

A First Experience in a Business Communications Class: Video Clips That Help Students Establish a Continuum of Success

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Abstract

Business communication classes are often complicated by an implicit bias, a fear of public performance that can be exacerbated by diversity within the classroom and stereotype threat. However, three short videos depicting infants' mirror neuron responses (less than five total minutes in length) occupy a special position in an Advanced Business Communications course. The videos allow more than 50% of the students to positively define their success in the communications course itself as just another in a series of communication successes.

This paper addresses the complexity of fear in diverse classrooms that require public speaking, the significance of the first experience with course material, the role of video clips in the college classroom, a description of the short videos with context and the videos' efficacy (through an analysis of survey responses).

Fear in the Classroom

In the 2015 Chapman University Survey of American Fears, fear of public speaking (a personal anxiety) ranked higher than a fear of natural disasters. Fear affects our ability to "think on our feet" and perform to the best of our abilities when tested (LeDoux 1995; Putwain & Best 2012). Complicating this fear of public speaking, in our increasingly diverse classrooms, is the additional emotion created by stereotype threat, which also blocks learning (Mangels, Good, Whiteman, Maniscalco, & Dweck, 2012). T. Scott Bledsoe and Janice J. Baskin note that fears in the classroom should be actively addressed through educating students about fears, creating a nurturing environment, "taking advantage of campus resources, being proactive about communicating with students outside of the classroom, and incorporating active learning strategies" (2014). This sounds ideal, but these are generalities. If we are to actually "create a nurturing environment" that combats stereotypes, then we must think carefully about what that looks and feels like for students.

At this point, to create experiences that achieve these multiple goals, instructors must focus more carefully on a particular course and its requirements. While almost every course will require some element of public speaking, a few college classes occupy a unique position. In business communications courses, public speaking and critiques of public speaking and behavior are intrinsic to the class. Fear, then, becomes the "elephant" in that classroom, and this fear is compounded in diverse classrooms by abutting stereotype threat with fear of social shame, "generat[ing] emotions that disrupt cognitive processes" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010). How, specifically, do we address these fears? Fear appeals, in which we discuss the negative consequences of failure, only increase anxiety and reduce performance (Putwain & Best 2012). With this awareness, instructors must seek to create a

nurturing classroom environment in which students feel capable of success; we must indicate that we believe that ability is not fixed and that students improve with effort (Dweck & Aronson). Andrew Martin identifies this as an “achievement evolution” (2010); it is possible to decrease student fear by demonstrating that students have already achieved success in the past, giving students a sense of growth and movement on a continuum.

This sounds complex, but the classroom messages that will be discussed in this paper are all tied to three short video clips that begin the first interaction students have with course material, related to the least threatening element of the course, nonverbal communication. During the last ten sections I taught of the “Advanced Business Communication” class, I introduced students to the course material with this single sentence: “Your brain and face primed themselves for social interaction as soon as you were born.” At that point, the class saw three short video clips from YouTube, before any other discussion or explanation. These brief clips play a vital role in the course, establishing a continuum of success for all students, breaking stereotypes, and connecting students to something familiar and reassuring. Even a month later, students in one section of the course who were anonymously surveyed remembered these clips and a significant percentage tied the video clips to a message of success in communication on a continuum.

Establishing Expectations: The Importance of the First Day

Is the first day of class powerful in a significant way? Those who wish to be elementary school teachers are often required by their college education programs to read Harry and Rosemary Wong’s *The First Days of School*, first published in 1991 and currently in its fourth edition. This book addresses the ways that classroom procedures and management, on those first days, help students incorporate behavioral rules and expectations into their own behavior while reducing student fear, setting students up for classroom success throughout the year.

As students move into higher education, most of them have learned how to “do school” (internally incorporate implicit and explicit behavioral rules and academic expectations to achieve success, as indicated by passing grades and acceptance to college). That first class, though, still sets the tone and influences “students’ opinions about the course and instructor for the remainder of the semester” (Perlman & McCann, 1999). While many discuss a successful course beginning in books for faculty (e.g., Bain, 2004; Bain, 2012; Willingham, 2009), there is disagreement about whether that first class should be spent entirely on expectations and grabbing students’ attention or whether instructors should dive directly into course content. A 2007 study of college students given either a “positive” (friendly overview of the course and syllabus with early dismissal) or “negative” (emotionless reading of syllabus, history video and homework assignment) experience on their first day of a course supports the hypothesis that the first day occupies a special position; those students who left early with a positive, friendly first impression showed a positive end-of-term difference in their grades and feelings about the instructor and course (Wilson & Wilson, 2007).

