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REDUCING CLASSROOM ALIENATION: APPLICATIONS FROM THEORY*

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Faculty with poor student evaluations quickly accuse the measuring instrument of not being valid. Professors with better evaluations generally agree, either out of a sense of loyalty or the fear that we truly cannot control the evaluation scores ourselves. Colleges and universities, however, require greater accountability of classroom competence than ever, and student evaluations play a major role in promotion and tenure decisions.

Course evaluations do measure something. We use similar instruments, in fact, in our own research. A given score on a given scale may be meaningless in itself. But comparison with the scores of other respondents or to standardized numbers produces a relative definition. When we claim such validity for our research, how can we deny legitimacy to teaching evaluations?

Even allowing for student exaggeration and misinterpretation, classroom tales of poor teaching sometimes just amaze me. Some professors defy simple common sense. Sociologists seem no less ignorant of the basic social processes in the classroom than professors of other disciplines. We should know better!

Sociology provides theory and research that can be translated into classroom strategy and techniques. Applying our own discipline to the social process of teaching can be enjoyable enterprise of experimentation, creative thought, and fun. New strategies do not necessarily involve more work. They do require, however, that we modify our assumptions about education, the classroom, our students, and power.

While talking to a group of students who were criticizing another professor some time ago, I identified their frustration as normlessness. As I mentally listed Seeman's (1959) dimensions of alienation, their sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness also became obvious. They were alienated from the class and they had good reason. They were even more frustrated because they had planned to lambast the professor on evaluations, but he never gave them the chance!

If course structure and interactional processes produce alienation, then we can also use the theory to alleviate the problem. We should ask ourselves if specific features of a class increase or reduce each type of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Seeman 1959). We can then minimize each of these with specific classroom strategies.

POWERLESSNESS

Powerlessness, the belief that one's own behavior does not effect desired results, is frequently found among students. Many believe that studying has less to do with final course grades than luck or manipulating the professor. We can reduce the feelings of powerlessness among students by giving them more responsibility.

We know as sociologists that participatory decisions are the most effective for encouraging commitment and performance. Giving students partial responsibility for determining course requirements is a worthwhile exercise, particularly for small-enrollment, upper-level classes. The freedom to develop course policies, for example, also involves the responsibility to determine and enforce the consequences. The instructor, an equal negotiator in this process, establishes the parameters, warns of pitfalls, and keeps the time and energy investment at reasonable levels. Large enrollment, lower-division classes can discuss and choose among options.

Choices give students more control over their lives. They appreciate the greater self-determination provided by having options and a variety and larger number of grading opportunities. A small part of the grade based on effort rather than just performance, or a little optional, extra-credit work can greatly reduce the feeling of powerlessness. Having students evaluate their own work reveals that most are more demanding of themselves than we think.

MEANINGLESSNESS

Meaninglessness refers to an individual's failure to appreciate the purpose of his or her work. Students experience this feeling when they are unable to see the relevance of a particular assignment or lecture to the total course or when they question why they are required to take certain courses at all.

Students cannot read our minds. It would be easier if students accepted and understood our assumptions, but they typically do not even know what they are. Do we? Can we articulate a justification of the content and structure of our courses? Can we communicate to our students

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the contribution a given course will make to their lives?

A brief mention of the purpose of a lecture or assignment may be all that is needed to make it more meaningful. Too many students in my family course, for example, were listing the lectures on cross-cultural and subcultural family variations as "least worthwhile" on course evaluations. I considered excluding the information but feel that students need exposure to cultures different than their own. "Why?" students ask. It's a legitimate question and we should be prepared to answer it. I decided to "market" the cross-cultural lecture and "repackage" the subcultural one.

In spite of the business orientation these terms suggest, "marketing" and "packaging" are useful conceptual tools in teaching. To market the cross-cultural lecture, I revised the introduction to explain why I include this information and consider it important. I suggest that American ignorance and ethnocentrism hurt our ability to deal with people different from ourselves. World peace may depend on a stronger development of cultural relativity. I find students open to these ideas and showing more interest in the lecture as indicated by their questions and discussion.

Repackaging the lecture on subcultural variations included changing the title (to "Family Experiments"), revising the introduction to assert that these experiments (Oneidans, Amish, Hutterites, Amanas, Unificationists) are responses to basic Christian ideology, and adding visual aids. This "new" lecture also generates more discussion and questions than in previous quarters. These topics, furthermore, are no longer over-represented on the "least worthwhile" item of the evaluations. I did not make major changes in either lecture; I simply responded to the students' perspectives.

Sociology departments can also market courses to make them more meaningful to students. We know our courses are worthwhile, even valuable, but many of our students do not. Today's college students are characterized by a vocational orientation, self-interest and consumer attitudes (Levine 1981). Such a student perspective is short-sighted, and we should not cater to it but we do need to respond.

