

USING *STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION* TO TEACH CONCEPTS IN PERSUASION, FAMILY COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNICATION ETHICS

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More than thirty years ago Newton Minow, chair of the Federal Communications Commission, declared that television was a "vast wasteland of mediocre programs" that were providing a diet of "dulling sameness" (Defleur & Dennis, 1988, p. 205). In the three decades since this statement, television programming has changed considerably: no longer are viewers restricted to one, two, or even three network channels; no longer are they required to stay by the television set at the very time a show is broadcast; and no longer is the television program instantly gone while it is being watched. Today, independent companies, new networks, cable transmission of television programming, and video recorders make the choices of what to watch almost unlimited.

A variety of analytical and critical approaches are available to examine television program content and modeling. For example, Dreibelbis (1990), Larson (1990), Flayhan (1992), Keller (1981a, 1981b), K. Leeper (1991), R. Leeper (1991), and Bohlken and Braden (1991) critically examined various aspects of *The Simpsons*, such as family interaction patterns, transitions, self-reflexivity and intertextuality, discourse and social power, language, and Bart Simpson as a charismatic hero. Getz (1992) focused on racism and military suspicion in an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and Spaeth (1992) and Waldow (1992) utilized a cultural and social values approach to analyze two other episodes of the same program. Aden (1990) applied the concept of myth to the Bundy's of *Married . . . With Children*. Hart (1990) looked at *The Tracey Ullman Show*, and Dilley (1992) wrote about the lessons of *Molly Dodd* from a feminist perspective.

Television programs also provide a repository of instructional materials for a variety of subject areas in communication classes. While Proctor and Adler (1991) provide numerous applications of movies to classroom instruction, little has been done with television programs as instructional tools (an exception is Vande Berg's, 1991, application of television to teaching gender and communication). The purpose of this article is to provide a rationale for the use of popular television in the classroom and to provide examples and applications from the syndicated television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

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POPULAR TELEVISION IN THE CLASSROOM

ADVANTAGES

There are several advantages to utilizing popular television in the communication classroom. First, popular television programs are current, unlike many of the fine films produced by McGraw-Hill CRM films, Barr Films, Phoenix/BFA Films, and GPN/UMA during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which draw snickers from students when they see the hair and clothing styles. Second, popular television shows, by their very nature, are dramatic and well adapted to students used to high intensity and action-packed programming. Third, and this is a particular advantage of using *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the quality of the production and writing is usually very high, and main and subplots often reinforce each other by dealing with the same concept or issue.

A fourth advantage is that popular television programs are usually quite familiar to students in college classrooms. According to Coit (1989), the new *Star Trek* has "reached across class, age, sex, and race into the hearts and souls of many Americans" (p. 88). In addition, episodes usually can stand alone, that is, viewers do not need to be followers of the series to understand the plot of a single episode.

A fifth advantage of using popular television in the classroom is that unlike feature movies, television shows are, for the most part, less than an hour long (most hour-long shows run about 45 minutes without commercials). This is true for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with the exception of the two-part programs. With editing of the plots, a complete subplot can be reduced to about 20 minutes. These easily fit into a typical class period and also allow time for discussion.

A classroom instruction aid would be of little use if it were not available. A sixth advantage is that current episodes are readily available for off-air recording and immediate classroom use (later use requires some investigation into copyright observance). More importantly, however, episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* are coming out on home video for purchase at video stores. By the end of 1992, the first 22 episodes were released for sale to the public. The purchase cost, approximately \$15 per tape, is less than the rental rate of most films available through university film rental libraries. Video rental stores also may stock titles in the series for rental use, further reducing the cost.

DISADVANTAGES

Few innovations come without some drawbacks. First, and probably most important, is copyright infringement (it is illegal to record programs off the air and continue to use them in the classroom without getting permission to do so in a reasonable amount of time). Second, some popular television programs contain violence, sex, and language that can be a problem for church-related schools, faculty whose values preclude their use, and students who might be offended by their use in required classes (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* is, by almost any standards, mild in its approach to violence, sex, and language). Third, some students may not like the television series being shown, just as they may dislike any instructional aid or course unit.

