Classroom Learning Activities

Where Do Theories Come From and What Use Are They? An In-Class Activity.

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One of our challenges at Ferrum College is to keep students attentive and engaged in our Recreation and Social Theories class. The beginning of class is generally filled with great wails and moans from the students who see intellectual theories and conceptual models as useless information in a field of practitioners and service providers. A non-random sampling of students in class indicates that they perceive theories as being created by scientists or intellectuals set apart from normal people, and that the theories themselves are absolute, inalterable, and inerrant.

Trying to alter this misconception (at least I hope it's a misconception) is a long process. Beginning with an activity to demonstrate the origin of theories can set us off on the right foot and remove some of the deliberate barriers of disinterest that the students are so good at building.

I begin by dividing the class into groups of three or four students each. I then give each group a puzzle to solve. The puzzle is the commercial kind known commonly as "blacksmith puzzles" where some part of the metal contraption needs to be removed, or a three dimensional object such as a cube is disassembled and rebuilt. Each group then has 5 to 10 minutes to work on solving their puzzles. During this time I watch their group interaction (and intra-action) behavior making notes on things that are of interest. For example, do the students share or hoard the puzzle? Who are the dominant versus passive group members? What do the members of the groups do if they finish the puzzle and still have time left before the activity is over? Do groups either trade puzzles or give up on their puzzle?

When the activity ends I collect the puzzles (without showing the solutions) and ask the students to reflect on the activity and make some observational statements about individual and group behavior. As students state what they saw, I write their observations on the board. I use my observations to prompt them if they don't know where to start.

Next, I ask the class to take some of the specific observations and make general statements about behavior. For example, we take "Bob's group got frustrated and gave

up." And generalize that to "Groups that cannot complete their task get frustrated and lose interest in the task."

After translating several statements, I open our text, *A Social Psychology of Leisure* (Mannell & Kleiber, 1977) and tell them about the Robbers Cave study (Sheif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). In this study, researchers watched a boy's behaviors and made observations about what they saw. With each new camp situation there was new behavior and more observations. Interestingly, these researchers then made generalized statements similar to the statements we made. We compare the quality of the Robbers Cave statements to the quality of our Puzzle Activity statements. They are usually similar enough that I can praise the class on their skill as observational researchers.

Next the class takes their general statements and rephrases them such that there is some predictive nature to the statement (some of them already are). For example, "When Bob's group tried to get their puzzle done first, they got really rowdy." Becomes "When the activity becomes competitive, the excitement in the group rises."

After refining some of these statements, we look at the Norman Triplett (1898) bicycle study and see how he went from his observation that he rode faster in competition than he could when he rode alone, to his prediction that level of athletic performance is higher in social context than it is in isolation. He then took a very important step and gave his theory a catchy name: The Rabbit Effect. Now the class takes their predictive statements from the puzzle activity and gives them a good name. By the end of this class, the students have a better understanding how theories originate and that they are just as capable of coming up with theories as are researchers and scientists (we learn about validating theories later).

For the next class, we work from the theory to application. Using Triplett's (1898) study, I ask them to imagine that they are a coach or a personal trainer. Their athlete or client complains that they just aren't getting the workout they want and can't seem to improve their performance. They also work out on their own. First, what was that theory with the catchy name? (Hence the importance of having a good theory name, Rabbit Effect.) Second, what did the theory say? (Paraphrase is good.) Now how can we use that information to improve the performance of our athlete/client? (Give them a workout partner.)

At this point, I write their theories on the board again (did I mention that I wrote these all down at the end of last class?). Now we look at their theories. If they need prompting, I will propose a scenario and ask how the Puzzle Activity Theory could help in our hypothetical dilemma. My goal is to work them toward imagining their own scenarios in their own field of interest or specialty and how one of their theories can provide a solution.

As the rest of the semester progresses, I continue to present activities that demonstrate or illustrate theories and models. I also return to their Puzzle Activity Theories

when appropriate and compare our text theories and models to the theories they created on that first day. This continuing comparison reminds them that these theories come from real people just like themselves, and in some cases, their own theories compare favorably to our accepted social and recreation behavior theories. By the end of the semester, some students have left their fears of theories so far behind that they can identify their favorite social or leisure behavior theory and try to apply it exclusively to every problem they might encounter as a practitioner.

I would like to believe that this introduction activity turns all of my students from theory-phoebes into eager and enthusiastic theorists (I'm happy if it's true for one or two). Actually I have gotten some feedback from students (again a non-random sample) that the activity is helpful for two things; it removes the shroud of mystery about where theories come from, and it keeps them alert in class.

References

Mannell, R. C. & Kleiber, D. A. (1997). *A Social Psychology of Leisure.* State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

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