ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE:
GOFFMAN ON THE PRESENTATION OF SELF

by

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ABSTRACT

Irving Goffman examines communication activity through the perspective of theatrical performance. In everyday life, each of us wears many masks or takes on many roles as we interact with those around us. In Goffman’s view, the better we set the stage and speak and act our parts determines how well our performances will be accepted by our audiences. The more believable our performances, the more likely we are to successfully communicate with others.
All the World’s a Stage: Goffman on the Presentation of Self

*All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts ... – Jaques, As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7, 139–143 (Macrone, 1990)*

The English bard William Shakespeare and sociologist Erving Goffman agree on one thing: all the world really is a stage. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman uses theatrical metaphor to explore various aspects of communication activity. Much as a playwright attempts to control the action on a stage, Goffman sees communicators as actors who manipulate setting, language, and non-verbal cues to create a desired outcome. In the production of the desired outcome, the greater the degree of agreement between the setting, language and non-verbal cues, the more successful the actor will be in gaining the audience’s approval of his communication.

Through the careful crafting of the message, a communicator is more likely to have his/her audience suspend his or her disbelief and accept the terms of the message being delivered, if the message and all of the details of the presentation are in harmony. Conversely, incongruities and inconsistencies can have a negative impact on the intended audience’s reception of the message. In the terms of theater, the intended audience will not suspend its disbelief and not accept the message being delivered. And, one could argue, in this instance, the intended message was not delivered.
The communicator, or actor in this instance, can be either conscious or unconscious of his or her attempt to manipulate the “audience,” and the goal or desired outcome can be benign, malignant, or neutral.

For instance, the goal of the communicator could be quite beneficial, as when an instructor seeks to control the learning outcome for his students to insure their proper instruction. Or the goal may well be malignant, as in the action of a confidence man preparing his mark to defraud or otherwise cheat the victim out of their money, property or other assets. The goal could also be as simple and seemingly neutral as trying to decide where to eat for dinner.

In each of the above instances, either consciously or not, the teacher, the con man, and dinner companion have a goal to create a desired outcome. For each, how they present themselves and their cases to their intended audiences will determine the outcome of their goals.

Of course “neutral” is a matter of perspective. If, for instance, one of the dinner participants does not care for Tex-Mex when all of his or her dinner companions do, and he or she instead prefers Chinese or pizza but wishes to be seen as one of the group, he or she may suggest the new restaurant in the area, which just so happens to serve Chinese, pizza or another cuisine rather than Tex-Mex. This may spark his or her companions’ interest, the communicator may not have to eat Tex-Mex, and all the participants are satisfied with the outcome.

This begs the question of whether motives are ever truly neutral; however, that question is beyond the scope of this paper. In the context of this paper the positive, negative, or neutral nature of the communications will not be considered, but only how the goal of the communication may be successfully accomplished through the lens of Goffman’s theory.

While on stage, an actor portrays a character involved in some form of interaction to convey a mood, setting or information to the audience, the third participant in the play.
(Actors) (p)lay parts in stage, television, radio, video, or motion picture productions for entertainment, information, or instruction. Interpret serious or comic role by speech, gesture, and body movement to entertain or inform audience…. Perform humorous and serious interpretations of emotions, actions, and situations, using body movements, facial expressions, and gestures. Portray and interpret roles, using speech, gestures, and body movements in order to entertain, inform, or instruct radio, film, television, or live audiences….

(CareerPlanner.com)

Although the audience is usually passive from the character’s perspective, they still play a vital role, for without an audience the actors have no purpose. That is, the audience hears and views the action and, if the playwright and actor have done their jobs well, the audience will perceive the scene and the meaning as intended.

The audiences’ feedback, in the form of laughter, applause, or other outward signs of involvement, indicates to the actors and playwright that the message has been received, and the degree of that response is an indication of their acceptance of that message, and actors thrive on this type of feedback.

Once the final curtain falls, actors will accept and acknowledge the audiences’ feedback, in the form of applause or standing ovations, assuming, of course, that the play was worthy of such feedback. However, while the actors may thrive on this feedback, they will rarely if ever respond directly to laughter, applause and other feedback during the course of the play. This would be, in the parlance of the theater, breaking the fourth wall.
In the theater, there is an imaginary fourth wall at the very front of every stage. This “wall” provides the audience with a way to look in on the action of the play while maintaining the play’s fiction. This allows the audience to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the fiction for what it is – entertainment.

