

“Teaching Communication: Getting to the Heart Using Visuals as an Instructional Tool”

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Students become much more engaged in movies than in most other visual aids because they find them entertaining and see greater applications in their own lives. However, the instructor’s goal in showing films is more than to entertain or fill time; it is to assist in learning. By increasing student involvement, higher levels of learning can be achieved. This paper applies a taxonomy of engagement suggested by Rößling and Naps (2002) to the teaching of communication. By engaging students, beyond viewing, in responding, changing, constructing and presenting, greater learning outcomes can be achieved.

Introduction

Using film and movie clips to help illustrate communication concepts is a teaching technique used by many instructors in communication studies courses. For some faculty, this means selecting an illustrative clip and incorporating it into a lecture oriented course. Rößling and Naps’ (2002) research on using visuals as part of active engagement in learning suggests that a teacher selected and presented visual represents the lowest form of engagement short of not using a visual at all.

The purpose of this paper is describe our observations and experiences with incorporating clips in various communication courses with a view to increasing student engagement with the visual thereby enhancing experiential learning. We found that by providing students with guidelines (or frameworks) they can select clips, show them to their classmates, and discuss the implication of the clip for communication studies concepts—a multi-engagement experience described as being at the top of Rößling and Naps’ visual taxonomy. In addition in increasing student involvement in the learning process, students report that they enjoy selecting their own clips and making presentations—even in the basic speech course—generally taken by first-year college students who can be very intimidated by public speaking. In this paper we describe our

guidelines, give examples of student selections and applications, and consider evaluation issues. Alternative uses of student-generated film clips and future directions are also discussed.

Background

Griffin (2003) uses movie clips to teach communication theory. In his syllabus he designates specific clips for various theories, indicating the movie, the running time of the clip, cue point and application. For example, he uses the scene from the movie, “A Beautiful Mind,” where the women are entering the pub to show the “application of game theory (social exchange) to interpersonal attraction. The scene shows the mental breakthrough that ultimately led to the Nobel prize.” The clip starts at 17 minutes 30 seconds into the movie and runs for 4 minutes 30 seconds. Griffin’s approach is teacher-centered, but structured so that students can view and study the clips on their own. Hinds (1991) describes a use of the television game show format to teach Pennsylvania history. The format was successful because it involved the audience, was entertaining and educational.

A Visual Taxonomy

Bloom’s taxonomy has long stood as a model for effective teaching. The nature of the taxonomy is hierarchical with later categories considered superior to the one before it. Level 1, **knowledge**, is recall of factual information without any real understanding. Level 2, **comprehension**, is understanding the meaning behind the facts. Level 3, **application**, is applying the information in new situations. Level 4, **analysis**, is dividing a complex problem into its component parts. Level 5, **synthesis**, is generalizing and