Yet an immediate immersion into content that conveys the material of the class and the role of the student in that particular classroom has value, even on the first day. Denise M. Anderson, Francis A. McGuire and Lynne Cory reviewed research about the significance of college students’ first day of class in an article titled “The first day: it happens only once” and found that the first day remains important, yet research about class activities at the college level remains mixed, with data from students supporting, in some studies, an optimal first day focus on the syllabus, class expectations, rules and policies (as described in the experiment above). However, they comment that Pintrich (2006) suggests a

framework for student learning called SRL (Self-Regulated Learning), and under this framework, engagement with the material that first day can enrich the four phases of learning (roughly summarized here as goal-setting, metacognitive awareness, task involvement/awareness, and reactions/reflections related to the task/task involvement). In Anderson, McGuire and Cory's assessment: "This framework supports the importance of using the first day to engage students in the course at hand – what better time to encourage students to identify their goals for the class, to develop awareness of strategies that promote learning, as well as determine desired levels of self-scrutiny and satisfaction in reaching the task at hand (e.g. effectively completing the course). In addition, this concept suggests there is a mediating effect of motivational and cognitive processes; therefore, students with varying learning styles can be successful based on their own regulation of learning."

Paul Higgins creates a unique interaction in his psychology class. He engages in role play with a student who violates accepted class norms (the student is playing along) on the first day in order to elicit emotion by creating a "real" confrontation within the classroom that students then discuss and analyze (2001). Higgins says, "We have a unique opportunity the first day. We can confirm the expectations of our students by getting the first day out of the way in order to 'really' start on the second day or by plunging into the 'real' work of the course. Or we can excite students through unexpected activities that promote their participation, collaboration, and wonderment. With students who are energized, we professors then face the demanding, delightful challenge of sustaining their interest."

The three video clips that I show are intended to fall into this category of unexpected activities that promote a message of success and wonderment about the work of the class, a motivational message tied to the central argument in the course that nonverbal communication success begins at birth.

Video Clips Used for Teaching

Are video clips acceptable teaching tools? What can they offer that an instructor cannot better describe? Ronald Berk begins a 2009 article, titled "Multimedia Teaching with Video Clips: TV, Movies, YouTube, and mtvU in the College Classroom," by asking the question "How can video clips embedded in multimedia presentations be used to improve learning in college courses?" The answer to this question is, of course, complex. Videos have the power to elicit emotions, as Berk notes, which is often the reason that we hope to use videos (to generate interest and stimulate thought). A review of research about the brain's engagement with videos to facilitate learning leads Berk to conclude that videos have the potential to "(a) tap the core intelligences of verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, and emotional (interpersonal and intrapersonal), (b) engage both the left and right hemispheres, (c) appeal to the reptilian, limbic, and neocortex layers of the brain to sense the nature of sounds, react to scenes and music emotionally, and appreciate it intellectually, and (d) manipulate students' Alpha and Beta brain waves to relax or alert them for learning." Berk comments that it would be "a shame" not to use video to "stir up" all of these areas "to promote learning."

"Stir up?" What does he mean by this? Ronald Berk's comments suggest an implicit understanding that video clips can be used to create small-scale mental turbulence in the classroom (in a fairly predictable way) that strategic instructors can use to enhance the in-class educational experience.

Can we create these mental states without video? Of course. However, instructors remain singular entities with a limited amount of resources. A great deal occurs in the classroom, and a teacher cannot be or do everything. On a typical teaching day, for a period of time in each class, we are speakers who tend to stand, or pace, and talk...and talk. As facilitators, we direct students to talk or accomplish work.

While we might be both “the audio and the visual,” we as humans are not endlessly diverting and are not typically powerful visual representations of our points. We also tend not to be actors, and we lack the authenticity and credibility of other voices unless we arrange for guest speakers to attend class with us. So, we bring in a video. Berk argues that most of the studies he has reviewed of the available evidence of using video effectively within the classroom supports the dual-coding theory that “more is better.” Simple audio (our voice alone or a podcast), Berk argues, is not as effective for student learning as audio and picture. Daniel Willingham brings cognitive science to bear on the issue and makes a similar point (2009).

