A Bird in the Hand is Worth Two in the Mind: Exploring Symbolic Interaction Theory in the Classroom

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For those instructors who teach in the recreation core curriculum, finding and using up-to-date textbooks that provide theoretical foundations for core content can often be a challenge. Typically, there is a lag time between the time a text was written and when it shows up in the classroom. Some texts also become "classics" which keep them popular enough to maintain sales despite not being updated on a regular basis. Then, too, some areas of subject matter fail to generate any new texts over a period of years. For example, in the late 1980s few new recreation programming texts appeared. Also, most were complete in terms of the "how to" aspects of various types of programming, however, few used a theoretical basis for their approach to programming.

That all changed in 1989 when the first edition of Rossman's *Recreation Programming: Designing Leisure Experiences* was published. This text included many innovative concepts (Rossman, 2000) that not only added to the body of knowledge in the field, but also challenged instructors to find new ways of teaching these concepts to students. One of these challenges involved teaching the concept of symbolic interaction theory to first or second year undergraduate students.

Symbolic Interaction Theory and Programming

One of Rossman's innovations was to predicate his approach to programming on the social science theory of symbolic interaction theory. His rationale was that the symbolic interactionist approach perhaps best explained how individuals structured and experienced leisure occasions. The assumptions that underlie symbolic interaction theory are (a) that individuals act towards things (e.g., physical objects, others, institutions, principles, laws) based on the meanings those things have for them, (b) that those meanings are derived or emanate from the social interaction one has with others, and (c) that meanings are subject to modification through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1978).

Although Rossman did a commendable job of explaining symbolic interaction theory and the subsequent phenomenology of the leisure experience, undergraduate students, especially those new to theory based courses, frequently have difficulty grasping this concept. Assigned readings followed by in-class discussions generally yielded less

than ideal results on the sections of exams that addressed symbolic interaction theory. A new approach to learning and understanding this subject matter was needed.

Operationalizing Symbolic Interaction Theory – Act I

Early attempts at operationalizing symbolic interaction theory in the programming course involved the instructor bringing items into class. These items ranged from ordinary every day items like a can of Coke, an empty beer bottle, a box of breakfast cereal to more esoteric items like a soap opera magazine, pictures of family, and pictures of individuals with disabilities participating in recreational activities. Students were asked to silently write down what each item meant and/or represented to them. Then, in a round-robin fashion, students shared their perspectives with the rest of the class. During this process students were asked to make a list of others responses. After looking over their lists, students were asked if there were any way of categorizing the class's responses. Class discussion invariably lead to the conclusion that some of the more common items received similar types of responses from a majority of the students. Items that were more esoteric or that were designed to be marketed to specific target markets received more varied responses that were often harder to categorize.

The next question posed was why did the responses fall into the various categories? Students came to the conclusion that common items like a can of Coke held similar meaning for most of them because they all interacted with it and were socialized to it in a similar manner. Esoteric items often only held meaning if the student was familiar with its subject matter. For example females would generally report positive perspectives about a soap opera magazine while males would report more negative perspectives. With regard to the pictures of individuals with disabilities, students who knew or who had worked with individuals with disabilities reported positive perspectives while those with little or no exposure reported more neutral or negative perspectives. The final aspect of class discussion suggested to the students that what they had just experienced and explored was in fact symbolic interaction theory at work. This approach helped students understand and retain the assumptions underlying symbolic interaction theory. Once they had this basic awareness it was easier for them to then extrapolate symbolic interaction theory into the leisure environment. Although this approach worked well, it was theorized that an approach incorporating aspects of cooperative learning (Williams, 1995) that allowed more student involvement would probably work even better.

Operationalizing Symbolic Interaction Theory – Act II

The classroom learning activity outlined below is what the author currently uses to help students in the programming class explore symbolic interaction theory. This exercise is done in class before students are assigned any readings related to symbolic interaction theory and before the topic is addressed in class lectures. Although this process could follow the introduction of symbolic interaction content in class, the author has found that presenting it first provides useful reference points for future discussions. This

process will generally require at least one 50-minute class session to complete. Groups should be given adequate time to complete each step. The steps are presented in order of completion.

1. A class session or two before you undertake this classroom learning activity, prepare a handout (or build the assignment into your syllabus) that asks students to bring to class some item that has particular significance to them. You will need to remind them again during the class session preceding the classroom learning activity; invariably some students will forget to bring in an item. Luckily, they can still participate in the interpretation phase despite not having an item.

2. The day of the classroom learning activity, divide the class up randomly into groups of five to seven students. This small group approach is indicative of cooperative learning methodology. The group size is not set in stone but it has worked well for this activity. Have the students bring pen and paper with them to record their observations.

3. Instruct students to take turns showing their item to the rest of the group. At this point students should not say "why" the item is significant, rather they should just show the item and provide a brief description of what it is (e.g., this is a picture of my dog). Instruct the other students to write down what they think the significance of the item is to its owner. Follow this procedure until all items have been presented.

4. Instruct the students, in a round-robin fashion, to share their perspectives on each items' supposed significance. Have students record each other's responses. Once all perspectives have been shared, ask the owner of each item to share its actual significance. Much laughter and discussion generally follow this step.

5. Instruct students to brainstorm in their group to see if there is any way to make sense of and/or categorize the group's responses.

6. Ask each group to share the following information with the rest of the class:

    a) What item did most people guess correctly on?

    b) What item did most people guess incorrectly on?

    c) Why the above results?

7. Facilitate the class in a general discussion exploring their rationale for categorizing the items the way they did. Students will generally come to the same conclusions discussed earlier in the paper. Familiar or common items generally hold much the same meaning for all students based on their own past experiences with the item. Esoteric or even familiar items may hold special meaning

if the individual received that item in a particular environmental context. Finally, students typically come to realize that their interpretation of an item's significance to its owner has now been modified through the process of completing the classroom learning activity.

Outcomes

The outcomes provided through this classroom learning activity rest on the following observations. First, students are afforded an opportunity to learn about and understand an abstract concept, in this case symbolic interaction theory, using a small group (cooperative learning) approach. This method allows students to share and explore information with each other in a format similar to that outlined in Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984). Szucs, Hawdon, and McGuire (2001) suggested that Kolb's model explains knowledge acquisition in two ways: (a) by concrete experience (feeling), and (b) by abstract conceptualization (thinking). This knowledge is further transformed by; c) active experimentation (doing), and b) by reflective observation (watching/listening). The second outcome of this classroom learning activity is that both student and instructor are provided with a context to refer back to as symbolic interaction theory content is introduced to the class through readings and subsequent class sessions. The ability to tie the theory to real experiences is beneficial as it affords the instructor with many "for example" opportunities.

The final outcome is perhaps less "academic" but equally important. Students in the class, generally all recreation/leisure study majors, have an opportunity to get know one another a little bit better. For example, one year a student brought in a small obviously hand made bird sculpture to share with the class during this activity. Try as they might no one in the group could guess the items significance to its owner. Guesses ranged from A to Z. The owner finally shared its significance from a deeply personal perspective. Lots of active discussion ensued in this group. It was later revealed in an open-ended course evaluation that participating in this classroom learning activity had fostered some very strong friendships among the group members.

This classroom learning activity is a fun and useful method to explore symbolic interaction theory. It always gets positive reviews from the students. In fact, students will often ask why the class can not do more of these "types" of hands on activities. From an instructors perspective it is easy to facilitate, it effectively conveys the material, and it provides reference points for future class discussion.

References

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