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People's Court Comes to the Classroom

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People's Court Comes to the Classroom

Goal: To demonstrate how nonverbal cues are combined to make effective or ineffective first impressions.

This learning experience is designed to highlight the way nonverbal behaviors can be used, either to enhance or contradict the image a speaker wants to project. Successful nonverbal impression management is particularly important in such work contexts as job and sales interviews. However, making the "right" first impression also is critical for social success.

The television program *People's Court* is ideally suited for providing examples of effective and ineffective impression management. Plaintiffs and defendants who appear on the program are not professional actors. They are ordinary people trying to make a favorable impression on the judge, courtroom audience, and viewers. The program is widely syndicated and appears five times weekly. This allows for taping and use in the classroom within copyright guidelines. (Copyright regulations state that programs taped for educational use must be shown within 10 class days and may be kept a total of 45 days.)

Before showing the tape, I ask students to form answers to the following questions while viewing the segment. Voice, dress, hairstyle, eye contact, facial expression and posture are some nonverbal cues that can be analyzed.

1. What images are the defendant(s) or plaintiff(s) trying to project? What messages do they want to convey about themselves and the dispute?

2. How successful or unsuccessful are the parties in communicating the desired impressions? Explain your answer based on the nonverbal behaviors of each.

3. What suggestions do you have to help both the defendant(s) and plaintiff(s) manage their nonverbal impressions more effectively?

Unsuccessful attempts at impression management, in particular, can generate lively discussion. (For more information on nonverbal impression management, see Dale Leathers, *Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles and Applications*.) For example, some speakers plead poverty while dressing lavishly, while others lower their credibility through poor eye contact and monotone vocal delivery. Following discussion of the tape, students form dyads to examine their own success or lack of success in impression formation and to formulate a plan of action to increase their effectiveness in future encounters.

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