The use of user-created videos is addressed by Peter Duffy (2008), who comments that the immediacy of YouTube videos and their ubiquity in student life brings a sense of the familiar along with an acknowledgement of students as stakeholders in the classroom. The internet has evolved, in our students’ experience, to a dynamic place that reflects their own realities. Using this reality to make thoughtful points in the classroom, is of course, a challenge for educators.

While Ronald Berk (2009) acknowledges that novices and visual learners benefit most from the addition of video to presentations, he fails to address the fact that videos offer a consistency (they remain the same – unlike the instructor) that in-class “live” presentations do not. Even when an instructor attempts to present the same material to similar audiences the same way, that instructor is still going to change in response to the situation. Basically, anyone can have a bad day. The videos, though, consistently look and sound the same, as long as the technology is functioning correctly.

The fact that a video is consistent does not make it relevant or appropriate. Videos, according to Berk, should be selected based on three criteria: “(a) the students’ characteristics, (b) the offensiveness of the video, and (c) the video structure.” Videos should be “[identified] in the students’ world.”

Characteristics of Students: The videos selected are of babies mirroring their parents’ facial expressions. Most of the students in the Advanced Business Communications classes (while not parents themselves) are from large families and have, at a minimum, one sibling. The majority are now between the ages of 20 and 26. The videos, then, are familiar to them and the parents represented in the videos are just slightly older than the average age of the students. However, the parents in the videos are all fathers, breaking one stereotypical assumption (that mothers would interact with these babies). This pairs the familiar (YouTube videos) with a message about stereotype and turbulence (father as nurturer, babies as effective nonverbal communicators).

Offensiveness: The videos are inoffensive; the babies are clothed and the parents are simply interacting. The second and third video shown are simple cell phone videos uploaded to YouTube, representing an ordinary – and yet extraordinary – interaction that almost all parents have with their children, facial mirroring (Ehrenfeld, 2011).

Video Structure: The videos depict a brief interaction impossible to replicate in the classroom. The videos all feature a close-up of the baby’s face as it mimics a parent’s face. No video is more than three minutes long.

Subject Matter: Because these are videos explicitly created to demonstrate the mirror neuron response in infants, the videos have the ability to activate a mirror neuron response in the viewer, which in turn activates responses in emotion, empathy, bonding and memory (Ehrenfeld, 2011), areas near mirror neurons in the brain. Videos have been shown to activate the mirror neuron response in both humans

and monkeys, as well as to elicit emotion and bonding (Ehrenfeld, 2011). Mimicry itself not only helps humans bond, but it indicates social cues and belonging in groups; we mimic those who “belong” and do not mimic outsiders (Ehrenfeld, 2011). Mimicry has been shown, among humans, to dramatically increase pro-social behavior (van Baaren, Holland, Kawakami & Knippenberg, 2004).

By playing these videos to show mirroring from the oldest to youngest infant (the two-month old, the one-month-old, and the one-hour-old), after the comment, “Your brain and face primed themselves for social interaction as soon as you were born,” students seem to approach the videos as nonverbal success stories central to human identity and survival, Andrew Martin’s “achievement evolution” (2010).

Mimicry at Two Months

The first video, posted by YouTube user betapicts, shows a baby of about two months of age looking into a mirror with a father. When the father sticks out his lower lip in an exaggerated pout, classic “duck face,” the baby mimics that expression. The students laugh at the baby and the cartoonish (Donald Duck) soundtrack. Students are engaged, laughing. The video lasts exactly thirty seconds. Without comment, I usually play the next video.

Mimicry at 21 Days

The next video shows a baby that is 21 days old posted by YouTube user pratiq. As the father sticks out his tongue, his daughter tries to mimic that movement. Because of the camera angle, we see both father and daughter. The father is excited and engaged. His enthusiasm is infectious and easy to empathize with. It is also obvious that the baby is focused on imitating the father’s tongue movement, sticking out her own tongue, and that this activity and control is very labor-intensive for the baby. Students usually moan in sympathy as the baby tries, over and over again, to stick out her tongue. This infant focuses so much effort and finally succeeds, winning praise. I frequently hear sighs of sympathy from students as the baby achieves the goal. The video is one minute and thirty-four seconds long. I usually proceed to the next video without comment.

Mimicry at One Hour

The final video, posted by YouTube user cdhut27, shows another father. This father is with a baby that is just one hour old. The baby’s skin is wrinkled. You can see a little vernix.

