LEARNING IN LARGE INTRODUCTORY CLASSES

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Our introductory sociology courses aim to increase student knowledge and to foster personal growth. The first goal – "knowledge" – includes the retention of subject-related information, an understanding of approaches or perspectives as well as the creative integration of these facts and ideas. While knowledge is a generally recognized course objective (Vaughan and Peterson, 1975:8), there has been little discussion of personal growth.

"Personal growth" is a primary interest of many group workers, humanistic educators and personality theorists (e.g., Lieberman et al., 1973; Maddi, 1968:77-80; Cross, 1976:148-51; Galyean, 1977:142-56) and so the term has been used in different contexts. Some, for instance, discuss personal growth with reference to therapeutic areas like the release of repressions, the relief of distress or the management of feelings about one's actions.

Others discuss personal growth in ways that are not necessarily "therapeutic." For example, Frank Bruno (1977:30) uses the term "personal growth" as a synonym for the process of self-actualization. Lieberman et al. (1973:92-93) refer to personal growth as individual change in "hoped-for" ways in areas such as:

1. general self-awareness
2. basic attitudes toward self (self-acceptance, self-esteem) and others (e.g., prejudice, collaboration)
3. sensitivity to others' feelings and perceptions
4. effectiveness in interaction (role performance, managing situations)

As we use the term "personal growth" it does not cover therapeutic areas and it is not defined in a very general or "global" way. Rather, personal growth is viewed as course specific with attitude changes more likely to occur in certain emphasized areas rather than others. For example, the topic "majority-minority relations" is approached in such a way that one might reasonably expect changes among some students in terms of their "degree of prejudice."

Personal growth focuses on changes on the micro – or individual – level but these changes are fostered in our introductory courses through the development of a macro sociological perspective. The instructor continually emphasizes the impact of the broader social settings in which individual actions occur. It is through the development of a "sociological imagination," then, that personal growth occurs.

The teacher and the textbooks, however, are not the principle tools of learning (c.f., Light and Keller, 1975; Gross, 1977). Implicit in that approach is the conception of the student as a passive entity who receives, reacts and responds to teacher and texts.

In our view, the student is an active agent who uses awareness of the causative and contingent factors of social life to analyze and interpret immediate situations, make judgments and decide on courses of action. We agree with Pape and Miller (1967) that "learning does not take place unless there is personal involvement." (See Vaughan and Peterson, 1967; Baker and Behrens, 1971; Wallis, 1973; and Petras and Hayes, 1973.)

Further, we maintain that student involvement should occur in a group context. For as Wallis (1973) and others have pointed out, it is the group experience which facilitates individual knowledge and personal growth. (Lakin and Costanzo, 1975; Lortie, 1968; O'Keefe, Kernaghan, Rubenstein, 1975; Reighert, 1970; and Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles, 1973).

Even in the large class, which Baker and Behrens (1971) and Wallis (1973) assess as having some effect on the quality of instruction, the group may be utilized as a catalyst for learning. Large classes may present special problems (e.g., balcony seating, control, simultaneous distribution of materials, hearing student responses) but may still be conducted effectively using a student-centered approach.

We have employed heuristic techniques with classes of 50 or more students using group experiences with small, multiple groups or the class-as-a-whole as the working unit. As a result, students become aware of the "collective ability of the group" (Faris, 1971), develop some concern with each others' input and feedback, form a degree of responsibility to each other and are encouraged to develop sociological imaginations.

TECHNIQUES

Within our classes we have supplemented the traditional lecture-discussion approach with means of instruction which involve the student as an active participant in group experiences. While there are many ways to encourage individual participation and group cohesiveness, we will discuss common experience, dialogue, class humor, class exercises, tests and scales, and small groups.

THE COMMON EXPERIENCE

Shared events can generate a great deal of class discussion. Some of the common experiences that have been incorporated in our courses are: films, institutional visits, guest speakers and paired assignments. (See also, Gross, 1977.)

Film. A film - or part of one - can be used as a vehicle for discussion and debate among class members. One film that we have used for this purpose is "Understanding Aggression" (29 minutes, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971). While it may not be the best film for understanding aggression, it does generate discussion.

Students, after viewing the film, have talked about the following issues: (1) aversive environments, (2) the various theories of human aggression, (3) the irony of a researcher who talks about peace and love and spends his time shocking monkeys and (4) the irony of a sociologist who talks about peace and love but then rents or buys a film which support people who are shocking monkeys.

