

Introduction

As a sociology and psychology professional, I understand psychosocial phenomena to be the contexts of interaction in which socially constructed concepts, their foundations, relative influences, and movements are established. Social psychology, a product of both disciplines, sheds light on these meanings and conceptualizations and how they are born out of the numerous interactions that constitute these phenomena. From such interactions come race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, work, and numerous other social concepts that become codified as the scope of normative human condition that dictates both behavior and cognitive action. Within this condition, concepts are given life by those who construct and adhere to them. Once alive, the constructs themselves interact with their creators and with each other.

Typically, these constructs are overlooked until individuals uncover them by their own actions, as a result of the actions of others, or by using institutional tools such as methods of science. Methods of scientific analysis expose these social constructions by analyzing interactional dynamics that reflect processes such as legitimation, power, and oppression. The exposure of these dynamics thrusts these conceptual meanings into empirical reality that either support theoretical explanations or offer the basis for new ones. Once these empirical realities are attained, alternatives become possible, change becomes inevitable, and the constant change of empirical reality is what indicates societal movement.

Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Directives

It is this understanding that guides my teaching, research, and service to the academic and greater community. As a result of this understanding, I am implored as an educator of social science to (1) *describe the meanings and concepts that exist in social world*; (2) *illustrate how meanings and concepts are developed and utilized in human interaction*; (3) *illuminate the processes that evolve meanings and concepts from creation to normalized structures encased within the social world*; (4) *facilitate the uncovering of interactional dynamics*; (5) *assist in the formulation of logical sociological and psychological deductions, inductive explanations, and reasonable predictions related to the dynamics of social life*; and to (6) *elucidate the process of movement and change that is fostered by these dynamics*.

These directives undergird my overall philosophy as a teacher and direct the manner in which I perform my functions in that capacity. Based on these directives, I argue that my purpose as a teacher is to be a student-oriented mentor focused on the objective of aiding in the development of student minds. Therefore, all of the coursework and activities that I use in my teaching supports three specific aims. The first of these three is to grasp the “pre-taught” understandings of students in relation to the six directives as a means of organizing and prioritizing course material. The second aim is to insure that students are personally invested in and directly involved in the presentation of course material associated with the directives. The third aim is to evaluate student knowledge relative to the directives after course material has been presented based on their demonstration of theoretical understanding and practical application. In addition to these aims, I believe my use of an achievement grading model versus an aptitude grading model also supports my purpose as a student-oriented mentor.

The value of these aims is directly connected to my understanding of how they serve as building blocks for the effective educational union of teaching and learning. I define effective teaching as the use of educational resources and materials to facilitate learning. I define effective learning as successful achievement of added knowledge relative to course competency. Based on these definitions, in order for the educational process to be effective, it must expand objective

knowledge from one level relative to course competency to another in an additive manner through the use of resources and materials. This process of expansion can only be reached through the assessment of current knowledge levels, followed by the development and implementation of information learning objectives based on these current levels, and observable achievement associated with these objectives that must be measured in terms of the newly achieved knowledge levels in relation to the previously assessed current ones. The aims of student-oriented mentorship that guide my teaching clearly support this process.

I believe that this process of knowledge expansion is a factor of achieving knowledge versus achieving grades. Understanding that achieving a grade is correlated with the expansion of knowledge, does not preclude the fact that their relationship is unfortunately not causal. Therefore, it is my belief that using assessment frameworks that focus students initially on a mark that they potentially could or should achieve relative to others in their group is somewhat detrimental to student oriented-mentoring. In these situations, students are constantly reminded of failures – falling short of the highest objective potential, regardless of observable subjective progress made relative to course directives. Additionally, I argue that the determination to maintain the highest standard of aptitude fostered by this process causes students to sacrifice intimacy with and ownership of course work that is a factor of investment that occurs when students desire to achieve the best possible knowledge set that they can simply because they enjoy the knowledge being attained.

Teaching Style

This philosophy of assessment coupled with my practical and theoretical aims makes my teaching style somewhat atypical because it gives the student agency while at the same time calling for student responsibility. Student orientated teaching and mentoring that calls for student responsibility often translates into instructor expectations and class room mechanisms that urge student to read materials, research materials, engage relative supplemental materials, be aware of class policies and timelines via the syllabus or online communication hubs, engage with other students in groups and online discussion forums, present material in class, as well as other expectations that are most likely less common and less prioritized in traditional professor-centered class situations where the course material does not evolve based on student participation.