The meaning of the term "fourth wall" has been adapted to refer to the boundary between the fiction and the audience. "Fourth wall" is part of the suspension of disbelief between a fictional work and an audience. The audience will usually passively accept the presence of the fourth wall without giving it any direct thought, allowing them to enjoy the fiction as if they were observing real events. It is the invisible barrier between realities…. The term "breaking the fourth wall" in theatre generally means when a character is showing his/her awareness of the audience. The term originated from Bertolt Brecht's theory of "epic theatre" that he developed from (and in contrast to) Konstantin Stanislavski's drama theory. Most often, the fourth wall is broken through a character directly addressing the audience; an example is the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's Our Town, who speaks to the audience. A similar effect can be achieved by breaking character, through dialogue, or by the characters interacting with objects outside the context of the work (e.g. a character is handed a prop by a stage hand) (Art & Popular Culture).

Breaking this wall can be a dramatic device. Shakespeare used soliloquies to have his characters convey expository information directly to the audience that the other actors in the play
would not be privy to. However, breaking the fourth wall is a device best used sparingly because, poorly employed, it can jar an audience out of their suspension of disbelief.

Outside of the theater, in the field as it were, the communicator must, of necessity, break through this wall, while maintaining command of the stage. The feedback the communicator receives during the delivery of the message will indicate to him/her how the message is being received and how it may be altered, if necessary, to be accepted.

“In real life, the three parties are compressed into two: the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience” (Goffman, p. xi). In other words, the individual who would portray the lead in a play of communication interaction with others takes on a role in which the communicator is the main character, and the other or others present are both the actors and audience.

The communicator’s role then is also that of the playwright attempting to control the mood, setting and the information being presented. In order to carry out this role, the communicator must win the approval of that audience. He must also keep in mind that the audience, or other actors in their turns, may also wish to define the mood, setting and information being presented. “The key factor in this structure is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions” (Goffman, p. 254).

This struggle to maintain definitions can be most easily seen in the run-up to the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, wherein Republican candidate John McCain and Democrat candidate Barrack Obama were running for the office of President of the United States. While each candidate was vying for voters by trying to define himself in the most favorable public light, he was also casting doubts and aspersions on his opponent’s qualifications and ideas. At the same
time, his opponent worked with equal fervor to cast himself as the best candidate for the job while casting dispersions and doubts on his opponent’s qualifications and ideas. The audience, in this case the American voter, was left to decide who best fit the description of ‘qualified to lead the country.’

Managing a candidate’s image can be everything in U.S. Presidential politics. Sigelman (2001) examines both the “on-stage” and “off-stage” personas of Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, comparing their public utterances and their private communications.

In Sigelman’s study, he examined the public and private transcripts of both Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon. Because both presidents used recording systems to record their private Oval Office conversations, Nixon’s to his eventual detriment, Sigelman was able to compare the two men’s on-stage and off-stage self-presentations.

Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon presented themselves differently in their carefully crafted major public addresses than in their free-wheeling behind-the-scenes conversations. Backstage, the two presidents displayed personality traits that were out of keeping with the presidential prototype and were therefore unsuitable for a general audience. Onstage, they converged toward a more “presidential” profile, verbally displaying qualities that Americans value highly in their presidents (Sigelman, p. 15).

Beschloss (1997a) in a *New York Times* opinion article looked briefly at both Johnson’s and Nixon’s taping legacies, noting that without those tapes a great deal of what went on behind closed doors at the White House would have been lost to history. Because each man taped so many conversations, dealing with the many serious issues of the day, it is unlikely that the two men could maintain an artificial posturing for history throughout the course of the recordings.
Thus it could be reasonably argued that the tapes of both Johnson and Nixon reveal what each man was like in unguarded, off-stage moments.

If historians writing of Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson had to work only from sources that show the public face of their Presidencies, we might be forced to read about Richard Nixon as the President of law and order or about L.B.J. as a leader who was always self-controlled, who believed the lone gunman verdict of the Warren Commission and who never wavered in his confidence that the war in Vietnam, if it had to be fought, would be an exhilarating adventure (Beschloss, 1997b, p. 4/15).