Frederick Wiseman's films also are recommended for class use. We have used Wiseman's "Titicut Follies" (85 minutes, Grove Press, 1967) - a film about activities at a state institution for the criminally insane - to discuss institutionalization as well as interpreted realities. (For comments on the Wiseman film see Hecht, 1972, 48.)

In discussing the film, students have disagreed about whether Wiseman has captured the realities of the situation and about whether his filming techniques have added to or detracted from the film's effectiveness.   As a result, they have developed new insights about the film and become more aware of their own and others' value systems.

Institutional visits. We have taken classes to visit correctional and mental institutions where they have met with staff and inmates. These trips have generated a great deal of discussion and have affected the students in a variety of ways.   Some students had friends or relatives who spent time in such institutions. For these students the class visit "was painful" but also profitable as it helped them "put things in perspective." A number of students, on the basis of their work experience in other closed environments, discussed the difficulties and effects of working in such institutions.

These visits made many students uncomfortable. Some felt very uneasy because they "didn't like to see wierd people," they were afraid or they thought "we made the inmates feel like they live in a zoo." Students sometimes found it difficult to talk with patients in the mental institutions because they were strangers or because some patients didn't converse in a normal way. We have found that any or all of these feelings and experiences, to the extent that they were shared, helped get the students involved with each other and encouraged them to analyze their own thoughts and actions.

Guest speakers. After the class has visited an institution or organization, it's very useful to schedule a speaker who presents an opposing view of the institution or its operation. The outside expert instead of the instructor leads the discussion and presents a strong challenge to the student to think through what she/he previously saw and heard. In this way the student must arrive at her/his own decisions after listening to differing and often polarized views.

The speakers who have been regarded most favorably were those who made very short initial statements, spent most of their time in discussion and who also were flexible enough to initiate or allow shifts in the direction of that discussion.

Paired assignments.   At times we have paired all students in the class and asked the pairs to undertake a similar experience such as taking part in a police ride-along program. The student pair made its own arrangements for the activity and submitted one very brief report about the experience. Throughout the semester, we

begin some of the class sessions by asking pairs to discuss particular aspects of their experiences. We used this information inductively to develop an understanding of the concepts, methods, or theories that were being studied. This technique is more effective in the smaller classes as everyone who has taken part will have an opportunity to discuss her/his experiences.

DIALOGUE

An "arranged" dialogue between the instructor and selected students can be very helpful particularly when the topics to be discussed are quite difficult. In this way the instructor is assured that at least several people are very familiar with the topic and will be able to speak with some confidence.

Similarly Petras and Hayes (1973) suggest that classes should be dialogues rather than lectures. However, they use a dialogue between the instructor and the assistant as the learning vehicle and encourage student participation in the process.

In our use of dialogues, the students are directly involved. Three students are assigned a particular subject (e.g., structural-functionalism) and they are expected to research it and then write a three-page summary of their collective thoughts on the subject. Before the in-class discussion of this topic takes place, the students are asked to keep the discussion as informal as possible by not reading to the class and by allowing the instructor to direct the discussion in order to permit wide participation.

The three students also are asked to sit in different parts of the room so that they will be seen as class members who are participating rather than as a panel of experts. We have found this technique has encouraged other class members to join in the dialogue.

CLASS HUMOR

Humor that is shared by a teacher and students can enhance the group's sense of cohesiveness. The use of class jokes can strengthen the "we" feeling of the group and, if necessary, can be used to lighten the atmosphere. Humor must be used carefully, however, as its misuse or overuse may lead to tension.

Repetition. Recognizing the heuristic function of repetition, we have asked students the same recitation question in successive class meetings. The request itself as well as the repeated enumeration of the series of concepts, theoretical approaches, names or stages of development can become something humorous that is shared by the teacher and the students.

Creation-of-a-word. We have encouraged the generation of class-specific argot or "esoteric" language to develop the students' understanding of concepts such as symbols, language and reality construction. The students have enjoyed creating these words and the continuous employment of these terms helps to establish the class' sense of uniqueness.