Teaching Evaluation

This uncommonness is reflected in evaluations that I receive from both students and peers. Based on qualitative and quantitative feedback, overall, students find my courses agreeable and satisfactory, and they offer positive feedback. However there is a fraction of students who do offer negative feedback and are not satisfied with them. When qualitative feedback is analyzed across my previous teaching opportunities, it reflects that those who are satisfied with my courses like them for the same major reason that those who are dissatisfied do not like them: *they are different than what they have previously experienced*. This finding suggests that students have most likely been subjected to a style that is less dependent on their personal achievement or one that calls for less responsibility on their part to achieve their grades, which causes them to either be disappointed with or to enjoy my instruction because it is not consistent with the previous experience.

My previous teaching experiences involve instruction of some type at five state universities in the United States:

- University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- California Polytechnic State University

Brian N. Hewlett Ph.D.

- University of Colorado at Colorado Springs
- University of Colorado at Boulder
- University of Arizona

I have also had the distinct honor of teaching at one European university:

- Technical University of Dresden

I have held faculty positions at two community colleges in Arizona, one of which I still hold*:

- Pima Community College*
- Mesa Community College

I have also held faculty positions at two private university/colleges and am still a faculty member in good standing* at one of them:

- University of Phoenix*
- Collins College

My experiences with these institutions have allowed me to design and implement courses in the academic disciplines of Psychology, Communication, English, and Sociology.

The substantive courses that I have implemented and/or designed in the discipline of Psychology include:

- Substance Abuse
- Self-Management & Leadership
- Leadership in Student Organizations
- Introduction to Psychology
- Social Psychology
- Psychological Measurement & Statistics

In the discipline of Communications I have taught substantive courses focusing on:

- Diversity in Communications
- Media & Society

In terms of English, I have taught English as a second language courses in Europe and a substantive course in Developmental Writing at Collins College.

However, to date, most of my coursework has been in the discipline of Sociology, where I have taught:

- Introduction to Sociology
- Cultural Diversity
- Popular American Culture
- Ethnic Relations in the U.S.
- Women & Men in Society
- Collective Behavior & Social Movements
- Minority Relations and Urban Society
- Individuals, Groups, & Society
- Juvenile Delinquency
- The Social World of Drugs

Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of a sample of evaluations from 14 of the courses I taught within the disciplines of sociology and psychology, students overwhelmingly approve of my courses although it differs by institution. In terms of the quantitative measures, I received an 83% average approval rate across 5 Pima Community College course sections included in the sample, a 61% approval rate from one of the two Mesa Community College course sections included (I was only able to secure qualitative measures for the other), and an approval rate of 82% across 9 course sections included from the University of Arizona. These approval ratings are based upon measures that record performance approval as “agree to strongly agree,” “average to excellent,” or “sometimes effective to almost always effective.”

Student approval also varies by the substantive course content, the semester the course was offered, and by the number of students in the class. Based on these same data, it appears that students find my courses more enjoyable and offer more approval for courses I have taught in the summer semesters rather than for those taught during the traditional school year. This suggests that students enjoy the course when they have more time to do the work, less work to do, and fewer courses for comparison. These same data reflect that students provide more approval of my course offerings when there are less student participants. Likewise, student feedback from this sample offered more approval when the topic was more general in nature (i.e., introductions to the discipline or surveys discussing general social issues like interactions across individuals, groups, and society). According to Wolfer & Johnson (2003), some studies have previously identified class size (Hanna, Hoyt, & Aubrecht, 1983), course content (Cashin, 1990; Hanna et al., 1983), gender and other cultural attributes of the instructor (Anderson & Miller, 1997; Martin, 1984), and grading style (Greenwald & Gillmore, 1997) as factors that may influence student assessments of instructor performance.

Teaching Feedback Analysis

When qualitative comments are examined, a number of other patterns emerge. In most cases, students would recommend me as an instructor and the course in which they are receiving instruction from me to other students. Overwhelmingly students indicate they enjoy my courses and that they acquire a lot of knowledge and some comment that they have a greater interest in the subject as a result of the course material. A few even contend that they are now interested in majoring in sociology, psychology, or social psychology based on what they have gained by being enrolled in my courses. Other students have positively noted my enthusiasm, knowledge, positive attitude and energy, unique style, my attempts to make the material easily understood, and use of discussions, as well as other student involvement techniques.

