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Using *Swing Kids* to Teach Theories of Persuasion

Goal: To use the movie *Swing Kids* to illustrate persuasion concepts and theories.

In the past decade, *Speech Communication Teacher* and *Communication Education* have published numerous articles describing how feature films can be used as illustrative case studies in communication courses (for an overview and bibliography, see Proctor, 1998). The goal of this article is to describe how the movie *Swing Kids*, a 1993 release from Hollywood Pictures, can be used in courses that focus on theories of persuasion.

Movie Synopsis

Swing Kids is a fictional story rooted in actual events that took place in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s. The term "Swing Kids" refers to German young people who loved American swing music and disdained the Hitler Jugend (HJ). The HJ movement was committed to nurturing young Nazis; the Swing Kids were committed to dancing and fun. The movie depicts the ongoing tension between the rebellious Swing Kids and the HJs who try to persuade them to join the Nazi cause.

At the heart of the movie is the story of three friends: Peter (played by Robert Sean Leonard), Thomas (Christian Bale), and Arvid (Frank Whaley). At the outset of the film, these young men are all avid fans of swing music and regularly attend underground dance sessions at local music halls. Arvid is ardently anti-Nazi, perhaps because he has the most to fear. He is handicapped and walks with a limp; thus, he knows he can not and will not be part of the Nazi "master race." Peter is also anti-Nazi at the beginning of the story because his father was imprisoned and died in a German jail. Thomas has the least to fear and the most to gain from the Nazis because he is looking for acceptance and status in a group. As a result, he buys into the Nazi agenda rather quickly and ends up defending it staunchly.

Theory Illustrations

Swing Kids offers excellent depictions of many persuasion concepts, including fear appeals, source credibility, and foot-in-the-door/door-in-the-face approaches. It also illustrates three familiar persuasion theories: Cognitive Dissonance, Social Judgment, and Elaboration Likelihood (for discussion of these theories, see Gass & Seiter, 1999; Griffin, 1997; Larson, 1995; Woodward & Denton, 1996). The following is a brief summary of how these three theories are illustrated by the three primary characters.

Cognitive Dissonance. Arvid stands firmly against values and beliefs that are inhumane and evil. His behaviors are consistent with his attitudes. He recognizes that even small inconsistencies in behavior can lead to changes in attitudes.

He declares, "Anytime you go along with them [the Nazis], you just make it easier for them."

Peter begins the movie with anti-Nazi sentiments but becomes confused once he is forced to join the HJ. The more he engages in HJ activities, the more his attitudes change. In a conversation in the middle in the movie, he defends the Nazis and puts down his father, reducing the importance of his previous cognitions. When he comes to his senses near the end of the movie, his monologues suggest that he has decided to stand by principle rather than reduce his cognitive dissonance by rationalizing his behavior.

Thomas spends much of the movie rationalizing his behavior and overturning his attitudes and values. He denies volition about joining the HJs, claiming, "We didn't want to join, we had to" (which isn't true). The Nazis woo him with a series of rewards such as uniforms, promotions, praise, and motorcycles. The more he acts like a Nazi, the more he thinks like a Nazi. He eventually rationalizes Nazi atrocities and turns on his friends. When Arvid rails against the Nazis, Thomas declares that swing music has "perverted his brain." Ultimately, Thomas turns in Peter and almost kills him for the sake of the Nazi cause.

Social Judgment. The Nazi messages are in Arvid's latitude of rejection. He is unswayed by their propaganda because he has strong ego involvement; he knows the Nazis have no room for a "cripple" in their agenda. He believes the Nazis are inhumane and never wavers on this issue.

The Nazis are originally in Peter's latitude of rejection, but his level of ego involvement is not as strong as Arvid's. His latitude of noncommitment grows as he is exposed to Nazi propaganda and begins to assimilate their way of thinking. In a powerful moment, Peter learns that the Nazis are killing Jews, creating a boomerang effect. From this point on, his ego involvement against the Nazis is unwavering, as is his resistance to their persuasive appeals.

Thomas begins the movie in the latitude of noncommitment about Nazi messages. He doesn't have the ego involvement of Peter or Arvid and doesn't believe that joining the HJs is a problem. He declares, "We can be HJ by day and Swing Kids by night." As he receives praise and recognition from the HJs but not from his father (who calls Thomas "a misfit"), his ego involvement with the Nazis becomes strong and all anti-Nazi messages land in his ever-expanding latitude of rejection.