What their constituents saw and heard of both men when they were on-stage was quite different from the off-stage Johnson and Nixon. While preparing for his address to the 1964 convention, Johnson nearly talks himself out of carrying on as President of the United States. While delegates heard him ready to carry the mantle on-stage, off-stage he struggled with the decision.

Here’s what I’m gonna say to ’em [reading from a handwritten statement]: …

After thirty-three years in political life, most men acquire political enemies as ships accumulate barnacles. The times require leadership about which there is no doubt and a voice that men of all parties and sections and color can follow. I’ve learned, after trying very hard, that I am not that voice or that leader.” … I just don’t want these decisions I’m being required to make.... I am absolutely positive that I cannot lead the South and the North.... I am very convinced that the Negroes will not listen to me.... And I do not believe I can physically and mentally carry the responsibilities of the bomb and the world and the Negroes and the South.... I
know my own limitations. (Beschloss, 1997b, p. 529, 532)

Nixon’s public, on-stage law-and-order stance flies in the face of his off-stage conversations. Hindsight proved to make a lie of his “I am not a crook” line and his denial of involvement in the Watergate break-in. Many would have been shocked to hear Nixon’s private, off-stage conversations where Nixon advocated and promoted the use of government agencies to investigate otherwise law-abiding citizens.

We have the power but are we using it to investigate contributors to Hubert Humphrey, contributors to Muskie, the Jews, you know, that are stealing every — ... Are we going after their tax returns? ... Are we looking into Muskie’s return?... Hubert? Hubert’s been in a lot of funny deals.... Teddy? Who knows about the Kennedys? Shouldn’t they be investigated?… Bob, please get me the names of the Jews, you know, the big Jewish contributors of the Democrats.... All right. Could we please investigate some of the c——suckers? That’s all (Kutler, 1997, p. 29, 31).

“On-stage” and “off-stage” are simple concepts used by Goffman (1959) to describe where the communication “play” takes place. On-stage is where the actor works, in front of the audience. When an actor is on stage, in front of this audience, the goal is to deliver the lines, act out the part in a convincing and believable manner to properly convey the character’s role. “On-stage” can also be referred to as the “front,” as in front of the audience, where the message is delivered. This is the public display. When an actor acts on stage, the lines have been vetted by a playwright, and a director has made determinations as to how scenes are to be conveyed, defining for the audience what they see and hear.
The “‘front’ is that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman, p. 22). The front is made up of the physical setting and the personal setting, which can be divided into appearance and manner. The physical front is made up of the physical surroundings where the performance is taking place. In the theatrical sense, this is the “stage,” where the performance takes place, and can be a living room, a boardroom, or a classroom, with all of the props that one might find therein. Unlike in the theater, however; with its prop masters and stage hands to make certain the scene is properly set, the communicator must often work solo, and adapt to his surroundings if he/she is operating away from “home field.”

The personal front can include signs of rank, such as a law enforcement or military uniform or cleric’s collar; choices of clothing, from a three-piece suit to a Hawaiian shirt; age, youthful, middle-aged or old; sex, physical appearance and mannerisms, manner of speaking, and other personal clues (Goffman, p. 24). The personal front can be further divided into “appearance” and “manner.” “Appearance,” takes into account all of the personal clues, provides an insight in the individual’s social status, and the “manner” provides clues as to how the individual will interact with others.

Thus, a haughty, aggressive manner may give the impression that the performer expects to be the one who will initiate the verbal interaction and direct its course. A meek, apologetic manner may give the impression that the performer expects to follow the lead of others, or at least that he can be led to do so (Goffman, p. 24).

Of course, in order to complete a successful communication performance, the physical and personal fronts and the appearance and mannerisms must all complement one another. Any
incongruity will diminish the effect of the communication and could diminish or degrade the desired outcome.

Thus, we would react quite differently to a young police officer who displays a certain lack of confidence or authority than we would to a veteran police officer with a sound command presence. One would expect more sound legal advice from a clean-cut individual in a three-piece suit than one would from a Hawaiian-shirt wearing person with a shaggy haircut. However, we could discover that the Hawaiian-shirt wearing person is actually a noted attorney enjoying a vacation after a particularly long and grueling case while the man in the three-piece suit is fresh out of law school. And while we may be tempted to try to talk our way out of a ticket from the young officer, who, being new on the job, takes a hard line; we would simply sign the ticket issued by the veteran, who may have lent a sympathetic ear or would have enjoyed a creative story and let the ticket pass.