Students have now registered the progression of the videos. I typically hear a few “Oh!” noises, as students recognize that we are watching the same mimicry occurring at earlier time periods in infancy. In this video, the father captures the baby’s attention and sticks his own tongue out, encouraging this newborn baby to mimic him. After a long pause, she does. With obvious and intense effort, this newborn sticks out her tongue three times.

The baby is obviously exhausted after the interaction. The video ends. It plays for only one minute and twenty-seven seconds.

Student Responses

Immediate Responses

The series of three videos takes no more than five minutes to show, and there is only a simple sentence, which is read aloud and appears on the screen, preceding the videos: “Your brain and face primed themselves for social interaction as soon as you were born.” This sentence is intended to prompt a comparison between the students and the babies and to indicate a continuum.

How does showing these videos immediately affect the classroom dynamic? Students show nonverbal indicators of engagement, leaning forward, reacting facially to the babies’ efforts to contort their own faces. We proceed from this initial video to a discussion (with PowerPoint) of the Duchenne smile as a powerful nonverbal message, and students take notes, ask questions, and stay after class to ask questions when the class ends five minutes early.

Responses After 21 Days

When a group of Advanced Business Communications students were surveyed on September 15, 2016 about a class that took place on August 25, 2016, 29 anonymous responses were received from the class of 45. These surveys were pieces of paper passed out to students without comment as they entered the classroom on September 15, 2016. Students were told not to write their names and were asked to complete the survey and pass it back. Please note that some student responses were blank or represented with arrows drawn to other questions, which is why not all responses are represented here.

The following are student responses to the first question “What was the purpose of the video clips of babies that the instructor showed when you discussed active listening?” The responses have been numbered only for reference and to allow a glance to confirm the number of useable answers.

Referred to communication as part of a successful continuum	Student Survey Response to Question #1 (“purpose of the video clips of babies”)
	1. “humans instinctively mirror to gain approval”
+	2. “you start learning or trying to communicate/connect with others from the time you are born”
+	3. “Since babies are able to observe and comprehend, we as mature & older human beings are just as capable as babies.”
+	4. “to show how social mirroring happens as early as a few months into when you’re born”
	5. “humans copy one another”
	6. “to show us about human social instincts”
+	7. “showed us that we mirror behaviors right from the beginning”
	8. “to [show how] we mimic what we see and to get our attention at the beginning of the class”
	9. “from when we were born, we were already picking up on nonverbal cues”

	10. "to show the babies listened so well they were able to mimic their parents even though they didn't know what they were saying"
	11. "to show how they mimic and replay information"
+	12. "to show that they are programmed with innate language abilities"
+	13. "to show babies mirror from the beginning"
+	14. "to show how we start mirroring from birth"
+	15. "to demonstrate that babies, even at a small age, listen just the way we do"
+	16. "to show us how early we start to mimic expressions and mirror other people"
+	17. "The purpose was to show that humans by nature are social animals. We are wired to interact with our surroundings."
+	18. "To show that active listening happens as early as an infant."
+	19. "to show the innate tendency to mimic"
	20. "nonverbal communication in which babies mirror their parents' behaviors"
+	21. "to show that we mimic (copy) from the day we are born"
	22. "Babies can pay attention and realize what they are doing."
	23. "To show that babies actively pay attention and is able to mirror what you do"
+	24. "To show that we naturally mimic what other people do."
+	25. "Babies are hardwired to communicate once they pop out."
	26. "How even babies have non-verbal reactions to listening and mimic actions of those they're listening to."
	27. "Active listening leads to mimicking"
+	28. "That active listening begins at an early age and occurs naturally."

Obviously, students remembered these videos vividly. This makes sense if you consider the positioning of the videos (first interaction with course material) and the subject of the videos (mirror neuron demonstration). Such a demonstration, as discussed previously, elicits emotion and bonding – and emotion is essential for both reason and long term memory storage (Zull, 2002).

How were these responses sorted and analyzed? For these responses, the key words and phrases identified were "mirror," "approval," "communicate," "born," "the beginning" "comprehend," "mimic," "early," "social," "wired," "instincts," "pay attention," "as early as," "from birth," "innate," "listen," "active listening," "nonverbal," "nonverbal communication," "copy," "naturally," "from the day we are born," "hardwired," and "programmed".

From these keywords, words most related to lesson content include "mirror," "approval," "communicate," "mimic," "social," "listen," "active listening," "pay attention," "nonverbal," "nonverbal communication," and "copy."