We need to educate students about what is good for them. Skills important for professional success are enhanced by sociology training (Huber 1983; Cobb 1983). We can explicitly feature these skills in our courses and teach students their value. For example, pointing out that class presentations help develop oral communication abilities needed in professional jobs reduces the complaints about the assignment.

NORMLESSNESS

Normlessness refers to a situation lacking effective norms or in which individuals assume that unacceptable behaviors are required for success. Students are understandably curious about what professors want. They should not have to guess. Trial and error is not a good learning procedure.

A complete syllabus and explicit written guidelines for assignments given on the first day of class provide clear expectations and reduce the feelings of normlessness (Dorn 1987). There is no excuse for distributing syllabi in the third week of the term, promising guidelines that never materialize, canceling examinations on the day they are scheduled, or changing assignments after some students have put significant effort into them. It sounds like common sense, but I have heard enough complaints to suspect that such events are too common.

Students also adhere to many implied norms and want the standards applied fairly to everyone. Students label a situation as unfair if a chronically absent classmate gets the same grade as they do or if late papers are not penalized in some way. On the other hand, students guilty of such behavior object strenuously to ex post facto consequences. Implied policies and assumptions should be discussed and made explicit.

Some students claim that first examinations and assignments serve primarily as devices for determining what a professor requires. Although I disagree with their attitude, I recognize it as another form of normlessness and respond by placing old exams and sample assignments on library reserve. The practice does not make a difference in grades but students like it. At least, it reduces their anxiety about the unknown.

ISOLATION

Isolation has been variously defined as detachment from cultural standards, disagreement with valued societal goals, or the absence of strong social ties. Social integration, the opposite of isolation, can be supported by increasing interaction among students. This interaction confirms academic standards, validates shared experiences and goals, and strengthens social ties.

Group projects, student presentations, small group exercises, class discussions, and get-acquinted activities all increase students' social integration with a class. We can structure these activities to increase academic benefit and avoid various pitfalls. Small group research provides subjects with structure and specific tasks to fulfill. Group exercises in the classroom need the same framework. Peer evaluation encourages better performance on group projects. Student presentations generate more commitment when the students themselves are given the

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responsibility for self-evaluation and writing test questions.

Classes are more fun when taken with friends. Students may not bring their friends to class, but we can encourage acquaintanceships. Get-acquinted activities improve the classroom atmosphere. Exchanging telephone numbers gives the students someone to call with questions or when they need notes for a missed class.

SELF-ESTRANGEMENT

Self-estrangement, also called self-alienation, involves dissatisfaction with oneself or losing intrinsic satisfaction with one's work. Students want to learn and they feel good about themselves when they accomplish something worthwhile. We can give them the opportunity and the support to do so.

We encourage development of self-esteem by requiring our students to stretch their abilities and then recognizing and rewarding their accomplishments. We need not aim for the proverbial middle if we aim for the top and give the middle and lower students the support they need to succeed. Intimidating major term projects, for example, can be broken into steps and progress shared with others. Good diagnostic feedback from other students or the professor helps students to turn in revised final projects that are easy to grade and a pleasure to read.

"Sluff" classes and assignments perceived by students as meaningless busywork do not improve knowledge, skills or self-esteem. Faculty complain that students shop for the easiest classes and give easy professors good evaluations. A few do, perhaps, but the majority want more from their education experiences. Students tell me that my classes are a lot of work but worth it because they learn a lot. I have never been accused of teaching easy classes or writing easy exams. But I get good enrollments and good evaluations.

CONCLUSION

Alienation theory applies to the classroom as well as to the work situation. How often do we tell students that going to school is their job? Student alienation affects not only their evaluations of our courses but also their learning. A conscious effort to increase student integration improves our teaching, their learning, and the classroom experience for professor and students alike.

It is beyond the scope of this note to provide empirical tests of my assertions. Future efforts may involve developing measures of academic alienation as well as indicators of those classroom structures and processes that affect student orientation. Hypothesis testing could then be pursued. The purpose of this essay, however, is to illustrate the contribution of sociological theory to teaching.

As the examples suggest, it does not take a lot of work or innovation, just regular, everyday good teaching and common sense. One challenge of these simple ideas, however, is overcoming faculty defense mechanisms. Some focus on the impossible and remain oblivious to what can be done. They jump to unwarranted conclusions and negative generalizations. No technique works everywhere for everyone. Each strategy must evolve from its own situation. Working from a theoretical perspective, however, gives a unified package of understanding and a direction for application of that knowledge. Exactly what theory is supposed to do!

This paper, developed from Seeman's (1959) work, uses a micro-level analysis. Alienation, however, results from a loss of control over not only the work process but also the work product. Kohn (1976) suggests that the appeal of the alienation concept is its inclusion of both social-structural and psychological aspects. The understanding of academic alienation can be aided by macro-level applications as well as the micro-level suggestions made here. Subordination of academic ideals to job market credentialing, fears over future job prospects, and growing student debts, for example, could all produce alienation. Documentation and comparison of these respective sources of alienation have much research potential.

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