APPLICATIONS

Star Trek: The Next Generation has many applications in the communication classroom. Presented here are examples of how to use the series for explicating concepts related to persuasion, family communication, and communication ethics.

PERSUASION

A number of the concepts involved in the study and teaching of persuasion can be illustrated through the use of episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Conflict is a primary component of any adventure series, and the crew of the Enterprise have their share of conflict with each other and with those they encounter. The concepts of influence, power, and persuasion are clearly illustrated in these conflicts, as in "Ensigns of Command" (episode 50, September 30, 1989).

In this episode, Data, a commander on the Enterprise, is called upon to convince a colony of settlers on a planet that they must leave before the Sheliak, a race that has little regard for humans, arrive to settle the planet and destroy the colonists. The 15,000 people in the colony are descendants of a ship that went off course years before. Data, the totally rational android, is the only one who can try to persuade the colonists to leave (the atmosphere is poisonous to human beings, transporters do not work in the radiation filled atmosphere, and phaser weapons do not work because of the radiation). Data must shuttle down to the surface alone and use words to convince the people to leave their home.

The episode illustrates the concepts of influence and power in the process of persuasion. French and Raven's (1962) bases of power are a useful starting point in the discussion and analysis of this episode. Data, as an officer of Starfleet, ought to have legitimate power. He has been authorized by a Federation starship captain to begin the evacuation of the planet that has been legally ceded to the Sheliak in a treaty negotiated 111 years before. Data ought to have expert power, since he has the sum total of human knowledge in his storage banks. However, as with any type of power, it is "given" by the audience or receivers, and not something "possessed." Gosheven and his followers generally did not recognize Data's legitimate authority or the authority of Starfleet or the Sheliak claim to ownership of the planet. In the same way, the colonists refused to acknowledge his expert power because he was a "machine." Referent and reward power did not play as important a role in the influence process. Coercive power might have helped in the beginning, but Data was one against fifteen thousand, and his phaser would not work in the atmosphere.

While bases of power might help clarify some of Data's approach to influence, another classical approach to persuasion also fits this episode. Aristotle's three modes of proof are illustrated clearly and directly in Data's three speeches to the people on Cygna V (the planet). The three attempts at persuading the colonists closely follow the artistic proofs of logos, pathos, and ethos developed by Aristotle (Cooper, 1932). When Data lands on the planet, he immediately seeks out Gosheven, the elected leader of the colony, and presents all the "reasons" for the colonists to leave the planet. In his use of logos, he cites the treaty, the

fact that they do not belong there, the inevitable destruction by the Sheliak, and the capabilities of evacuation by the Enterprise. Gosheven replies that this is their land and that they will fight to keep it just as their grandparents had. Data is surprised that his logical arguments are not persuasive.

After meeting and becoming friends with Ardrian McKenzie, a young woman who is fascinated by cybernetics, Data realizes that human beings are often swayed by their emotions and may need to be “motivated” in a way similar to the way that Gosheven was appealing to the past struggles of the people. Data is allowed to speak to the people only after he suggests that Gosheven’s argument is too weak to withstand public debate. Data’s appeal to the people sounds a little like Mark Anthony’s speech over the dead body of Caesar.

“I admire your conviction in the face of certain defeat. Your effort will be valiant, though doomed. Still, when you die, you will die for land and honor. Your children will understand that they are dying for a worthy cause. Long after the battle is over, your courage will be remembered.”

“Remembered by whom?” Ardrian shouts.

“Ah, that is true. There will be no one left alive to remember,” Data notes.

This appeal is more persuasive; however, Gosheven responds by pointing out that the people elected him their leader and that they could not desert everything they had built there. He orders the meeting ended by saying that his people will stay.

