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ABSTRACT

Magic can be used in the communication classroom as a means for introducing and/or illustrating the subject of persuasion. A magical effect which fools the class can lead to an early discussion of the need to be a critical consumer of persuasive messages. Magic can also be used to introduce the subject of ethics in persuasion. Each student can be given an "individual" astrological reading which, in fact, is the same for everyone. These "cold readings" contain general statements that apply to most everyone. However, students will generally ascribe great accuracy to the readings. Thus, students are persuaded that the readings were prepared "just for them." The ethics of using cold readings to persuade someone that one is "psychic" can be used as a springboard to discussions of ambiguity, vagueness, and deception in persuasive messages. Finally, magic can be used as an illustration of nonverbal persuasive messages. Successful magical performance is most often dependent on misdirection, or controlling the audiences' attention away from some movement or discrepancy, which is often accomplished through nonverbal means. This can lead to a discussion of the use of nonverbal tactics in persuasion. The three best ways to learn magic that can be used in a classroom are from books, from video tapes, and from personal instruction. Contains 17 references. (RS)

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Sleightly Persuasive:

Using Magic to Teach Principles of Persuasion

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Sleightly Persuasive:

Using Magic to Teach Principles of Persuasion

The use of conjuring as a novel means for introducing and/or illustrating select principles of persuasion is discussed. Magic can be used as a means for introducing the subject of the persuasion class. In a performance, the magician attempts to persuade the audience that he or she can seemingly accomplish the impossible. A magical effect which fools the class can lead to an early discussion of the need to be a critical consumer of persuasive messages. Another way magic can be used is as a means for introducing the subject of ethics in persuasion. For example, each student can be given an "individual" astrological reading which, in fact, is the same for everyone. These readings contain general statements that apply to most everyone. However, students will generally ascribe great accuracy to the readings. Thus, students are persuaded that the readings were prepared "just for them." This technique is called cold-reading, which is used by "psychics" to tell a person "all about themselves." The ethics of using cold-reading to persuade someone that one is "psychic" can be used as a springboard to discussions of ambiguity, vagueness, and deception in persuasive messages. Finally, magic can be used as an illustration of nonverbal persuasive messages. Successful magical performance is most often dependent on misdirection, or controlling the audiences' attention away from some movement or discrepancy. This is often accomplished through nonverbal means. This can lead to a discussion of the use of nonverbal tactics in persuasion. Ideas for how to add magic to one's educational repertoire are presented.

Sleightly Persuasive:

Using Magic to Teach Principles of Persuasion

Magic has been used in the educational setting (through "school shows" and individual performances by teachers) to emphasize and illustrate many diverse messages. The messages in "school shows" have included increasing safety awareness, increasing interest in reading, and preventing drug and alcohol abuse. Magic has also been used by some teachers in the classroom as a way of gaining and keeping the interest of their students (Frasier, 1993; McCormack, 1990; Severn, 1979). In this paper, I discuss how magic can be used in the communication classroom as a novel means for introducing and/or illustrating select principles of persuasion.

Using Magic In Presentations

Magic is a great deal of fun! It is enjoyable to perform and enjoyable to experience. Though magic is not always art, it can be a performance art if the magician is an artist (Maskelyne & Devant, 1946). According to Williams (1988), there are five keys to success in magic: desire, practice, enthusiasm, people skills, and more practice. Many people famous outside of magic have been attracted to the art, such as Harry Anderson, Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, Prince Charles, Cary Grant, Arsenio Hall, Michael Jackson, and Steve Martin (Davenport, 1992). Magic has been identified as an excellent way to make presentations more effective. Jeffreys (1989b) identified three reasons why magic works so well in presentations, such as speeches or lectures:

1) It is the ultimate visual aid. Think about it. Practically all speech books talk about the power of using visual aids in speeches. What could be more visual than a magic trick? Suppose you were giving a speech on problem solving, when suddenly, you took out a handkerchief with the word PROBLEMS written across it, and caused it to disappear. Your audience would love it and you would have their undivided attention.
2) It appeals to people of all ages. No matter how young or how old people are, they love to have their senses challenged. In addition, magic has no boundaries when it comes to race, geography, or income. Rich or poor, fat or thin, black or white, Russian or American; magic appeals to practically everyone.
3) It can be tied into just about any topic. Instead of writing the word PROBLEMS on the handkerchief as in the preceding example, you could write the word PROCRASTINATION. After making the handkerchief vanish, you could then give a speech on how to make procrastination disappear from one's life. (p. 11)

Magic in the Classroom

McCormack (1990) states that "I enthusiastically believe that magic is an amazingly potent tool for teachers. It delights! It amazes! But it also catches attention, develops thinking skills, and makes dull curriculum concepts come alive" (p. 3). While much of McCormack's discussion of the educational use of magic relates directly to teaching children, many of his ideas and much of his magic could be applied to the teaching of communication (see his book for a thorough discussion of the use of magic in education). As he notes, magic can be profitably used in the educational setting as a novel means of adding emphasis to or illustrating a point. In this paper I will discuss three ways magic can be used in the persuasion classroom in detail.