Words most related to the message of an "achievement evolution" (that these infants and their efforts represent a continuum of success that the students themselves have experienced, beginning in infancy), include "the beginning," "born," "instincts," "early," "wired," "from birth," "as early as," "innate," "naturally," "from the day we are born," "hardwired," and "programmed". Phrases that indicated a continuum, like "babies, even at a small age, listen just the way we do" were also counted as part of the message of an "achievement evolution." Most of these words and phrases were not shown as part of

the PowerPoint, with the exception of “born” in the first message to students about the course content. Responses with these words or phrases are marked with a plus sign and comprise 57% of the total responses.

The second survey question asked students, “Were you surprised by the video clips?” Of the 28 responses, only five were not surprised. Eighteen said, “yes.” Five more said, “somewhat,” “a little bit” or “mildly.” If these responses are also counted as “yes” responses, then approximately 82% of the students were surprised by the video clips to some degree. This surprise introduced a little turbulence into the classroom, as Ronald Berk might note, and such turbulence can be used to introduce new ideas or concepts.

The third question was, “What did you learn from these video clips?” Only 21 of the 28 responses were applicable to the videos of the baby, while the ones omitted from the list below either referred to a later discussion of the Duchenne smile or consisted of an arrow drawn to their response for the first question. Of these, 62% used a word or phrase that referred to a continuum of success (a positive message about previous success leading to current success in the course or subject area). These messages are marked with a plus sign.

Continuum?	Student Response to Survey Question #3
+	1. “We are capable of much more than we think we are. Development/growth really does start the moment you are born.”
+	2. “We can listen and pay attention!”
	3. “that babies are smarter than I think!”
+	4. “human instinct is to mimic”
	5. “that we were meant to reflect in conversations”
	6. “they showed more of an example of what you were trying to show”
	7. “first things we say aren’t words”
	8. “humans copy one another no matter how old you are”
	9. “better clues on how to read people and their nonverbal messages”
+	10. “I learned that we start to recognize expressions early on.”
+	11. “How early active listening begins.”
+	12. “How long we [have] been participating in active listening skills.”
+	13. “That mimicry is within all of us”
	14. “Mirroring is a nonverbal way of hearing”
+	15. “If babies are affected by active listening, everyone can be.”
+	16. “If babies can actively listen and pay attention, so can we.”
+	17. “From the day we are born we have the natural inclination to mimic people”
	18. “Sticking your tongue out repeatedly is okay as long as a baby is doing it too.”
+	19. “That humans have inherent reactions to stimuli when engaged.”
+	20. “Even a child can mimic and participate in active listening.”
+	21. “That active listening is so easy a baby can do it.”

Note that words or phrases identified as indicating a student perception of a continuum of achievement or success for this question included “development,” “growth,” “born,” “we can,” “instinct,” “early,”

“long,” “within all of us,” “everyone can be,” “so can we,” “inherent,” “even a child can,” and “so easy a baby can.”

Videos' Purpose

This series of short videos capture moments that cannot be replicated within the classroom. They are unique experiences for these parents (in the videos), while also representing universal experiences that most people have had (as babies) and hope to have (as parents). As such, they are both familiar and surprising for these students. These are the types of experience that students expect to have or have had, yet the content also might prompt them to redefine themselves, through empathy, as more successful at communication than previously assumed.

Since more than 80% of the students surveyed were surprised by the babies' abilities, this suggests that the videos bring an element of turbulence to the classroom (along with the familiar) that challenges preconditioned beliefs about innate abilities. For the usable responses in the third question, 62% used a word or phrase that referred to a continuum of success in reference to what they learned.

Are the videos more successful than an anecdote or simple announcement that babies mirror their parents' facial expressions? Yes. The survey results show that the videos, 21 days later, are still memorable. All surveyed students recalled the videos vividly, even though the entire series lasted no more than five minutes.

As the first experience of class material, the videos occupy a special position in defining classroom interaction and student success, as was previously addressed. These Advanced Business Communications students clearly recall how the class began, and more than half connect their first experience with the course material with their own communication success and abilities – abilities that are within them, constantly developing, and have brought them successfully through interaction after interaction in their lives. The placement of these videos achieves a fairly complex task: to create a sense, for students, that Andrew Martin's “achievement evolution” (2010) constitutes achievements they have already celebrated, marking them as ready to fully participate in a public speaking class.

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