In the above cases, judging a book by its cover would seem to be the natural choice but would have achieved the opposite results, and quite possible how the saying acquired its cautionary tone. Judging the book by its cover, in the case of the police officer and the lawyer, could find one in court facing a by-the-book rookie with advice for a rookie attorney.

“Off-stage,” on the other hand, is “behind the curtains.” This behind-the-scenes area is outside of the public view. This is where the actors practice their lines, rehearse their scenes, discuss their parts, and perfect the show. This is the private world of the actor. All of this action takes place well behind the fourth wall, where the audience is not allowed to see, where lines may be flubbed and the actors’ actions not yet in sync with one another.

Were the audience to look in on the play from behind the fourth wall during these moments, there would be no illusion of reality to lose and their willingness to suspend disbelief
would be greatly impaired if even attempted. In the earliest rehearsals, actors may well simply be sitting in chairs reading from scripts. Unless this was a part of the actual play, the audience could hardly be expected to believe in the illusion of reality of the play because the reality of the work of the play behind the scenes is in full display.

This is where we saw the “real” Johnson and Nixon in the examples above. While each may have initially thought their “rehearsals” would never be put on public display, the behind-the-scenes actions of both men shatters the reality they created before the public once the recordings were revealed.

In light of Goffman’s theatrical examination of the communications play, when a communicator is “on-stage,” he or she is actively attempting to persuade the audience of his or her point of view. When the communicator is “on,” the goal is to get their audience to willingly suspend their disbelief and accept the reality as the communicator is defining it. The settings, language and actions are all designed to accomplish the communication goal.

The setting may be one of the communicator’s choosing, for instance, his or her office, or it may be in the customer’s office or store, if the communicator is a salesperson. In the days when traveling door-to-door salesmen were a common site, these salespeople had to readily adapt to the home environment wherever they would be welcomed. Thus, they could find themselves in a prosperous neighborhood one day and a run-down area of town the next and in either instance, they would have to work within the areas they were assigned.

As the areas these salespeople plied their wares would differ, so to would they have to alter their language to match their current potential customer’s level of usage. It would do a salesperson as little good to use eloquent prose and potentially sound superior to a less-
sophisticated customer than it would to use simple language and usage with a sophisticated one. In either instance, the wrong usage could well cost the salesperson a sale and a loss of income. By necessity, the traveling salesperson above should be able to easily and readily change his language usage to fit his surroundings and settings, as he or she was not likely to make a presentation before a group populated by individuals as disparate as the two imaginary customers above. If the salesperson fails to correctly control all the pieces of the message presentation or the off-stage persona shows through, the salesperson may suffer some personal embarrassment and lose out on a sale, but no wide-spread damage is done.

Communicators on the public stage, or who make presentations to large groups who may have more than casual common contact do not have that luxury. Their public persona and message must be on target in order to effectively meet their communication goals. Thus, it would stand to reason that neither Johnson nor Nixon would have wanted all of their recorded conversations to be made public, shattering the positive public images they wanted to present.

While the lack of similar behind the scenes conversations of other presidents precludes Sigelman from making a general observation about presidential on-stage and off-stage behavior, he suspects that the same general findings would apply to all presidents (Sigelman, p. 16). Were the gap between public behavior and private behavior to grow too large, and that private behavior become public, the public image of a president could be seriously undermined.

If the gap between the public and private president grows too wide and the secrets of the back region become public, then what was referred to during the 1960s as a “credibility gap” is apt to develop, undermining not only the popularity of the president but the legitimacy of the broader political system. Revelations concerning indecorous backstage behavior cannot help but have a corrosive
impact on respect for the incumbent and the office. For this reason, presidents and their advisors have a vested interest in keeping the back region closed. The seeming desire of a majority of the American public to cede a “zone of privacy” to President Clinton in the midst of sensational allegations of his sexual misbehavior can be seen as an indication that most Americans, too, want to keep backstage presidential behaviors backstage (Sigelman, p. 16).