Introducing the Persuasion Class with Magic

The first way I will discuss that magic can be used in the persuasion classroom is as a means for introducing the subject of the class. Magic is a persuasive act. In a performance, the magician attempts to persuade his or her audience that he or she can seemingly accomplish the impossible.

A teacher can use a magical effect (a magic "trick") which fools the class to lead into an early discussion of the need to be a critical consumer of persuasive messages. Any magic effect which the teacher has practiced and which fools the class can be used. The recommended books at the end of this paper reveal any number of magic effects which might be used. After fooling the class, the teacher can this reveal certain information about the effect without exposing the secret (unless one performs an effect which is *meant* to be revealed, one should never reveal the secret of any magic effect). For example, the teacher can admit to the students that they did not see everything that occurred. He or she can admit that sleight-of-hand was involved, if it was. Then, based upon the performance and the information about the effect, the teacher can ask questions which can lead the students to reflect on how their experience relates to their exposure to persuasive messages. Some examples of questions which might be used include: What types of "sleight-of-hand" do producers of persuasive messages (i.e., advertisers, politicians, etc.) use? Do they hide relevant information from their audiences? If so, is this ethical? Is magic an example of persuasion? If so, is it an ethical form of persuasion? If not, what keeps it from being considered a form of persuasion? Do public relations practitioners ever direct their audience's attention away from some things and toward other things? All of these questions are relevant to the study of the principles of persuasion (Larson, 1992).

Introducing Ethics in Persuasion

The second way magic can be used in the persuasion classroom is as a means for introducing the subject of ethics in persuasion. Larsen (1992) states that persuasion "always contains *potential* ethical issues" (p. 30). Nilsen (cited in Bradley, 1988) states that ethics is concerned "with questions about the meaning of 'good' and 'bad,' 'right' and 'wrong,' and moral obligation" (p. 47). Through persuasion, one can potentially have an influence on the conduct of human affairs. It is important that persuaders take serious their ethical responsibilities (Larsen, 1992). The discussion of this important topic can be introduced with some "psychic" magic.

The way magic can be used to introduce this subject is through an example from the world of magic which may be considered unethical when used in non-educational contexts. The idea to be discussed was used by magician and psychic-debunker James Randi in one of his television specials. I have adapted it for the use in a persuasion class. The idea is this: The teacher prepares an "astrological reading" based upon his or her perception of the class as a whole which incorporates at least some of the following statements which most people will agree apply to them:

> You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you.
> You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.
> You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage.
> While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them.
> Your sexual adjustment has presented some problems for you.
> Disciplined and controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside.

At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing.
You prefer a certain amount of change and variety, and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations.
You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept others' opinions without satisfactory proof.
You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others.
At times you are extroverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved.
Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic. (Earle, 1989, p. 16)

These statements comprise what Earle calls the Classic Reading.

After the readings are prepared, each is placed in a separate envelope. The students are asked to provide the teacher with their birthdates at the beginning of class. Then, when the teacher decides to discuss ethics, he or she can write each students' name on an individual envelope. The teacher reminds the students that they provided him or her with their birthdates at the beginning of the semester/quarter. He or she explains that he or she had an astrologer prepare an individual reading for each of the students. The teacher instructs the students to not open the envelopes until they are all handed out. Then, each student is given their own individual envelope. The students are told that the readings are private information meant only for each individual, so the students should only look on their own readings. Then, the students are instructed to open the envelopes and read their readings.

