

THE NEWSPAPER COURSE--'PERSUASION':

AN INSTRUCTIONAL AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PROJECT

Valerie Schneider

The author wrote and directed a newspaper course entitled, PERSUASION: THE ART OF INFLUENCING OTHERS, in cooperation with the University Relations Office at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. It was primarily instructional but contained secondary value for the public relations function of East Tennessee State University.

THE NEWSPAPER COURSE IN 'PERSUASION': BASIC DETAILS

The persuasion course consisted of two parts. I wrote eight newspaper articles and also a thirty-page course packet. The packet contained a handout and an exercise to supplement each article. A course bibliography, basic instructions and a class evaluation form were also included. This newspaper course is the only locally-produced one ever to be done at East Tennessee State University. In fact, it is the only locally-produced newspaper course ever done in the state of Tennessee or in the tri-state region, including Western North Carolina and Southwestern Virginia, in which ETSU is located.

The newspaper articles ran during eight Thursdays from October 4--November 22, 1979 in the JOHNSON CITY PRESS-CHRONICLE. When I approached the managing editor, he agreed to run the

series free of charge, provided that I would not run it in the other tri-cities newspapers. (Kingsport, Tennessee and Bristol, Tennessee and Virginia are the other tri-cities.) In addition, I could retain copyright. (I wrote all course materials during the summer when I was not on the university payroll.) The PRESS-CHRONICLE also agreed to run one major advertisement for the course, which I also wrote, and brief reminders regarding enrollment procedures along with the first two articles. The course was also described in THE BULLETIN OF CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSES AT EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY (Fall, 1979) which came out about three weeks before the course began and was sent to persons on a direct mail list.

"PERSUASION" was designed as a non-credit course to be taken for one C.E.U. It had a registration fee of \$10. One Continuing Education Unit equals ten hours of in-class effort. The readings and exercises were designed to take the average person 10-12 hours. The format was primarily independent study with one class meeting at the end of the term to turn in the exercise assignments, ask questions, and discuss materials. Students could arrange to send the exercises to me through the mail, if they preferred. Students were encouraged to phone or write me while working on the materials, if they had questions or problems. Total expenses for the course (xeroxing and mailing) were about \$30. I was paid the remaining \$200 generated in fees for publicizing and supervising the course.

There were the topics of the eight newspaper articles:

(1) "Persuasion: Safeguard of a Democratic Society; (2) "Habits: You Can Persuade Yourself," (self-directed behavior modification); (3) "What You Call Yourself Makes A Difference" (self-fulfilling prophecies); (4) "Overcoming Attention and Perception Barriers"; (5) "How Do You Get Others To Do What You Want?" (building sufficient reward-value for the persuadee(s); (6) "The Golden Mean and Persuasive Success"; (7) "Persuasive Campaigns: Opinion Leaders are a Necessary Ingredient"; and (8) "Persuasive Speaking: Stage Fright and Its Remedy."

COURSE RESULTS AND METHODS OF EVALUATION

The National Endowment of the Humanities funded 10 newspaper courses between 1972-1982. The national series was entitled, COURSES BY NEWSPAPER. NEH spent about \$250,000 per course for development, advertising and for distribution to several hundred newspapers. These national courses were based upon 15 articles per course. A different nationally-known expert was selected for the writing of each article. Later all course articles were edited by a professional journalist. Data on the Spring, 1979 Courses By Newspaper offering, DEATH AND DYING, became available shortly before the PERSUASION course was run. This CBN study was utilized as a comparative base in evaluating the locally-produced course.¹

In addition, I supervised a telephone survey of 278 persons during a five-day period immediately after the last newspaper article on PERSUASION was run. I designed a short questionnaire and marked every tenth name in the Johnson City phone directory. If an individual was not at home, didn't read the PRESS-CHRONICLE or refused to participate in an interview, the next person on the page was phoned. Three student assistants did the phoning and recording of data. Also, students enrolled in the class filled out a questionnaire evaluating the course, selecting their favorite and least favorite articles, and giving demographic data.

The PERSUASION course enrolled 23 students. DEATH AND DYING had averaged 20 students per circulation area. Four percent of PRESS-CHRONICLE readers, 1100 people, studied the course at the level of reading all the articles in the paper. DEATH AND DYING averaged 3 percent reading all articles, but had 33 percent studying at least one of their 15 articles, while the PERSUASION course resulted in only 23 percent of PRESS-CHRONICLE readers looking at at least one of the eight articles.

After the PERSUASION course had been done, two departments at ETSU decided to utilize Courses By Newspaper materials. The Sociology department sponsored a course on MARRIAGE for non-credit program and enrolled four students. The Institute for Appalachian Affairs sponsored a credit course on ENERGY. Even though ENERGY was run in both the Johnson City and Kingsport newspapers, it had a total enrollment of only ten students.

I felt a major reason for such low enrollments was that advertising and instructions for registration were practically nonexistent in the newspaper itself: instead they were carried out through other channels of the university.

Twenty-one of the twenty-three enrolled students in PERSUASION actually completed the course. This compares nationally with a completion rate of only about one-third enrolled in a correspondence-type course. Those enrolled could rate the course from 1 to 5 with 5 being the best score. The composite rating for the course was 4.2. Both enrolled students and those studying by reading all the newspaper articles gave virtually the same ranking to popularity of the articles. Both groups liked the stagefright article best, followed by a tie between the articles on self-persuasion of habits and self-fulfilling prophecies. Next was the article on "How Do You Get Others To Do What You Want?". The article on "The Golden Mean" was the last choice of both groups.

Regarding demographic data, about an equal number of men and women enrolled. Only two students were under thirty. Almost half were college graduates, and two had some graduate training. Most were involved in some type of sales, promotional, publicity or management-type work and two were teachers. One student took a credit course from me the next term, and another took a speech course for credit from

another professor. Two others said they planned to take a credit course in another department at ETSU. Overall, the men rated the course slightly higher than the women.

SECONDARY PUBLIC RELATIONS IMPLICATIONS

Any message, even when it is primarily instructional, which mentions the name of an organization in a favorable manner, advances the public relations-image building effort of that organization. In a study of the Courses By Newspaper series George A. Colburn says, "Most colleges and universities see great benefit in affiliating formally with their local newspaper through CBN. Many administrators view the newspaper's involvement--and promotion of CBN as worth thousands of dollars in publicity for their institutions."² In addition, the advertising for PERSUASION stressed that it was a locally-produced effort, never before done in the institution or in the whole region, to better serve the convenience of non-traditional students.

NOTES

Valerie Schneider is a Professor of Speech Communication in the Department of Communication at East Tennessee State University. This project was reported on at the 1983 convention of the Southern Speech Communication Association.

¹Research Report on Courses By Newspaper-"DEATH AND DYING," September, 1979, p. 1.

²George A. Colburn, "Courses By Newspaper: No Longer An Experiment," in Chamberlain, Martin N., ed., CONTINUING EDUCATION BY MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY, (New Directions for Continuing Education, #5) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1980, p. 45.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

THE JOURNAL OF THE TENNESSEE SPEECH COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION is published twice yearly in the Fall and Spring. Subscriptions and requests for advertising rates should be addressed to David Walker, Box 111, MTSU, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Regular subscription price for non-members is \$4.00 yearly, or \$2.00 per issue. The TSCA JOURNAL is printed by the MTSU Print Shop, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. Special fourth class postage is paid at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN.

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