A number of the people want to hear more from Data and plan to meet at Ardrian’s home. While they are meeting Gosheven arrives and uses an electrical device to “shut down” Data. Gosheven demonstrates that he has and can use coercive force. Coercive force can be effective when the opposition is primarily using reasoning and appeals to emotions. When Data’s self-repair circuits revive him, he realizes that humans are often more convinced by actions than by words. Gosheven has unwittingly shown Data how to defeat him. Data modifies his phaser by using some of his own circuits and sends a message to Gosheven that he is going to destroy the aqueduct. Approaching the aqueduct, Data stuns the armed guards, sets his phaser on maximum, and destroys the aqueduct with a single blast. The people, shocked at the display of power, are told:

I could reduce this pumping station to a pile of debris, but I trust my point is clear. I am one android with a single weapon. There are hundreds of Sheliak on the way . . . and their weapons are far more powerful. And the Sheliak may not even offer you a target. They can obliterate this colony from orbit. You will die never having seen the faces of your killers. The choice is yours.

The people relent and go to pack. Gosheven is disheartened and points out that he really was willing to die. Data responds by saying that buildings can be replaced, lives cannot.

Data finally succeeded in persuading the colonists to leave only after he established his credibility by showing the people what kind of power was coming toward them. Once the people acknowledged his ethos, Data was able to renew his emotional appeal and move them to action.

The “Ensigns of Command” episode is an excellent example of the successive use of logos, pathos, and ethos in an attempt to persuade without the use of force or coercive power. The distinctions among power, force, and persuasion

can be taught in the communication classroom through vivid and dramatic means with the use of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Star Trek: The Next Generation offers many possibilities for teaching family communication concepts. This section focuses on family patterns, family roles, and the impact of ecosystems on family life.

Family patterns

A family interaction pattern is “an ordered and repetitive sequence or connection of events” (Stierlin & Simon, 1985, p. 260). A communication pattern is “an organized repetitive sequence of communication exchanges that tends to be repeated” (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1990, p. 318). Patterns are important because they provide a means by which families regulate themselves and maintain equilibrium. Also, they provide significant clues for understanding and interpreting behavior (Galvin & Brommel, 1991, pp. 37–38). Learning to recognize patterns is an important analytical skill for family communication students. Once students gain an outsider perspective of positive and negative effects of patterns in families, they can identify and explore consequences of patterns in their own family systems.

One way an instructor can facilitate development of pattern recognition is to make comparisons across a number of family systems. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* provides a rich source of different types of family systems. The crew have their families on board the “new” Enterprise, thus creating a large colony ship. For example, Dr. Beverly Crusher (human), Worf (Klingon), and Data (android) are single parents challenged when their children do not “fit” with their peers (“The Offspring,” episode 64, March 10, 1990, and “New Ground,” episode 110, January 6, 1992). Students can compare the parent-child interaction in each of these systems and look for similar/dissimilar patterns. Other episodes depict interaction between crew members and their families of origin. For example, Picard (“Family,” episode 76, October 1, 1990), Data (“Brother,” episode 77, October 8, 1990), and Worf (“Sins of the Father,” episode 65, March 17, 1990), all have conflictual interactions with their brothers. In “Haven” (episode 5, November 30, 1987) Deanna Troi, the empathic ship’s counselor, experiences conflict between her Betazoid mother and potential in-laws over a Betazoid or Earth style wedding ceremony.

Family roles

Yerby et al. (1990) define family roles as “describing a set of behaviors that family members of particular positions are expected to perform in relationship to each other, based on the rules established for specific relationships” (p. 327). In the family, roles emerge from and are sustained by patterns of social interaction. Family members negotiate their mutual expectations of each other and make adjustments. However, family members do not learn roles solely by interaction; they also learn them by observing and imitating models. Sources of role expectations include the media, daily life within a community, cultural groups, significant and complementary others, and each person’s self-understanding regarding a “fit” with a role (Galvin & Brommel, 1991).

The varied family systems aboard the enterprise provide an opportunity to explore the influence of cultural groups on family role expectations. For example, in “New Ground” Worf’s parental role expectations are shaped by Klingon beliefs that harsh discipline is good for a child. These beliefs influence his decision to send his son, Alexander, away to a Klingon school. This decision is modified by his interactions with others, most notably, Counselor Deanna Troi and Alexander.