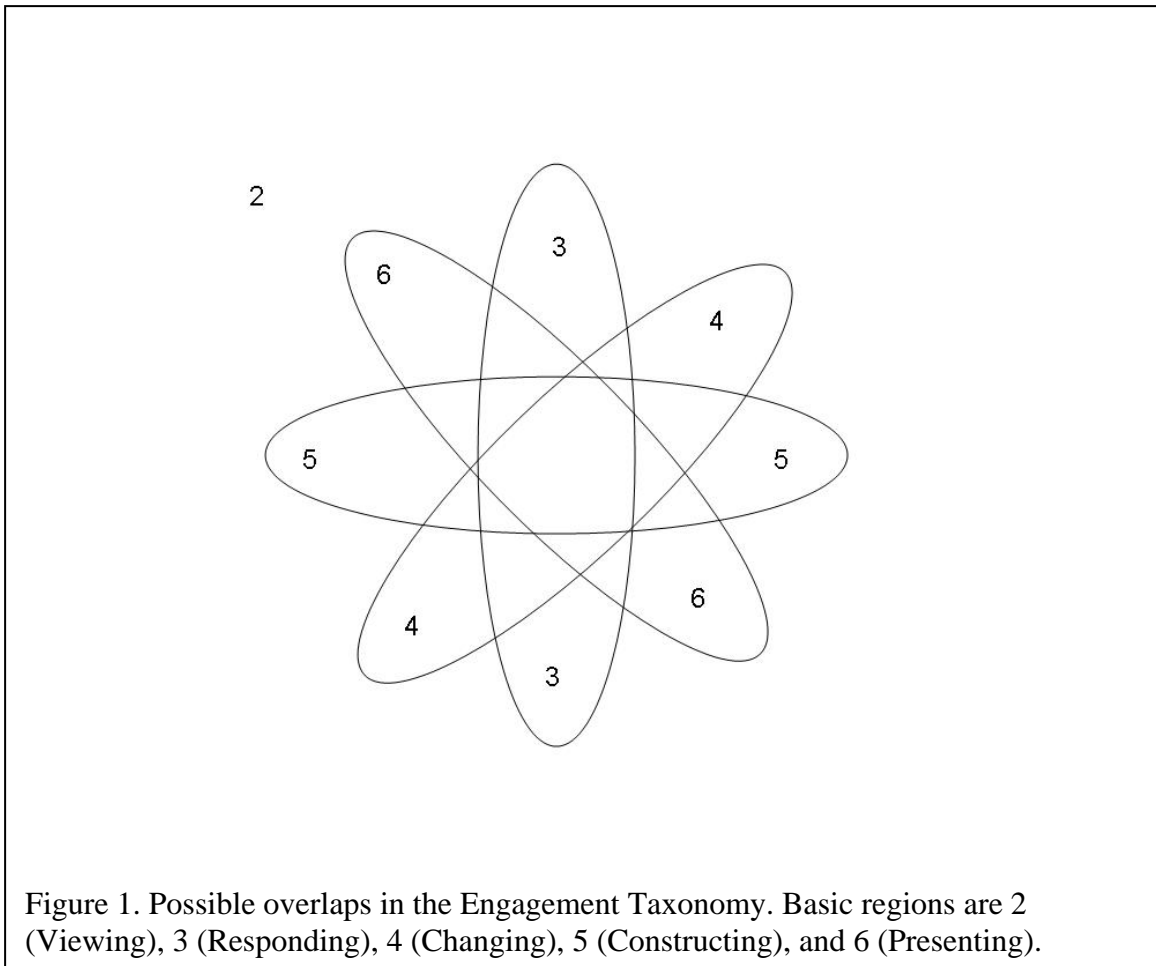
drawing conclusions from facts. Level 6, **evaluation**, is comparing, evaluating and discriminating among different approaches.

From experiences in using visualization to teach computer science, Rößling and Naps (2002) provide a similar taxonomy to illustrate forms of active engagement in visualization technology. Level 1, **no viewing**, uses no visualization. Level 2, **viewing**, is the core form of engagement since all other forms of engagement included viewing. Level 3, **responding**, is answering questions about the content. Level 4, **changing**, involves modifying the visualization, to explore differences in behavior. Level 5, **constructing**, encourages students to create their own visualizations. Level 6, **presenting**, has the students give their visualizations to an audience for feedback. Finally, **multiple engagements** encourage a mix of several forms of engagement.

Rößling and Naps (2002) found that...

Viewing provides no significant improvement over no visualization....
Responding results in significantly better learning outcomes than only viewing....
Changing results in significantly better learning outcomes than responding.
Constructing results in significantly better outcomes than changing.
Presenting results in significantly better learning outcomes than constructing.

Multiple engagements or a mix of several forms of engagement allow the best learning outcomes. The “higher the level or the more forms of engagement that occur when using visualization, the better the learning outcomes,” according to Rößling and Naps. Although the taxonomy reflects levels of increasing learner engagement, Rößling and Naps do not believe the relationship is hierarchical. Instead the last five engagement categories tend to overlap with viewing forming the basis for all of them.



Our Experience

We encourage **multiple engagement** visual learning experience through movie clips in at least three of the five courses we teach including the basic speech course and several public relations courses. Although we sometimes select film clips to illustrate key concepts in the courses, most of film clip choice is left to the students and is integrated into their assignments with the possibility of earning course credit.

In the first class of the semester we model showing a movie clip by selecting one of our own as part of the course introduction. We then lead the class in a discussion of the clip concluding with a description of the criteria to use in selecting and presenting their

own clip. For example, in the Fundamentals of Oral Communication class, teams of two students select a short clip (no more than about five minutes in length) that relate to the scheduled chapter and concepts for a given day. We encourage students to use creativity in choosing clips that show as many communication concepts in the assigned chapter as possible. After showing their clip, the student presenters explain concepts they identified and explain how the clip illustrates the concepts. Class members are encouraged to add their own ideas about the clip. Throughout the discussion, students make notes about the concepts in a “Concept Journal” which they will later refer to when preparing for the midterm examination and will also hand in for course credit. The whole process can last anywhere from five to ten minutes to the entire class period depending on how rich the clip is that is presented and class interest in the discussion.

