Pedersen, Daphne E., “Active and Collaborative Learning in an Undergraduate Sociology Theory Course,” Teaching Sociology, v.38, n.3 (July, 2010).

**Categories:** Active Learning, Student Centered Learning, Collaborative Learning, Sociology, Theory

**Summary**

This article presents examines a potential solution to a commonly experienced problem in sociology courses focused on theory. According to the author, a high percentage of undergraduates who take sociology theory courses find the curricula overly complex and lacking in real world application. In order to remedy this situation in her classes, the author sought to reshape her courses by focusing them on active and collaborative learning methods.

Over the course of two semesters, Pedersen tested new applications of active and collaborative learning approaches in her undergraduate sociology theory classes. Her primary objective was to use these methodologies in order to tie theory to “lived experience,” and in order to link theory and sociological research methods. In order to accomplish these goals, she incorporated group based “ethnographic field experiences” into her classes. Though this approach necessitated set aside some class sessions to discuss methods, Pedersen placed students into groups of approximately five students, who then were tasked with undertaking a series of field observations at preselected sites. To ensure logistical feasibility, students within the same group were not required to conduct the observations at the same time, and were allowed to share field notes on a group discussion board on Black Board. Each group was also tasked with writing a report of shared findings after having the opportunity to compare their notes and discuss them with other groups.

Pedersen made several changes to her approach between the first and second semester. Initially, she had organized the semester into blocs of theory, methods, and fieldwork (in that order). This staging presented various problems, and as a result the second semester was structured a series of a week of theory followed by observation and then class discussion. Pedersen also found that her first semester had suffered from a general lack of formal assessment, which led students to report that they would have been more motivated to study harder had they been tested in some traditional manner. Thus, in the second semester, students were required to take a series of “brief, interpretive quizzes.” A third change made in the second iteration of the class was the inclusion of a “paper ‘roundtable,’” in which students were able to discuss, compare, and offer feedback on other groups’ field notes and how they applied theory, prior to completion of their own final papers. Finally, Pedersen found it necessary to alter the submission of notes on electronic boards in order limit opportunities for students to engage in plagiarism.

In addition to the adjustments noted above, Pedersen made considerable changes to the system of assessments that she utilized in the course. In the second semester, students were required to make a minimum of three theoretical connections in the body of their field notes. The author also developed a more effective three point rubric for these note assessments that evaluated the number and effectiveness of the students’ application of theory. These field note evaluations occurred five times over the course of the semester, with the first operating essentially as a practice round. The next four
field note assessments were directly tied to specific blocks of theory taught in class and tasked in that specific field work assignment. Taken together, these five field note assignments were then used by student groups to develop their final papers. According to Pedersen, this latter approach led to an approximate .5 point average improvement from the first to last assignment.

The article concluded by discussing student attitudes, as expressed in both informal assessments and final evaluations, towards the new active, collaborative approach adopted by Pedersen for her theory courses. Approximately 85% of first semester students and 100% of second semester students preferred the fieldwork model. Further, twenty-one of twenty-seven of the second semester students indicated that the collaborative nature of the observations helped or improved their fieldwork based learning. Finally, twenty-three of twenty-seven second semester students noted that they felt that the group work format had helped them with the final paper.

Conclusions

Pedersen identified several benefits derived from the active/collaborative approach that she adopted. First, Pedersen concluded that the active approach helped students significantly improve their abilities to link theory and real-life applications/experience, and thus indicated that they had improved in both their knowledge and applied skills. Second, the new approach led her to approach formal assessment in a far more “conscious.” In particular, she noted that utilization of the new approach led her to develop assessments that more effectively examined students’ ability to utilize theory and relate it to “real life” through direct application.

Application

On first glance, this article would seem to have a somewhat limited scope of application. The article is tightly focused not just on sociology, but also on a specific curriculum within that field: theory. Moreover, the rubrics presented in the paper and the same questions/fieldwork assignments provided in the appendix similarly reference sociology specific content. As such, this article might serve as an effective model for helping those professors teaching sociology/theory at U.D.C. to make their course more active. On the other hand, one can assume that there are a number of courses that focus considerable attention on the teaching of theory and/or that utilize field observations as a means of applying that theory. In such cases, Pedersen’s article offers a well-developed model for tying theory to fieldwork exercises, assessing those activities, and doing so in a collaborative manner.

Citations of Interest