Data and Lal (his android daughter) in “The Offspring” (episode 64, March 10, 1990), provide an example of how they learn parent and child roles by imitating humans. A touching example of this is shown in the scene in which Data discusses the struggle to be human and suggests that the struggle is what is most important. The scene ends with Data and Lal holding hands, an action Lal has observed humans associate with expressing affection.

Data also discusses different societal expectations for the parental role, reporting that his reading revealed much confusion over appropriate parenting. He suggests that there are two major philosophies: a traditional “spare the rod and spoil the child,” and a more liberal attitude. Data allows Lal to choose her own gender and appearance and displays a fairly open and supportive parenting style. Data’s approach to parenting contrasts sharply with Worf’s philosophy in “New Ground.” Students could discuss the consequences of these different parenting styles and find examples of them in other television programs depicting families.

The major controversy in “The Offspring” revolves around the definition of *family* and whether Data and Lal constitute a family. One way of evaluating this argument is to have students assess whether or not Data fulfills parental functions. In the episode, Data teaches Lal social skills and about her environment, praises her when she learns, corrects mistakes, works with her motor coordination, sends her to school, and sends her to Ten Forward (the pub) to interact with other systems. He even displays a loss of patience with Lal’s relentless “Why?” questions. In class discussion, students could evaluate whether Data fulfills Coleman’s parental role responsibilities of “providing love and acceptance, supplying structure and discipline, encouraging competence and self-confidence, presenting appropriate role models, and creating a stimulating and responsive environment” (Pearson, 1989, p. 192). Students can develop their own role descriptions of what it means to be a parent.

Ecosystems and family life

Family ecosystems refer to the hierarchy of systems that both comprise and surround the family, including subsystems to macrosystems (Yerby et al., 1990). The family units aboard the Enterprise are expected to follow both the ship’s and the Federation’s regulations, illustrating the interdependence of systems. When the various systems interface, conflict can result, as depicted by the family definition controversy in “The Offspring.” Data considers Lal his child and says to her, “We are a family, Lal.” Picard, the ship’s captain, is initially bothered by the parent-child relationship aspect and criticizes Data for not consulting him prior to creating Lal. Data responds that he had followed Starfleet instructions and had not observed others on board requesting permission for procreation. Admiral Haftel, the Federation representative, does not recognize family ties between Data and Lal, viewing her as an object needing his own supervision. He

not only questions Data's judgment as a parent, but insists that since the two androids are the only ones in existence, they should not be kept on the same starship. Students can discuss implications of family definitions held by members of different ecosystems.

"The Offspring" also can be used to discuss responsibility associated with mutual dependence between the family and other social systems. Data makes a passionate speech (for an android) in which he explains his motivations for parenting. He explains that he has received so much from Starfleet that he wanted to give something back. Even though Admiral Haftel is telling him that he should give Lal up for her own good, Data insists that he cannot give up his child. It is his duty to guide and support her as she learns to contribute to society. He states that "No one can relieve me of that obligation." However, when Admiral Haftel orders him to turn Lal over to him, Data immediately rises to comply.

Star Trek: The Next Generation's varied and culturally diverse family systems, as well as their environmental interactions, facilitate many applications.

COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Communication ethics is another area in which *Star Trek: The Next Generation* can be used for pedagogical purposes. There are a number of episodes that can be utilized, but two episodes are especially pertinent to communication ethics. "The Offspring" and "Ethics" (episode 116, March 2, 1992) both present ethical dilemmas in which all alternative perspectives are presented. "The Offspring" for example, can be used to investigate the seven ethical perspectives described by Johannesen (1990).

Johannesen's "political perspective" uses one's political system's ideologies and values as the base for ethical reasoning. In the United States, the democratic philosophy undergirds many ethical decisions. The use of a "political perspective" to analyze this episode would challenge students to delineate key democratic values and ideals, and to investigate the intercultural implications of this perspective. That is, what if the ethical struggle involves two different political systems? How does one decide whether to act against one's own value system when within a different political value system (cf. Condon, 1981)? This type of discussion is especially pertinent within intercultural as well as interpersonal and mass communication classes.