Seen in this light then, it would serve presidents and their advisors well to maintain some sense of balance when creating a president’s public image and restricting off-stage, private access. “… the cases of Johnson and Nixon suggest that it is unlikely to divert them from their efforts to construct an onstage persona that is decidedly closer to the presidential ideal than what emerges when the president is backstage, hidden from public view” (Sigelman, p. 17).

Schütz (1995) examined the self-presentation of entertainers, experts and public servants; analyzing the content of their statements during German public television broadcasts. He studied how politicians presented themselves on television in comparison to experts and entertainers. Schütz found that experts emphasized their areas of expertise, which is why they had been invited on the shows, and they were not likely to downplay their accomplishments because they were generally not well known to the public. Entertainers, unlike experts or politicians, were likely to portray themselves as being ordinary people, sharing credit for their accomplishments and revealing personal foibles. Politicians, on the other hand, were less likely to present themselves as knowledgeable as the experts, and were less revealing than entertainers (p. 218, 219).

According to Schütz, these technical experts were likely to use their accomplishments as a way to lend credibility to their viewpoints when discussing the issues at hand. Because the
experts were not public figures, they used their accomplishments to bolster the public’s acceptance of their points of view (p. 218).

The entertainers, on the other hand, did not want to be seen as braggarts or risk alienating their fans by appearing to be superior to them, so when they discussed their accomplishments they shared the credit with others, Schütz noted. By sharing their weaknesses or flaws, they revealed some of their off-stage shortcomings to give the impression that they share common foibles with their fans (p. 218).

Schütz said politicians, always looking to the next election, were not as likely to present their personal weaknesses as were the entertainers but neither did they imply that they were as knowledgeable in areas outside of their personal fields of expertise as did the experts. “It was found that politicians provided less factual information than experts and disclosed less about their personalities than entertainers. Furthermore, they relied heavily on presenting themselves as worthy, successful, and innovative” (p. 211).

“When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman, p. 17). According to Goffman the audience is asked to believe the individual’s words and actions, trust that he is who he says he is, he will do what he says he will do, or that the situation is as he has described it. Fail any of these conditions, and the communicator fails to make the impression he or she wishes to present, and their goal for the communication may fail to be realized if the expressions the communicator gives and the expressions given off are not in harmony.

In the on-line world, individuals can exert a great deal of control over the expression they give and the expressions they give off. Expressions “given off” are the non-verbal messages,
cues and clues that are sometimes difficult to control, where the expressions “given” are more easily controlled. These are the theatrical part of the communication presentation.

On-line, the communicator has control of the impressions given, and because of a lack of direct face-to-face contact, the communicator has nearly complete control of the impressions he or she gives off, thus the communicator can more fully control his self presentation. “The absence of nonverbal elements may render communication less rich, but simultaneously allows individuals to be more inventive with self presentation. There is greater control of expressions given off and thus less risk that identity manipulation may be exposed” (Papacharissi, p. 645).

Therein lies one of the potential dangers of communicating over the Internet. One can never know for certain that the 13-year-old girl in an on-line chat room is not a pedophile preying on vulnerable girls, or the college coed is not a long-in-the-tooth matron. Being in near complete control of nearly all aspects of their self presentation, an on-line communicator can be or become nearly anything they want and are clever enough to present to the on-line world and its audience.

The persona one presents on-line can be embellished to the extent of one’s imagination for purposes either benign or malignant. All the audience sees is the on-stage presentation presented via a computer screen. Without face-to-face interaction, the on-line, on-stage communicator can be nearly anyone – based completely on a fiction or authentic in every detail. The ability to control both the expressions given and the expressions given off enables the communicator to be in almost complete control of his presentation, where one can only see the on-stage persona and there is little chance of seeing the off-stage person.

Papacharissi (2002) found that self-presentations created on-line bore a strong resemblance to Goffman’s “front” or on-stage presence, through the use of “hyperlinks, images,
animations, color and font choices” to define the communicator (p. 654). The need for social feedback can be identified through the use of e-mail connections, guestbooks and visitor counters. “The use of guestbooks could even be interpreted as a request for affirmation that the presentation of self has been well received and that the management of expressions given and given off has resulted in a successful performance” (p. 655). While the on-line communicator may be authentic, a complete fiction, or lay somewhere in between, the characters in fiction are as likely as their real-world counterparts to rely on some degree of fiction within fiction to complete their goals.

