

19 JAWS: DEMONSTRATING CLASSICAL CONDITIONING

Randolph A. Smith

Ouachita Baptist University

This activity is a good "opener" to get students to pay attention and talk. The materials are readily available, and once you have them, there is no advance preparation. The music from the movie Jaws could be replaced by music from any current thriller, with appropriate modifications in imagery. No prior knowledge of psychology is necessary, and the activity is suitable for classes of all sizes.

- CONCEPT** The concept of classical conditioning is often difficult for students to grasp if the instructor immediately begins to use the time-honored example of Pavlov and his dogs. The students may get lost in the maze of terms—US, UR, CR, CS—and fail to see any relevance between slobbering dogs and human learning. Thus I think that it is important to begin a presentation of classical conditioning with a real-life example that most students have experienced.
- MATERIALS NEEDED** You will need a tape recording of a few seconds of the shark-attack music from the movie *Jaws*.
- INSTRUCTIONS** I use this demonstration at the beginning of the section on conditioning in general psychology classes before I introduce the concepts. First I ask students to close their eyes and engage in mental imagery. I tell them to imagine that it is a hot summer day and that they are at the beach. The sun is scorching. They are getting hotter and hotter, can stand it no longer, run toward the ocean, and splash in the shallow water. Then they swim out to deeper water and enjoy cooling off after being in the sun. It is fairly easy to stretch this imagery process out for 2 or 3 minutes. Then, as unobtrusively as possible, I start the music from *Jaws*. From the expressions on their faces and the laughter, I can tell immediately that most students have seen *Jaws* and have been conditioned to associate the killer shark with the music.
- DISCUSSION** The key part of the demonstration is the discussion that follows. Without knowing the appropriate classical conditioning terms, students are able to explain in their own words what happened during the movie. They can tell you that the shark (technically a CS, but a US in this demonstration) yields a response of fear or disgust (the UR). They know that the music (CS) originally had no meaning but came to elicit a response (CR) during the movie because it signaled that the shark was about to appear and have a swimmer for lunch. At this point, they are prepared to hear your discussion on Pav-

lov's experiment, to understand it and the terminology used, and to see the application of classical conditioning to human behavior. As you go on through the classical conditioning information, you can point out that you actually demonstrated second-order conditioning to them, because their responses to a shark are learned through classical conditioning since they associate sharks with mutilation, blood, death, and so forth. All in all, the demonstration helps to bring classical conditioning and its principles to life in a highly relevant situation.

**SUGGESTED
READING**

- Cogan, D., & Cogan, R. (1984). Classical salivary conditioning: An easy demonstration. *Teaching of Psychology, 11*, 170-171.
- Gibb, G. D. (1983). Making classical conditioning understandable through a demonstration technique. *Teaching of Psychology, 10*, 112-113.