Title:

Strike that pose: An infamous TED talk

Abstract:

What do you do when you find out there is a problem with a favorite video, exercise, and/or example? This session uses the example of Amy Cuddy’s Power Poses TED Talk. This TED Talk focuses on non-verbal communication while also imparting important life lessons. It has become infamous because the credibility of the science behind it has been called into question. Despite this controversy, there is still good reason to use it in class. This session will introduce people to the TED Talk as well as facilitating a discussion on how to handle something imperfect in class.

Key Words:

Non-verbal communication, TED Talks, Debriefing

Introduction:

Instructors who know the value of experiential activities are often on the lookout for new ones. Inspiration can come from many different places, mine have come from a variety with some being more obvious (e.g, attending MOBTC) than others (e.g., Broadway musicals). While often inspired, when we sit down to figure out how to use them in our classes and then implement them, the results can be mixed. Mixed isn’t necessarily bad as we make tweaks for the next class. Sometimes tweaks aren’t possible, in those cases we learn to either frame the activity as to minimize the imperfect or abandon the activity and search for another.

This session focuses on a situation that initially was seemed flawless but became problematic. While minor problems are fairly common (e.g., updating exercises so that monetary or cultural references are meaningful), this was a major problem. The activity in question is Amy Cuddy’s TED Talk on non-verbal communication and “power poses”. While extremely popular, the underlying science on which it was based was called into question. Normally, that would be enough of a reason to move on, but there was a hitch. Perhaps even more problematic was the fact that the TED Talk resonated with students and from reflection journals I knew they were trying what they learned in their own lives. So I engaged in a process of reflection and found both reasons and a way to continue its use.

There are three reasons that I chose to continue to use the TED Talk and believe that other instructors should utilize it as well. First, the TED Talk remains an engaging way to introduce the concept of non-verbal communication. Second, in her talk, Amy Cuddy shares her personal journey which is both inspirational and imparts some important life lessons for our students. Third, even if the science was questionable, there appeared to be a placebo effect that was helping students. While I have only used the TED Talk in a traditional undergraduate course, I believe that it would valuable in any instructional setting.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications:

The focus of Cuddy’s TED Talk is the power pose. As such, it is useful for teaching multiple course topics. The main topic for which I use the video is non-verbal communication. In addition to non-verbal communication, the video could also be used to discuss the concept of power. Although I use it more in terms of how people could use power poses to their advantage. Specifically, how the projection of power relates to persuasion and as such could be used as an impression management tactic.

The power poses in the Cuddy TED Talk are an excellent example of kinesics. Kinesics represent what most people think about as non-verbal communication, namely gestures and body language. However, there are multiple types of non-verbal communication. Other types of non-verbal communication include haptics, proxemics, and chronemics. For example, haptics include physical contact such as a pat on the back to express that someone did a good job, but in terms of power it could be the firm hand that guides motion. Proxemics involve the use of space, for example the typical classroom set up with students seated in rows and the instructor as the focus in the front of the classroom helps to establish the instructor as the top of the hierarchy. Finally, chronemics involves the use of time. Making someone wait to see you is a way to communicate either that you are more important and/or you don’t care about the other person.

One of the applications of power poses in the TED Talk involves job interviews. Individuals who engaged in power poses and more powerful non-verbal behaviors were rated higher than those who did not. This result provides an opportunity to discuss persuasion and impression management tactics. Regarding persuasion, scholarship shows that credibility is an important factor in determining someone’s level of persuasiveness. The relationship to the video is that people who look the part or project confidence, via a power pose, are generally viewed as more credible. This impact on credibility can explain why people who utilize power poses would be more effective in interviews. Such intentional use of non-verbal behavior can be considered a form of impression management, which has been shown to increase applicant success in job interviews.

Learning Objectives:

I use Cuddy’s TED Talk to achieve three learning objectives. The first purpose of the video is to introduce students to the various types of non-verbal communication (i.e., kinesics, haptics, proxemics, and chronemics) as well as its applications and meanings. This video focuses on the concept of power so it is particularly good at reinforcing the topic in an Organizational Behavior course or a Negotiation/Conflict Resolution course (which is where it is currently being used). Given a specific application in the video (i.e., employment interview), the video also provides an opportunity to cover persuasion and/or impression management tactics. A related secondary objective of the video is for students to recognize their personal use, or lack thereof, of non-verbal behavior that projects power and if desired to change their behavior. Finally, the video provides an opportunity to cover the importance of being a life-long and critical learner.

Exercise Overview:

The session will provide conference participants with enough information on why and how they would use the Cuddy TED Talk, as well as a better understanding of how to handle problematic activities. In the interest of time and to maximize participant involvement, only clips of the TED Talk will be used. The basic flow is that the first half of the session will be the TED Talk and the second half will be handling problematic activities. In addition to participant reactions to the Cuddy video, the discussion will also more generally cover handling problematic activities, and ask participants to share their own experiences.

As part of the introduction, I will be letting people know that I will be showing only clips of the Cuddy video and will explain what is not be shown. The first clip I will show is approximately 1:30 minutes long and is where she covers different types of non-verbal behavior. The second clip is longer (just over 6 minutes). In this section of the video, Cuddy talks about the application of power poses and includes her personal story/life lesson. This clip also talks about the science that provides her explanation for the power poses, but I am leaving out the approximately 8:30 minutes where she covers that experiment in detail. I will make clear to participants that the full video runs approximately 21 minutes and that the accompanying discussion/debrief can be completed to accommodate someone teaching a 50 minute section.

In conjunction with the video portion of the session I will debrief it. I will connect the video to the various types of non-verbal communication (i.e., kinesics, haptics, proxemics, and chronemics). I do this by defining each type and then ask students to which type of non-verbal behavior appears in the video. I follow this up with asking students for examples of the other types of non-verbal behavior that are consistent with the concept of power. Next, I ask students about how/why power poses may make someone more persuasive. Finally, I ask students to reflect upon how the video may impact them personally. Depending on time and size of the class, this can be done as part of a single discussion (better for smaller classes or when time is short) or have students break up into groups first (better for larger classes or when more time is available).

I will start the second set of the session with an explanation of why this has become a problematic TED Talk. In addition to my verbal summary, I will make available to participants a New York Times Magazine article that does an excellent job of covering the controversy. I will then ask participants to discuss how they would choose to handle the video. The three main options are to 1) not use; 2) use but explain why it is problematic; or 3) use but don’t explain the problem (which allows the placebo effect to remain intact). With the remaining time, I will focus the discussion on how to handle similar situations and ask participants to share examples from their instructional experiences.

Session Description:

Introduction 3 minutes

Clips and debrief of TED Talk 10 minutes

Group discussion 15 minutes

Wrap up 2 minutes

Bibliography:

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