Students are asked to select clips that will not offend their classmates, but we do not otherwise censor their choices. (Some clips, like the whipped cream bikini from Varsity Blues 1999 or the language and murder scene in Full Metal Jacket, make us a little uncomfortable, but we try not to react negatively to the selections.) End of semester teacher evaluations indicate that this method of incorporating movie clips into the learning process is considered a highly enjoyable and positive exercise for the students.

In a public relations ethics course, we use a framework borrowed from Dr. Phyllis Japp (2000) who introduced it to communication studies graduate students as a tool for critically analyzing messages in movies. The framework encourages students to consider implicit, dominant, alternate, and ideological meanings of messages in movies in addition to other aspects of critically examining values represented in popular culture. In the public relations course, students are assigned 19 readings and then pair up to select and

present a clip that illustrates an assigned reading. These clips tend to run longer than those in the basic speech course with a maximum time limit of 20 minutes. Following the clip, the presenters discuss it in terms of the framework. Class members then discuss the clip. The presenters receive course credit for their presentation and submit a written analysis of the clip responding to all eight areas of the framework. Film clips have been selected to illustrate lying, argumentation, keeping secrets, and the fallacy of dichotomous portraits of important national issues in the news media.

In a public relations course focusing on problems and cases, we ask groups of students to select a movie to analyze for examples of good or bad public relations. Students select a concept or framework from their readings to use in their analysis. Students present three or four clips, explaining how each shows the use of or lack of public relations. Students describe how the situation is good public relations or how public relations could change or improve the situation. They suggest public relations tactics that might be used in the situations they have shown and described. In conclusion they recommend public relations changes and describe how the movies and the concepts apply in public relations. The presentations last about 20 minutes. Recent selections included John Q, The Wedding Planners, A League of Their Own, Enemy of the State, Dave, the American President, Maid in Manhattan, Happy Gilmore, Miracle of 34th Street, Outbreak, and Murder at 1600. Other examples have been Civil Action, Thirteen Days, The Insider, Erin Brockovitch, The Hurricane, and Rainmaker. Some of the examples seem to stretch the envelope; however, even a comedy like Happy Gilmore (not the ideal client) or an action film like Enemy of the State (a question of ethics) have situations that are worthy of analysis.

Applying the Taxonomy to Using Visualizations in Communications Teaching

Although the use of movie clips is only one way of using visuals in the classroom, this discussion has been confined to that of movie clips. The alignment of other audio-visual forms of presentation might also be considered in terms of this taxonomy. 1) In teaching communications as in computer science instruction, **no viewing** can be described as no visualization. For example, lecturing continues to remain the standard presentation approach in higher education classrooms. 2) **Viewing** is the core form of engagement since all other forms of engagement include viewing. A lecture might be supported by the viewing of a movie or movie clips. The film presentation is improved when the instructor explains how the film relates to the course concepts. 3) However, it is not until step 3, **responding**, that students become engaged. Here students are required to answer questions about the content. This can be accomplished through classroom discussion in the class as a whole or in groups. It can also be achieved by having students do individual worksheets. 4) In this taxonomy, **changing** involves modifying the visualization, to explore differences in behavior. When using clips in the communication classroom, discussion should take students beyond discussion of obvious concepts to developing applications for their personal lives. 5) **Constructing** encourages students to create their own visualizations. Several of our colleagues have students develop their own video clips to illustrate concepts. As part of this stage, we feel that similar levels of learning can be achieved by having students select film clips and analyze them using the framework Japp created. 6) **Presenting** has students giving their visualizations to an audience for feedback. Here students either present the films they have created or the film clips they have chosen. For presenting to be effective students must go beyond just

showing the movies to include describing the communication concepts and their applications in their own lives. Finally, **multiple engagements** encourage drawing together viewing, responding, changing, constructing, and presenting into a single class exercise. Students present the combination of film and messages they have constructed showing applications that change behavior and engage students in responding to their questions and being involved in discussion. It goes beyond simple visualization to include the highest levels of engagement for all students.

Conclusion

Students become much more engaged in movies than in most other visual aids because they find them entertaining and see greater applications in their own lives. The typical classroom film presentation, if students are awake, incorporates viewing and possibly responding if questions and discussion follow the movie. In some situations, as Rößling and Naps (2002) suggest, learning outcomes may be no greater than “no viewing.” A good discussion may on the other hand allow for responding and may incorporate Bloom’s learner outcomes of knowledge (factual recall of information), comprehension (of the meaning behind the facts), and application (of the material to new situations).