Coughlin (2008) noted in the film Fargo (1996) that actors take on various personas within the context of the film. In effect, the actors act out roles that they envision will offer them greater control of those around them, within the context of the film. Outside of the celluloid world many may not go to such extremes, but all seek to control others’ impressions of themselves. In Fargo, a man’s attempt to have his wife kidnapped for quick cash is bungled by a pair of hapless criminals.

In the movie, actors Steve Buscemi, Peter Stormare and Gaear Grimsrud, are hired by Jerry Lundergaard, portrayed by William H. Macy, to kidnap his wife, Jean Lundergaard, played by Kristin Rudrüd, but the plan goes horribly awry. Unfortunately for Jerry Lundergaard, his plan starts spinning out of control nearly from the beginning because of his inability to control the circumstances around him. While he claims to have a “sound” plan, his given image and the image he gives off are at odds. For instance, in the scene where Jerry is supposed to deliver the ransom money, his father-in-law, Wade, portrayed by Harve Presnell, steps in and takes the money to deliver to the kidnappers (p. 228).

Meanwhile, Carl’s street-wise tough persona crumbles in the face of his partner, Gaear’s,
shooting of a highway patrolman. “The appalled and terrified countenance worn by Buscemi in this scene betrays what might be considered Carl’s true character, not at all up to the grim realities of the criminal world” (p. 231). Here, the character’s given image is counter to the image he gives off.

Carl, in Fargo, is a desperate actor who clutches for the right way to project himself into a confident portrayal of a criminal tough guy. When he threatens to shoot Jerry’s wife, Jean (Kristin Rudrüd), he does so with a lack of conviction comparable to a bad actor delivering unconvincing lines of dialogue. Just as the police car shines its lights and Carl registers the need for calm he turns to Jean, covered by a blanket in the back seat, and warns her: “Keep it still back there, lady, or we’re gunna have to … you know …. to shoot ya.” Carl’s uneasiness with the clichéd phrase reveals his apprehension with its real meaning. He delivers the line like a poor actor in a cheap movie, his stilted articulation suggesting just how remote he considers the possibility of violence (Coughlin, p. 230).

In the case of Buscemi portraying Carl in Fargo, we have an actor portraying a bumbling criminal. In the context of the film, the character is acting the part of a street-wise criminal in order to appear as more than an inept criminal. His on-stage public face, the one he wants to present to the public, in this case Jean, fails in the delivery as Carl’s inability to match his words and deeds do not convey the impression he intended, that of a “successful” street-wise criminal.
APPLICATION

Positive self-presentation or image can play an important role in the classroom setting where the instructor presents himself or herself as an expert in the subject being taught. While having the knowledge to teach the subject at hand is, of course, a necessity, how the instructor manages his presentation for the students and how the students perceive of the instructor are important factors in creating a positive learning environment.

Extending the example of the youthful police officer, an instructor could be well-versed in his or her subject matter but fail to present an air of competence; and thus, fail to create the intended learning environment. Overcoming this would seem to be particularly vital in the high school and higher academic settings where students may not be inclined to automatically confer academic credibility to an instructor.

As the face negotiation literature reminds us, self-presentation as a communication goal is relevant in nearly all encounters, and anyone who has stepped in front of a class of students should easily accept the argument that this goal is particularly relevant to teachers. Indeed, presenting a competent image is of special importance to instructors who are offered as experts on the subject matter they are to teach. It is also important to remember that a competent image is communicated through a series of verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Bruschke, p. 209, 210).

Instructors can insure a positive self-presentation and create a positive learning environment by “providing a warm classroom environment, enhancing student learning, maintaining classroom organization, motivating students to learn, being interesting, providing clear explanations, and maintaining a quality evaluation process” (Bruschke, p. 213). Thus, the
instructor who projects a high degree of competence in his subject matter, maintains a sense of order in the classroom, provides meaningful learning exercises and proper feedback as well as creating an engaging atmosphere is more likely to create a successful learning environment.

Kim (2006) notes that the instructor, the actor, must have as a goal the control of how the audience, his or her students, perceives the instructor, and how the reactions of the students can be used to judge the effectiveness of the behavior or communication (p. 4). The instructor’s “on-stage” presentation is successful if the audience, the students, judge that the instructor’s communication and behavior are congruous and the students perceive the instructor as competent.