CLASS EXERCISES: TESTS AND SCALES

Theoreticians such as Jourard (1964) and Mowrer (1964) have "hailed self-disclosure as the primary mechanism and sine qua non of growth" (Lieberman et al., 1973:356). The kind of self-disclosure that takes place in a sensitivity training session, however, is not possible in a large class. Moreover, a large class is hardly the place for intimate levels of self-disclosure, due to undesirable reactions. Nevertheless, some self-disclosure may be achieved through the use and analysis of paper-and-pencil tests and scales. By discussing their responses to these tests, students gain an understanding not only of the tests as scientific instruments but of their own "unique" responses in relation to normative patterns. Three of the measures that we have used are: a social awareness test (Marwell, 1966; Robertson, 1977; and Bogardus, 1933), Manford Kuhn's Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954) and Emory Bogardus' social distance scale. The first two measures have been analyzed in class on the day of administration or during the following class meeting. The social distance scale has been administered at the beginning of the course but analyzed when the topics of race and ethnicity were discussed later in the semester.

The three tests generate a great deal of discussion. The social awareness test serves as a catalyst for community when used at the beginning of a course and all three tests help make the student aware of her/his own values in relation to others. However, some students object that such

tests force competitiveness, and others were concerned about "right" and "wrong" answers.

SMALL GROUPS

One way of creating bonds in larger classes is to incorporate some type of small group experience in the classroom setting. Any of a number of exercises ranging from buzz groups on assigned readings or topics to values-clarification or prisoner's dilemma exercises may be used. (See Berquist and Phillips, 1975; Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum, 1972; Pfeifer and Jones, 1969.)

Group exercises are effective particularly during the first few weeks of a course as they allow students to meet new individuals and to feel less anonymous. Many of the exercises also free the instructor to talk informally with groups and individuals as the exercises take place. Small group exercises also have been used as a valuable preparatory experience for the final examination (Fritz, 1979).

EVALUATION

We have employed two of the standard course evaluation methods – examinations (Dubin and Taveggia, 1968) and student evaluations (Jiobu and Pollis, 1971; Petras and Hayes, 1973; Linsky and Straus, 1973) – and have found them to be practical but limited measures.

Examinations are a measure of our first course goal, knowledge acquisition, and provide us with some indication of a basic element of the growth process. Examination questions require the student to recall, creatively integrate, and evaluate information.

The evidence which emerges from our experiences and those of others (Clark, 1974; Keller, 1968; Ferster, 1968) is that unconventional methods of instruction may make differences in examination performances. We have observed that student examination grades were higher in courses where less conventional teaching techniques supplemented the traditional approach.

The main reasons which seem to explain this better performance, however, are predisposition and integration. Students committed to our objectives are more likely to

enroll and remain enrolled in the courses. Our students, then, are favorably disposed and are likely to perform well on examinations (Clark, 1974). Also, students who are less committed but must remain in our courses are integrated by our techniques into teacher-student and student-to-student networks. This mutual involvement and responsibility encourages them to contribute and perform on at least an average level.

Student course evaluations. Given our objectives, a more appropriate method of evaluating the means of instruction is through the student course evaluation. Linsky and Straus (1973:105) have referred to these as "important as an index of student reaction to teaching."

The student evaluation forms which we use consist not only of traditional questions about readings, films, exercises and class discussions; they also include several self-reflective questions which we also use to assess personal growth. Students responded favorably to the techniques which we employed and over one half of those recently enrolled indicated some personal change, beyond conventional learning (Fritz and Pozzo, 1978).

CONCLUSIONS

Methods of instruction. While there are conflicting opinions (e.g., McGee, 1974; Pape and Miller, 1967) about the impact of teachers and teaching methods on learning, we have been encouraged by our teaching experiences to believe that when personal growth is a course objective it is essential to employ methods of instruction which emphasize student participation in group experiences.

Personal growth. If, as Maslow (1971:168) says, "the function (or) goal of education... is the 'self-actualization' of a person," then we need to learn much more about personal growth within the classroom. It is essential, then, that we more clearly define the concept of personal growth as an individual and group related process.

Evaluation. We have defined personal growth as one of our course goals, have developed some techniques by which it may be fostered and have attempted to evaluate it. But, admittedly, our ability to evaluate

this goal is limited. For as Wahrman (1974) has pointed out with regard to the intensive group experience, the techniques to evaluate personal growth are neither well developed nor rigorously used.

It is necessary, then, to clearly define the concept of personal growth, develop ways of adequately measuring it and more systematically research it as both an individual and group related process. Future research on factors affecting the teaching and learning of sociology should focus on these problems and issues.

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