After the students read their astrological readings, they are asked to determine how much of the reading is accurate According to Earle (1989):

> More than 80% of the people to whom you deliver this set of psychologically designed general statements will agree that it is quite accurate. Many will agree it describes them perfectly!
>
> In fact, if the subject is convinced that the reading is unique to [his or] her, that it is derived from information you "see" in [his or] her palm, [his or] her aura, [his or] her handwriting, [his or] her casting of the runes, or from any other accepted oracle, the probability of [his or] her considering it an accurate match increases still further into, according to research, the 93rd percentile.
>
> The simple needs of Love, Health, and Money are universal. If one includes the elements in a reading, the client will probably call it a success. Humans are more alike than different, so we all have problems taking root in many of life's similar circumstances. Childhood, adolescence, marriage, work, children, illness, and death are common sources of anxiety to most of us. By touching upon many of these common denominators, the Classic Reading is universally applicable. (p. 4)

Since the students are told that each reading is individually prepared for each of them due to their astrological charts, the students should agree that the readings are very accurate. Have the students report on this though a show of hands of how many think the reading is very accurate (at least 90%), accurate (at least 80%), only somewhat accurate (at least 70%), not accurate (below 70%). Then, have the students exchange readings.

When the students exchange the readings, they will learn that all of the "individual" readings are, in fact, the same. However, the students will generally ascribe great accuracy to the readings. Thus, students are persuaded that the readings were prepared "just for them." At this point, the teacher should expose the trick to the class and explain that they have all been given a "cold-reading." The teacher should explain that cold-reading is used by "psychics" to tell a person "all about themselves." One must be careful to not say that this demonstration proves that there is nothing to astrology or psychic readingss. However, it does illustrate quite well how these things

can be accomplished. The ethics of using cold-reading to persuade someone that one is "psychic" can be used as a springboard to discussions of ambiguity, vagueness, and deception in persuasive messages (see Larsen, 1992). In addition, the importance of being a critical consumer of persuasive messages is highlighted.

Nonverbal Persuasive Messages

The final way magic can be used in the teaching of persuasion is as an illustration of nonverbal persuasive messages. Nonverbal messages can be manipulated by producers of persuasive messages in their communicative attempts to increase their effectiveness. To be a critical consumer of such messages, students should become aware of how these behaviors can be manipulated (Larsen, 1992). Successful magical performance is most often dependent on misdirection, or controlling the audiences' attention away from some movement or discrepancy (Fitzkee, 1975). Misdirection is most often accomplished through nonverbal means of controlling the audiences' attention. The use of misdirection by a teacher who performs a magical effect can serve as an illustration of nonverbal behavior manipulation.

Before discussing how to apply this in the classroom, the ways in which nonverbal communication can be used in misdirection will be detailed. One of the most powerful tools in the misdirection repertoire of the magician is the use of the eyes. This is eloquently detailed by John Carney (cited in Minch, 1991) in his discussion of John Ramsay's famous magical effect, "The Cylinder and Coins":

> When Ramsay was proofreading the original manuscript for "The Cylinder and Coins", written by Victor Farelli, he felt the most essential elements were excluded from the description. Ramsay would complain, "You forgot to write 'Look at the audience.'" Farelli argued that this was a moot point, so long as the finger positions and sleights were properly described. But Ramsay insisted, "It's *the* most important part! Put it in capital letters, 'LOOK AT THE AUDIENCE!'"
>
> No study of magic is complete without an understanding of the principles set forth by Ramsay. The basic theorem comes down to this: *If you want the audience to look at something, look at it yourself. If you want someone to look at you, look at them.* These ideas are more complex than they at first appear.
>
> Ramsay explains that we cannot misdirect a spectator's attention until we have first focused it. By looking at and drawing attention to something yourself, you control the location of the spectators' gaze. The shift of focus comes a second before the sleight, by *looking them squarely in the face*. If you have first acquired control of the spectators' attention, this shift of gaze is very compelling. (pp. xxv-xxvi)

By looking at the spectators, the spectators' attention will focus upon the magician's face. Burger (1989) discusses this within the context of just having a selected card returned to the deck in preparation for performing a card trick:

> I look the spectators directly in the eyes and begin a short monologue, "*I can do this two ways. The hard way and the easy way. In the hard way, you don't tell me anything at all. That is why it's hard. In the easy way, you tell me the color of the card -- which isn't a lot, but does get me started. It's up to you. Shall we do this the hard way or the easy way?*"
>
> During that monologue, several things are happening. I begin the monologue to re-focus the spectators' attention. The card has been returned to the deck. The spectators are now focused on the *deck*. I want them to re-focus their attention on *me*. I am, after all, what is important here! I am the magician!
>
> First, I freeze the movement of my hand. It is still for a few moments.
>
> Second, I begin talking and looking into their eyes as I speak *to them*. Quickly or slowly the attention of the individuals present will be brought to my eyes. Any who are lagging behind (that is, still focused on the deck), will get special treatment -- especially if I have already learned their names! (p. 50)

