

Learning and Understanding Group Theory by Doing

Ruthie Kucharewski
The University of Toledo

Subject matter can easily be taught using the didactic approach, but by blending the didactic approach with experiential learning, I have found that students tend to gain a better understanding of theories and concepts. Experiential learning is often defined as learning by doing. The American philosopher John Dewey is credited with providing the foundation for experiential education, a learning environment that allows one the opportunity to link education and personal experience (Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995).

I teach a class entitled, "Leadership and Group Dynamics in Recreational Therapy," utilizing Kurt Lewin's theories of group dynamics and Dewey's experiential learning approach. Like Dewey, Lewin was also a proponent of experiential learning and much of his research demonstrated this (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). The following is an activity I designed to assist the students in understanding group concepts or theories, provide insight into what a patient/client might experience or practice communication skills.

"First Impressions" Activity

The students are given a 2-week time frame and a worksheet that requires them to make observations about an individual they encounter. The individual they choose may not be a traditional college age student or someone they know. The students cannot directly ask the individual to answer the questions on the worksheet. The questions the students must answer include estimating the individuals age, occupation, relational status, political orientation, music and literary preferences, and views on such topics as the legalization of marijuana, capital punishment, mandatory retirement, Title IX, etc. The students then write down the cues they identified that assisted them in determining answers to their questions.

After completion of the worksheet, the students must ask the observed individual to fill out a similar blank worksheet or discuss the information in an attempt to validate the students' observations. Lastly, the students share their information with the observed individual and discuss what information they received that led them to answer the questions as they did.

This activity is used to illustrate that whether or not we are aware of it, we are always collecting information about others and making judgments about them with the information we receive. It also points out that sometimes our observation is inaccurate and it may cause us to interact with someone in a different manner than we would if we

had information about that person. In addition, the activity helps make students aware that when we work with patients/clients we “judge” them, and are subsequently influenced in how we treat them in a therapeutic environment. Finally, this exercise gives students an opportunity to practice communication skills such as listening and observation.

Frequently students have reported that this activity has made them more aware of the impact first impressions provide. They have also reported that it has provided immediate feedback regarding their perceptions supporting the notion that our judgments and perceptions may not always be accurate.

References

- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, F. P. (2000). *Joining Together Group Theory and Skills*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kraft, R. J., & Kielsmeier, J. (1995). *Experiential Learning In Schools and Higher Education*. Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.