Another example of utilizing this perspective might be to apply Karl Wallace's (1955) four "moralities" or guidelines that are within the framework of a democratic political perspective. Within Wallace's perspective, the "habit of respect for dissent" is supported. Captain Picard's decision to go against Admiral Haftel's orders could be discussed as a possible utilization of such a "habit." Wallace also promotes a "habit to prefer public to private motivations," which may justify Picard's dissent. During such a discussion, it is important that students understand the possible consequences of Picard's decision (cf. White, 1990).

The "human nature" perspective could bring about a different type of discussion than that of the political perspective. Within this perspective, a key factor is that the characteristics of being human are utilized and respected when making an ethical decision. Having androids as key characters within this

episode allows for an interesting discussion on what attributes make a person “human.” Wieman and Walter (1957) present the characteristics of being human as having symbol-using capacity and a unique need for needing one another. Would one then describe Data and Lal as human? Is it important that they are or are not human? Analyzing human attributes in this manner allows students to understand the differences of opinions within each perspective as well as the overall perspective itself.

Another possible application using this perspective is Immanuel Kant’s (1949) “categorical imperative” in which he posits that human beings inherently possess the ability to judge moral laws. Within this perspective, as Johannesen (1990) points out, a lie is always a lie because “the moral imperatives are right in themselves, not because of their consequences” (p. 45). Kant presents two forms by which to assess an ethical decision. One form asks whether the decision is one that should become a universal code. Students learning this perspective might be asked what would happen if *all* Starfleet captains disobeyed direct orders. Also, what if Starfleet had the power to make decisions that counteracted *all* individual’s rights? The other form of Kant’s “imperative” is that communication should never be used solely as a means to an end. One might ask how Data and Lal are being used as a means to an end within the episode. Could Picard also be described as using them as means to an end? Once again, utilizing a variety of theories within a perspective can yield a fruitful classroom discussion.

The “dialogical perspective” is most often associated with Martin Buber’s (1970) philosophy that promotes an “I-Thou” relationship that focuses on being “present” in communication. With its focus on empathic interpersonal communication, discussion could revolve around examples of observed dialogical communication or how one listens with empathy to all sides of an issue and still stays committed to one ethical decision. How does one empathize with Captain Picard and Admiral Haftel and still come to a clear-cut conclusion? For a thorough and interesting discussion on this idea, Keller’s (1981) article, “Interpersonal Dissent and the Ethics of Dialogue,” could be assigned reading for students as a catalyst for discussion.

“Situational perspectives” focus on the idea that codes and rules cannot be used to make ethical decisions because the situational elements are, in and of themselves, the key determinants. These perspectives have interesting applications to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* because of the plethora of “situations” the starship encounters. However, it is important to remember to present the perspectives in a manner that allows students to examine how well the situational ethic works when applying it to their own lives, as well as to the starship crew.

A discussion or paper could focus on Rogge’s (1959) situational perspective in which he suggests that ethical criteria change according to the person’s leadership style, persuasive goals, and other communication elements. In this perspective, communication tactics that are usually identified as unethical, such as lying, using excessive emotional appeal, or name-calling, may be, in certain situations, ethical. Students may be able to discuss what other persuasive tactics could have been used by Captain Picard, Admiral Haftel, or Data to persuade one another. Fletcher’s (1966) situational ethics, which focuses on a Christian ideology, also could be used to facilitate learning about this perspective. Fletcher’s idea,

presented simply, is to analyze the situation and choose the most “loving” response. Students, after learning about this perspective, could then ask themselves how one would make the decision whether or not to transfer Lal under Fletcher’s approach to ethics. What *specific* situational elements are the deciding factor in the decision? How does one decide what is “loving”? In answering these questions, students examine the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing a situational ethical perspective.

Other perspectives that Johannesen (1990) presents are “religious,” “utilitarian,” and “legal.” Each can lend itself to analysis using *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episodes.

CONCLUSION

The insight and knowledge students receive in class should be directly applicable and relevant to their lives (Flint, 1924; McCaleb & Dean, 1987; White, 1990). Although the characters’ emotional and psychological states are ones to which students are likely to relate, there is a degree of “non-realness” to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Therefore, it is imperative to use episodes in conjunction with some realistic, relevant, and “earthy” situations.

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