Elaboration Likelihood. Arvid uses the central route (critical thinking) rather than the peripheral route (shortcut) in his analyses of the Nazis' persuasive attempts because he is highly motivated to evaluate the source's messages. In a speech near the end of the movie, he demonstrates that he has thought through the issues and outcomes of the Nazi agenda and has chosen to resist their persuasive appeals. He challenges his friends to recognize the subtle shifts taking place in their attitudes: "Do you think that just because you're not doing it [acts of hatred], you're not a part of it?"

At first, Peter takes the peripheral route in processing Nazi persuasion attempts. Although he is anti-Nazi at the outset, he is not highly motivated to evaluate their messages. As a result, he joins forces with them for a brief period of time and starts to use their rhetoric. When he comes to his senses later in the movie, he takes the central route in processing Nazi

propaganda. Near the end of the story, he quotes Nazi doctrine point-by-point to an S.S. officer in an attempt to expose the hypocrisy of the Nazi leaders and their agenda.

Thomas takes the peripheral route in evaluating Nazi persuasion appeals. He is attracted to the praise and recognition he receives from the HJ leaders and thus has little motivation to analyze their arguments. When Arvid and Peter attempt to steer Thomas down the central route to think critically about the Nazis, he ridicules them and even covers his ears. He becomes committed to the Nazis not because of carefully reasoned arguments but because his behaviors (acting like a Nazi) help create his attitudes (thinking like a Nazi).

Instructional Strategies

Swing Kids can be viewed in or out of class. Accompanying assignments can be general or specific, depending on the instructor's goals and the level of the students. At a general level, instructors can simply ask students to identify and describe theories/concepts from the course that are illustrated in *Swing Kids*. At a specific level, instructors can pose questions such as: (1) When and why do Arvid, Peter, and Thomas give in to persuasive appeals? When and why do they resist persuasive appeals? (2) Describe how and why characters in the movie reduce their cognitive dissonance. (3) Explain the importance of critical thinking in this movie, using terms from Elaboration Likelihood Theory. Who is the strongest critical thinker? Who is the weakest? (4) Create a Social Judgment Theory graph for Arvid, Peter, and Thomas. Describe how the characters change positions on the graph during the course of the movie.

To enhance discussion on these topics, it is best for students to answer these questions in writing before offering their appraisals in the classroom. This will allow them to carefully consider their responses and make appropriate connections to course concepts.

Appraisal

Swing Kids is an excellent tool for illustrating persuasion as a *process*. The characters in the movie do not experience persuasion as an immediate response to a public speech; rather, they are persuaded by a series of messages exchanged over time in interpersonal transactions. The movie also underscores the need to be critical consumers of persuasive appeals. Watching the characters act and react brought concepts and theories to life in our "Strategies of Persuasion" class. Many students said that viewing and analyzing *Swing Kids* was the course's most important and enduring learning experience.

References

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- Proctor, R. F. (1998). *Communication in film II: Teaching communication courses using feature films*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Woodward, G. C., & Denton, R. E. (1996). *Persuasion & influ-*

ence in American life (3rd ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.

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So What if You Found It on the Internet: An Exercise in Evaluating Web-based Information

Goal: To develop students' critical and evaluative skills of Internet sources.

As the information explosion made possible by the Internet provides unlimited sources of information about every topic imaginable, more students are turning to those sources of information for assignments in communication courses. This activity is designed to supplement the standard discussion about the credibility and reliability of sources, specifically targeting use of Internet sources for a communication assignment. At our institution, we are able to schedule sessions in the Electronic Learning Center as part of our regularly scheduled classes. However, the information that we share with our students, can easily be adapted for a non-electronic presentation. Students are asked to visit the following sites:

- <http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research.webeval.html>
<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college.instruct/web/critical.htm>
<http://www.improb.com/airchives/cat.html>

The first two sites are tutorials, the Cornell site offers tips on both Internet and non-Internet information sources and the UCLA site includes a series of questions developed by librarian Esther Grassian that the web researcher should ask about sources. The final site is one entitled *Feline Reactions to Bearded Men*. The article reads as if it were a scholarly article, but as students begin to apply the questions regarding reliability and credibility to this Internet source, they find how utterly ridiculous the source is! For those with limited Web access, instructors can provide a copy of the feline article for students to read. At the end of the session, this checklist for Internet sources (developed by David Boraks, 1997) is given to each student:

- What is the site's purpose? Will its information be unbiased?
- Who sponsors the site? What are the organization's values or goals? Can you contact the sponsors should questions arise?
- Is the information in the site well-documented? Does it provide citations to sources used in obtaining the information? Are individual articles signed or attributed?
- When was it published? Is the date of the last revision posted somewhere on the page?
- What are the author's credentials? Is the author cited frequently in other sources?
- How does the value of the Web-based information you've found compare with other available sources, such as print?

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