Our hope in involving students in the selection of films, the analysis of their content, and application to concepts is that they will not only view and respond, but change their understanding, construct new meanings, and present their findings to an audience for discussion and feedback. In so doing, students not only show their knowledge and understanding of information, but they also are led to apply, analyze (divide a complex problem into simpler parts), synthesize (generalize and draw

conclusions), and evaluate (discriminate and make judgments about their learning). These findings are preliminary and based upon our observations. However, structured examination of our approach seems worthwhile based upon the framework suggested by Rößling and Naps and their colleagues who developed this learning taxonomy for the visualization of computer applications of mathematical processes (algorithms). Beyond these applications, however, the taxonomy seems to have broader application to other areas of learning, such as communication. It provides a new way of looking at the learning process and establishes new objectives for teachers and students. Our goal in getting students involved in the selection and analysis of film clips allows them to reach greater understanding of communication concepts than they otherwise would if they were passive viewers and receptors. The instructor's goal in showing films is more than to entertain or fill time; it is to assist in learning. By increasing student involvement higher levels of learning can be achieved.

Critique Framework

The following is provided as a frame for you to use in critiquing the “texts” that we will be discussing in this course.

1. Implicit. What are the *implicit*, taken-for granted, but often unstated assumptions and expectations that seem to pertain in this “text” regarding the ethical issue/s in question?
2. Cumulative impressions. What are the *cumulative impressions*, the ideas and values that are repeated across time, space, and place, i.e. we can see it here, we can see it there, we can see it just about everywhere?
3. Dominant Meaning. What seems to be the *dominant meaning* regarding the ethical issue of your choice, i.e. what would an “unaware” repeated auditor probably absorb as acceptable?
4. Alternate Meanings. What *alternate meanings*, if any, seem possible, i.e. is there some internal conflict of ethics in your choice of “text.?”
5. Position. Where is the auditor or reader *positioned*, i.e. how is s/he invited to understand what is going on?
6. Ideology. What *ideologies* or believe systems seem to be reinforced in this “text?”
7. Shared Cultural Values. What does your exploration of this “text” seem to say about *shared cultural values*, either of the entire culture or a subset of that culture, i.e. if you were reading the culture from this example what would you conclude about it?
8. Counter-“Texts.” What *counter-“texts”* exist, i.e. is this contested terrain? Do auditors have access to other voices that seem equally powerful, equally attractive, equally persuasive?

Framework presented by Dr. Phyllis Japp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln to graduate students in a course on popular culture and communication ethics (2000).

Sample of Clips and Concepts They Illustrate

Concept	Movie	Situation
Perception/self-fulfilling prophecy	The Family Man	Father wants to buy an expensive suit. He asks “Do you want me to give up my dreams?”
Perception/self-fulfilling prophecy	Shrek	“She’s a princess and I’m an ogre”
Interviewing	Shawshank Redemption	Parole interview compared at beginning and at end
Interviewing	Office Space	Peter’s interview with consultants shows rapport building and closing
Listening – 5 steps	Cast Away	Chuck talking to volleyball “Wilson”
Listening	Hercules	Hercules is so in love he doesn’t listen to Meg; Philoctetes makes assumptions after only hearing part of the discussion between Hades and Megara
Culture/ gender/ language	Save the last dance	Men angry at friend for dating a white girl
Group meeting	Toy Story	Woody holds a meeting with other toys
Nonverbal/ task related touching/ illustrators/ affect displays/ regulators	Little Mermaid	Ariel uses signs to tell Prince she can’t speak
Nonverbal communication	Big Daddy	Sonny raises boys courage by telling him he is invisible when wearing sunglasses
Open communication	Apollo 13	Mother provides a positive message to son about father’s situation aboard Apollo 13
Handling conflict	Apollo 13	NASA director overcomes conflict to get engineers to work on solution
Conflict management	Super Troopers	Policeman orders food in fast food restaurant
Personality	Lord of the Rings: Two Towers	Gollum’s good side argues with his evil side
Relationship development	Lord of the Rings: Two	Shows the development of

	Towers	relationship between Aragon and Galadriel
Sexist language	Legally Blond	Elle says, "I don't use that word. You must have heard it from Vivian."
Information giver/ procedural technician/ evaluator	Crocodile Dundee	Sue shouts across subway to tell Dundee she loves him
Steps in relationship development	Love and Basketball	Boy asks, "Do you want to be my girl?" They kiss, then fight.
Group leadership	Goldmember	Dr. Evil ignores the results of group problem solving, showing instead autocratic leadership and inappropriate conflict resolution.
Speech making	Dogma	Two renegade angels prepare and deliver a speech to the board of a corporation.

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