John Carney (cited in Minch, 1991) also discusses this point in some detail while discussing the proper misdirection "package" used in vanishing a coin (the coin has just been shown to the audience):

> *Sharply shift your gaze* to the spectator's face as you *address him* [*or her*] verbally. It is a conditioned, civil response for him [or her] to look up, acknowledging your attention. The attention of the other spectators present should shift to the person addressed; and your physical deportment should reinforce this inclination, your shoulders and feet pointing in his [or her] direction. (p. xxvii)

One of the keys to successful misdirection is to point the feet and the body toward where you want the audience's attention.

One magic effect which can be used to introduce these concepts of nonverbal misdirection and deception is Slydini's famous "Flight of the Paper Balls" (*Stars of Magic*, 1975). This effect involves the magician throwing paper balls (generally made of tissue paper) over the head of one spectator as the rest of the audience looks on. The audience can see the paper balls flying over the spectator's head, yet the spectator has no idea to where the balls disappear. Due to the strong misdirection built into the effect, the paper balls seem to disappear into nothingness from the perspective of the one spectator (*Stars of Magic*, 1975). Doing this in the classroom allows students to witness how effective misdirection is and provides an example of how nonverbal cues can be used to fool someone. This can lead to a discussion of the use of nonverbal tactics in persuasion. The teacher can ask such questions as. Do producers of persuasive messages besides magicians use nonverbal misdirection in their persuasive attempts? Can anyone think of an

example in an advertisement where the producer of the message attempted to control the audience's attention away from one thing and toward something else through nonverbal cues?

Learning Magic

How does one learn the magic which can be used in a classroom? Probably the three best ways are from books, from video tapes, and from personal instruction. Personal instruction (often $40+ an hour) and magic videos (often $50 each) can both be rather expensive. Thus, I would recommend that most beginning magicians begin with a few good books. Probably the best place to begin is at the library (Dewey decimal system 793.8). If your local library does not have enough material, or if you decide you want to delve deeper into the art of magic, let me make two book recommendations. In a previous paper on the use of magic in teaching principles of selectivity and general semantics (Frasier, 1993), I listed quite a large number of magic books one might want to read. For this paper, I will mention only two books. First, I highly recommend that teachers who are considering using magic in their classrooms find and read Alan J. McCormack's (1990) excellent *Magic and Showmanship for Teachers*. Second, I would like to highly recommend that potential magicians not overlook Peter Eldin's (1985) small paperback *The Magic Handbook*. Though it can be found in many libraries and bookstores, it contains some really fantastic professional-quality magic. It is really one of the best bargains in magic.

If you "get into" magic, you will probably want to buy a few tricks and props. Two of the major suppliers of magic books, videos, tricks, and props are Abbott's Magic Company (Colon,

Michigan 49040; 616-432-3235/ 432-3236) and Louis Tannen, Inc. (6 W. 32nd St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10001-3867; 212-239-8383). You should also check out local magic shops in your area. Michie discusses the "etiquette" of visiting a magic shop:

> First, please feel free to do so! They are public places; you need no secret passwords! In fact, amateurs, even beginners are welcome. New customers! (Accomplished magicians mostly just stand around and swap lies with each other about how many shows they did last week.)
>
> Identify yourself as a novice. It saves your and the sales[person]'s time. He [or she] will demonstrate an effect or two, but the secret is never revealed until the trick is purchased. (The "secret" is the significant part, so don't be surprised to pay a dollar for something that could be made for a dime.)
>
> You are not obligated to buy everything (or anything) he [or she] shows you, but hopefully one of the first three or four will interest you. The sales[person]'s enthusiasm will diminish if he [or she] gets the feeling he's [or she's] putting on a free show. (p. 2)

Conclusion

Besides illustrating how much fun a teacher can have by bringing magic into the classroom, I hope to show that the use of conjuring can have a place in the communication teacher's repertoire for focusing on vital communication principles. It is a novel, fun, and interesting way to gain our students' attention, to keep their attention focused on the subject matter of the class, and to teach them something in the process. Through the discussion of this rather "quirky" way of introducing and presenting the information about persuasion, I hope to encourage other teachers to explore how the use of magic and its allied arts might enhance their own classroom "performances."

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