In my opinion, another positive note is student indications that they find my courses to be challenging. Unfortunately, not all students find this to be a positive attribute. Associated with my attempts to facilitate discussions by presenting multiple sides to social problems and/or issues, is the prominent criticism that I am too invested in the material and value student opinions less than my own. As students positively note, I am definitely passionate about the subjects I teach but, as a social researcher, I am also passionate about evidence based discussion, which may be a factor in this critique. I further interpret this criticism as a misperception of my passion that is indicative of an interaction effect between who students perceive me to be in relation to the material being taught. In other words, because this criticism only occurs in courses that are substantively based on stratification systems such as race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, etc., I believe that students attribute the passion normally associated with my teaching style to my investment in a subject based on the stratification characteristics they also attribute to me. Regardless, I constantly work to insure a diversity of opinion in my classrooms by utilizing student contributions to course materials and student directed discussions.

Another student criticism that I take very seriously is that students, regardless of the substantive nature of the course, note that didactic content, assignments and grading are often unclear to them. This critique is often attached to the comment that I am not explaining the material sufficiently. This is a particularly perplexing critique, since I feel that I have attempted to avoid such confusion in numerous ways. First I offer extensive explanations of each assignment and the criteria by which they will be graded in the syllabus and I stress the importance of familiarity with this document by asking students to sign a statement acknowledging they have read it. Secondly, I attempt to schedule the necessary out of class engagements of materials into manageable assignments. Third, I utilize teams/groups and web-based discussion forums, in which I also participate, to give students alternatives for gaining understanding of content and assignments. Lastly, I attempt to address this issue with Q&A or assignment discussions that I facilitate for the majority of class sessions. Despite these attempts, these criticisms still occur, which leads me to interpret their connection to the traditional lack of student desire to engage course materials outside of the classroom.

In terms of the confusion with the grading system, I attribute this to misinterpretations of the achievement model relative to the aptitude model. Evidence of this are the discussions I have with students during the one-on-one mid semester conferences I hold with them. Often during these conferences, students believe they are failing because their point score reflects a range of 30 – 50 points. Based on the traditional aptitude model, students believe they are failing because they do not receive a grade value of 60 or above. However, in the reality of the point system, they have achieved points for only half the work in the course, so based on that range, they are on track to pass if they are consistent with their work and double the points by the end of the class. Although, I explain this thoroughly on the first day of class, I often lose students who tell me later they thought they were failing and would not be able to make up that much of a difference. Because this is still an issue, I have recently begun placing a spreadsheet that serves as a grade progress monitor online so students can plug in values to determine their likely achievement.

Teaching Effectiveness

Despite these issues, I believe my teaching is effective for three reasons. First, many of the assessments such as Oral Examinations, Evidence-based Research Projects/Papers, Team/Group Audiovisual Presentations that prompt students to apply the knowledge associated with competencies they develop from the course materials yield better qualitative outcomes than traditional ones from the perspective of the student as well as in my opinion as the grader. Second, many of the course assignments are designed to yield products which students have developed by engaging the course material such as Comprehensive Note Summaries and Computer Slideshow Presentations and these products are maintained by the student for later reference and future engagement. This insures that students have educational material associated with the course content that they can use to teach themselves with over and over again. This also insures that they have expanded knowledge in either an internalized or external form. Third, because students experience my classes as unique and fairly different from the normal classroom experience, student engagement of the course materials and activities is highly likely to be more memorable and thereby serve as an anchor that will later assist students in retrieving the information associated with the course.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although my teaching has not always been popular with students, I am confident that overall it has been effective. I am also confident that it has left students with a plethora of

Brian N. Hewlett Ph.D.

psychosocial knowledge that is potentially useful as they further pursue their education, as they obtain and work through their careers, as they develop meaningful relationships, and as they experience other parts of their lives. This confidence is not mere conjecture but has readily been supported by the anecdotes I have often received from former students.

References

Wolfer, Terry A. & Miriam M. Johnson. 2003. Re-evaluating Student Evaluation of Teaching: The Teaching Evaluation Form. *Journal of Social Work Education*. V39