Kim examined three types of self-presentation: boastful, positive, and negative. Boastful presentations overstated or exaggerated accomplishments and experiences as related to the class. Positive presentations presented a realistic view of accomplishments and experiences, and negative presentations were self-deprecating and downplayed accomplishments and experiences as related to the class.

Students favorably evaluated positive self-presentations more highly than bragging which was rated more favorably than negative self-presentations. However, there was not a great difference seen between a professor’s bragging or positive self-presentations. “Bragging and positive presentations showed significantly higher perceived competence than negative presentation. These results imply that professor’s positive presentation could get higher perception of likeability and competence from students than bragging or negative presentation. As for bragging presentation, students evaluate it as competent, not as favorable” (p. 16 and 17).

There are advantages to presenting a balanced self-presentation, neither boasting nor self-deprecating. When an audience, such as a classroom full of students, can only accept the
instructor’s self-description at face value, it is more likely that the students will accept the credibility of that description if it is delivered in a balanced light, Robinson (1995). “In daily life, we must often evaluate others primarily on the basis of their unverified self-descriptions. Such self-descriptions, sometimes solicited and sometimes offered gratuitously, are likely to play an important role whenever politicians present themselves, prospective tenants seek housing, or strangers chat at cocktail parties” (p. 575).

According to Robinson, while those who boasted in their presentations were deemed more likeable than those who downgraded their self-presentation, those who made a more balanced self-presentation or description were rated as “more authentic, and significantly more likeable, than those who made either deprecating or enhancing statements about themselves” (p. 575).

“In addition to validating the maxim that honesty is the best policy, (the results of the study) suggest that a balanced mode of self-presentation, disclosing both strengths and weaknesses, may be the most effective interpersonal style, at least without additional contest” (p. 587).

These findings indicate that a positive, balanced self-presentation on the part of instructors is more conducive in attaining a positive outcome. When the communication act is considered as a whole, a well-balanced presentation is more likely to produce a greater level of acceptance by the students of the instructor’s communication goals.

This level of communication can be vital, particularly when one considers that fact that it can set the tone for the entire course.

The common practice of handing out a syllabus and quickly dismissing class leads to a missed opportunity for positive impression management for the instructor.
Instructors need to be reminded that the first day of class does set the tone and should be prepared for in a serious manner. Given that Communicative Competence is the most important attribute contributing to measures of instructional effectiveness on the first day of class, and Concern for Students plays a secondary role, it behooves trainers from all fields to focus on an instructor’s development of communication skills (Hayward, 2006, p. 21).

In the classroom setting, then, it appears that the proper management of the instructor’s on-stage presentation, particularly at the beginning of the academic term, is vital to creating a perception of competence and a positive learning experience. If the instructor sets the tone early, that first impression can often carry the instructor throughout the course of the academic term. With the proper presentation as well as training and experience in the discipline necessary to provide good instruction, an instructor can create a successful learning environment.

CRITIQUE

Messinger (1962) raises some questions about the appropriateness of Goffman’s approach. Messinger questions the definitions of when an individual is “on” or “on-stage” or out “front” in Goffman’s terminology.

Now we must ask, is the dramaturgic analyst asserting that individuals are “on” in everyday life, routinely and as a matter of course? Is he suggesting that ordinarily, say among family and friends, the individual views “life as theater”? If so, what shall we make of the fact that the mental patient experiences being “on” as an
interruption of his “normal” perspective and as a source of anxiety and alienation?

How shall we account for the patient’s desire to get “off” (Messinger, p. 105)?

Using a mental patient’s experience as a basis to critique Goffman’s analysis, however, may be pushing the limits of any theory used to analyze the interactions of any general population. Naturally, a mental patient is going to have an abnormal perspective or view of life, which, no doubt, explains his abnormal behavior. So, while Goffman’s theory as an analytical tool may not be valid for a population of mental patients, this does not necessarily demean its usefulness.

Messinger argues that the theatrical perspective is not the communicator’s world view but the lens through which the analyst examines the behavior of the communicator to aid the analyst’s understanding of how that behavior impacts the impression the communicator makes on others. This is necessary for the analyst because the impression the communicator makes will influence how others will act toward him and the accomplishment of his communication goals (p. 105).

