

Historic Figure Investigation and Polis Discussion

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Introduction

Imagine a debate between Jane Addams, Jack Kerouac, Teddy Roosevelt, and Karla Henderson! Imagine a student taking the initiative to have a telephone conversation with Robert Putnam to prepare for a class assignment. Imagine students being enthusiastic about the study of our field's history. One of the goals of the educational enterprise is the cultivation of self-motivated, life-long learners (Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment, 2004). The Historic Figure Investigation and Polis Discussion give students an opportunity to explore a historic figure about whom they are curious. The cultivation of students' intellectual curiosity is paramount to their success in the university and beyond (Shambaugh & Magliaro, 1997).

The Learning Activity

This learning activity is a series of assignments designed to foster an in-depth exploration of content and a progression of challenge and skill development. From a pool of approximately fifty historic figures, students are asked to select one individual from the field of recreation and leisure studies that they would like to investigate over the course of five weeks. Students make their selections by browsing half-page descriptions of each historic figure. Historic figures are chosen by the instructor with an eye towards representing the great diversity of our field. Needless to say, the collection of historic figures includes our 'Founding Parents', such as Luther Gulick and Joseph Lee. It also includes contemporary scholars, such as Betsy Wearing and John Kelly, who have had a profound impact on our understanding of recreation and leisure. Finally, students are also allowed to study individuals from outside the field, such as Mihály Csikszentmihalyi and Aristotle, who have none-the-less, had a profound impact upon the development of our profession.

Students begin their investigation by reading and reviewing a few pieces of their figures' scholarship. A majority of the pieces that students review are primary

sources authored by their historic figure. After reviewing their historic figures' scholarship, students post an annotated bibliography to the course's web site. Accommodations are made for situations in which a historic figure's original work is so complex as to be inaccessible to the student. For example, if a student chooses to study Aristotle, a majority of that student's sources will be secondary.

Once students have begun to familiarize themselves with their historic figure, they engage in a series of small group discussions, or symposia, in which they behave 'in character' as their historic figure. Each symposium group consists of eight to ten students and is composed of historic figures representing a variety of historical periods and ideological approaches to the study of recreation and leisure. During the first symposium, students are asked to introduce themselves 'in character' by describing their biographical history and their salient contributions to the field of recreation and leisure. Students are given ten minutes for this introduction after which their peers and the instructor have an opportunity to pose questions to each historic figure. The first symposium offers students an opportunity to apply their content knowledge in an interactive environment and to explore their presentation skills.

The second symposium, called a polis discussion, is designed to challenge students to apply their content knowledge to a contemporary context. Students are asked to present their vision, 'in character', for the administration and development of the community's leisure services agency. During the polis discussion, students are given five minutes to present their historic figures' ideas after which their peers are given the opportunity to query and critique their proposal. Students are assessed not only on their presentation, but also on the quality of the questions they pose to their peers while 'in character'. The polis discussion challenges students to extrapolate their figure's views to a topic which that figure may never have addressed. When critiqued by their peers, students must defend their proposals using their figure's guiding principles and concepts. Throughout both symposia, instructors endeavor to intervene as little as possible, so that students can direct the symposia. However, occasional interjections by the instructors can serve to stimulate critical thought and discussion. Student performance in the symposia is evaluated for Content, Delivery, Ability to Stay 'In Character', Synthesis and Creativity, and for their Contribution to the Discussion.

The Historic Figure Investigation concludes by having students compose a four to five page paper about their figure. This assignment asks students to briefly summarize their figure's biography and to express in writing how their figure might answer the following questions: 1) what are leisure and recreation? And 2) how might their figure approach the delivery of recreation and leisure services to individuals from diverse backgrounds?

Learning Outcomes

Enthusiasm and Curiosity

This project targets the acquisition of content and skills while simultaneously seeking to cultivate academic curiosity. The Historic Figure Investigation and Polis Discussion encourage students to immerse themselves in the life of a prominent thinker in our field. Via the polis discussion, this assignment also encourages and rewards the creative application of knowledge. Given an opportunity to play ‘in character’; students enjoyed demonstrating their learning in a novel way.

Acquisition of Content

This assignment offers students several opportunities to gain content knowledge by delving into the depths of an individual’s life. Rather than memorizing a series of names and dates, students acquaint themselves with the historical and cultural context within which their historic figure lived. This depth of investigation allows students to ‘paint a picture’ of their historic figure that may endure beyond the conclusion of the semester. This in-depth exploration is complimented by textbook reading assignments designed to facilitate a breadth of content acquisition. An objective-style exam is used to assess students’ acquisition of this content.

Creative Problem Solving

The ability to relate and synthesize seemingly unrelated pieces of information is the hallmark of creativity (Shambaugh & Magliaro, 1997). The Historic Figure Investigation facilitates creative problem solving by asking students to extrapolate how their historic figure may have addressed an issue that did not exist during his or her lifetime. For example, how might Aristotle approach the administration of a public parks and recreation department? What might Fredrick Law Olmsted say about the amount of television viewing in contemporary society?

In the formulation of their answers to such questions, students are expected to bolster their speculations with factual and referential support. By applying their characters’ ethos to contemporary problems, students occasionally find themselves proposing arguments that run counter to their personal convictions. Such conflicts offer students an object lesson in being able to articulate and consider an opposing viewpoint.

Professional Socialization

A crucial objective for an introductory course is to begin the process of socializing students into a new profession. This course is designed not only to facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge, but also to foster the creation of each student’s professional identity. One method for cultivating a sense of *esprit de corps* is to con-

nect students to the history of our profession via some of its prominent scholars and practitioners. By choosing and learning about a person of interest, we hope that students begin to situate themselves within the field and visualize their future role as a practitioner.

Recommendations

The design of this investigation can be altered dramatically to suit the needs of various contexts. Such an investigation could be shortened to encompass only a few weeks, however, in our view, lengthening it would be preferable. Likewise, the scope of historic figures that are available for investigation can be altered. Instructors may wish to focus on a particular content area, i.e. therapeutic recreation or natural resource management, or on a particular historical period, i.e. contemporary scholars or nineteenth century reformers. Any number of permutations can be created, but the distinguishing features of this activity are the students' freedom to choose among alternatives and their opportunity to explore in depth.

Students can be enlisted to give feedback to one another about their presentations and discussions. Their ability to give useful and judicious feedback to peers takes time to develop. In our experience a relative minority of students give feedback that is overly critical, while the majority of students give feedback that is too superficial. Despite their inclinations, we guided students by grading their ability to give feedback to one another. Peer feedback is helpful as it can be difficult for an instructor to effectively evaluate a discussion group of eight to ten students.

A concern that might be raised regarding this activity is its promotion of depth at the expense of a 'well-rounded' coverage of our field's history. This argument is worth considering. However, the undergraduate curriculum exposes students to the breadth of our fields' history, and the opportunity for students to really 'sink their teeth' into and take ownership of a particular topic is invaluable.

References

Greater Expectations Project on Accreditation and Assessment. (2004). *Taking responsibility for the quality of the baccalaureate degree* (ISBN/ISSN: 0-911696-96-2). Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Shambaugh, R. N., & Magliaro, S. G. (1997). *Mastering the possibilities: A process approach to instructional design*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.