the students with a piece of paper and an envelope. Next, I ask the students to write a letter to themselves, answering the following questions:

1. Based on one of the students you met during the introduction exercise, what is your current impression of the person you just met? Based on your initial impressions, do you believe you will be able to maintain a positive relationship with the individual you just met? Why or why not?

2. Based on your introduction to the professor, what is your current impression of the professor? Based on your initial impressions, do you believe you will be able to maintain a positive relationship with the professor? Why or why not?

When the students complete their letters, they should fold their letter and place the note inside the envelope, write their name on the outside of the envelope, then seal the envelope and return it to the instructor. The instructor should explain that the letters will be kept confidential and that the letters will be stored in a secure place for use again at the end of the semester (day three discussed below).

Activity Part Two

Time two (10 minutes) occurs during the point of the semester that you discuss first impressions, predicted outcome value theory, and perception. The textbook utilized for my introductory course includes content on first impressions and predicted outcome value theory within the broader concept of perception (see Gamble & Gamble, 2013). Following the explanation of the different concepts, I ask the students to recall the first day of our class, their initial interactions with their classmates, and the predictions they made in the letter they wrote to themselves. Next, in a large group discussion, the students respond to the following questions:

1. Based on first impressions, to what extent do verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and perceptions of individual status influence the predictions you make about future relationships with others?

2. In what ways does a positive or negative prediction about an initial interaction affect future interactions?

3. What are the potential negative consequences of focusing on the potential outcomes and values of a relationship during initial interactions with others?

Activity Part Three

Time three (20 minutes) is typically during the last week of the class. The final day of the activity provides an opportunity for the final synthesis and reflection of the activity. I begin by

returning the letters that the students wrote to themselves to the original author. Then, I ask students to open their letters and to individually read their responses to the question prompts from day one. Next, in a large group discussion, the students respond to the following questions:

1. Are the predictions you made about your first impression of one of your classmates and the instructor accurate or inaccurate?

2. What does the accuracy or inaccuracy of your prediction say about the significance of first impressions and the utility of predicted outcome value theory?

Debriefing

The final step, included in part three of the activity, is the debriefing that allows the students time to process the activity experience, critically reflect on class discussions regarding the activity, and illustrate an application of the learning outcomes associated with the activity. I prefer to debrief in smaller groups of four to six; however, the debriefing questions below are also appropriate for a large class discussion.

1. What did you learn about first impressions and interpersonal relationship development through this exercise?

2. How do the positive or negative judgments we make during initial conversation impact relationship development?

3. How would you modify your future initial communication interactions based on your understanding of first impressions, impression management, and predicted outcome value theory?

Appraisal

Before this activity, students indicate that they have some understanding of the influence of first impressions on relationship formation. However, most students are not aware of the

complexity of perception and its relationship to our first impression of others. By completing this tri-part activity, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the significance of initial communication interactions and the utility of predicted outcome value theory.

Overall, I have found that students enjoy the process of reflecting on their initial predictions from the first day of class. Students often comment on the accuracy of their predictions. However, in some cases, students' predictions are not accurate, which often leads to a robust and insightful conversation about human communication variables and their complexity. The classroom discussions have been lively, exciting, and even transformative. More so, the activity allows the students to demonstrate the application of the student learning outcomes.

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