This point does have some merit. Not all those involved in the act of communicating may view their actions as a performance, and many may not be conscious of purposefully creating a “scene” where their communication goal has the best chance of succeeding. But, one would have to admit, that they readily wish to create the best possible impression when, for instance, they are applying for a new job, a promotion or raise. Putting one’s best foot forward, by definition, would seem to mean acting in a manner conducive to achieving one’s goals.

In his article, Messinger notes that, as with any tool, the theatrical analysis has its limitations that, if not observed, can operate to the detriment of the researcher. In impression
management, the researcher’s view and the communicator’s world views may not be congruent. In other words, both may be looking at the same scene from two different perspectives (p. 108).

The everyday actor’s obligations, at least so far as fundamental qualities are concerned, do no leave him free to select an attitude toward the character he communicates. He does not, finally, experience life as theater. He does not expect the curtain to ring down, returning what came before to the realm of make-believe. He is constrained to be what he claims, and mental patients suggest that these constraints operate “inside” the individual as well as “on” him. Indeed, his need to believe in himself seems even stronger than his need to be certain that others entertain a particular view of him. He is in the prig of an ethic, and he violates this ethic so long as he is “on” (p. 109).

Gronbeck (1980) argues that while the image of communication as a theatrical presentation may make for a convenient means of examining small segments of an interaction, it may indeed be much more. He notes that whereas Goffman postulates “life is like a drama,” others argue that “life is drama.”

While Goffman (1959) admits that his theory is merely short-hand, a contrivance for examining the communications acts, it is, nonetheless, one that many recognize.

The claim that all the world’s a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, knowing that at any time they will easily be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously. An action staged in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the
performed characters – although at another level of course performers (as)
professional whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances (p. 254).

CONCLUSION

We are all actors, the author included, and this is easily discerned. With rare exceptions, an individual will act differently, dress differently, and make different language choices in different contexts. For example, it is rare that one would act, dress, and use the same language in a family setting as one would in the workplace, and those actions, dress, and language could be all together different with an intimate group of friends. This is not to say that the individual is not sincere within all three contexts, but one rarely would communicate in the same manner with a child as one would with an adult, even though the meaning of the message may be identical.

In order to control self-presentation, the communicator must seek to harmonize both language and actions. That is, words and deeds must not conflict or send a mixed message as it is difficult to take seriously an individual who says one thing while doing another. As Goffman (1959) said:

The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impression) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he gives, and the expression that he gives off (Goffman’s emphasis). The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols…. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the action, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way (p. 2).
This, according to Goffman, gives the audience a built-in check on the truthfulness of the lead character’s communications. With the knowledge that the individual will likely be presenting their case in the most favorable light, the audience may well examine actions for external signs or actions that counter the message. While it is relatively easy to manipulate a verbal message, it can be more difficult to manage physical actions. “Sometimes disruptions occur though unmeant gestures, faux pas, and scenes, thus discrediting or contradicting the definition of the situation that is being maintained” (p. 239). For instance, a closed stance, lack of eye contact, and delayed responses to simply verified questions could well indicate that a speaker was being less than truthful as when it is discovered that your nephew has skipped school and his youthful inexperience creates involuntarily actions which negate a truthful-sounding alibi.

Like a good actor, a good communicator must have a place to practice and rehearse his communication strategies. Goffman notes that preventing the audience from seeing “backstage” is a key to the actor effectively communicating his message. “We often find a division into a back region, where the performance of the routine is prepared, and front region, where the performance is presented” (p. 238).

A good stage or screen actor has certain capabilities and gives thoughtful study to his art, but Goffman notes that nearly anyone can learn a script well enough to execute a passable performance given an audience’s willingness to sufficiently suspend their beliefs and approve a novice performance. “Scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify” (p. 72).
While the theatrical perspective for examining the communications act is not a perfect lens, it is a handy reference tool. Admittedly, in the real world a curtain does not fall after the final act and the lives of the characters often continue to interact and intertwine, sometimes for a lifetime. But one would have to lack a certain level of introspection to not admit to playing different roles for different audiences, whether those audiences are employers, co-workers, friends, families, or spouses, and adjusting their communications to fit the specific audience.

Just as certainly, it is easy to see that the communicator has a vested interest in maintaining a separation between their “on-stage” presentations and “off-stage” lives, keeping a distance between their public face and their private lives.
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