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USING PANEL DEBATES TO INCREASE STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY CLASS*

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SOCIOLOGY PROFESSORS WHO want to increase students' participation and foster greater student involvement in the introductory course should try the panel debate. This technique also gives instructors who are experiencing "course fatigue" a needed change of pace! My introductory course meets four times a week for 50 minutes; by the end of the week, both the students and I wanted something different from the usual lecture and discussion of assigned reading materials. So, I instituted student panel debates, a technique I developed over the 15 years I have been teaching at Hanover College.

One of the paperback books I use, in addition to the introductory text, is Gary Fine's *Talking Sociology* (1997), currently in its fourth edition. Professor Fine's book consists of 12 chapters dealing with various social issues. For each issue, he shows where three political viewpoints—conservative, social democratic (liberal in our contemporary society), and libertarian—stand. The social issues he selects are usually very engaging to students. For example, one chapter is on civil disobedience and whether or not it should be justified; another chapter deals with whether or not drugs should be legalized; and another chapter discusses whether or not employers should use lie detectors on their employees. Typically, the issues are so interesting that students will engage in animated and heated discussions.

The result of these debates is that students become more conscious of the three political positions. Once they experience a number of panel debates, they begin to see two social patterns: (1) what people of a particular

political position believe and value and (2) how these people will attempt to resolve a social issue or social problem. Ultimately, such awareness should help our students become better critical thinkers.

STEPS TO TAKE

As to the mechanics of setting up the panel debate, I go through the following steps:

- (1) Students read the introductory chapter of *Talking Sociology*, which surveys the three political viewpoints.
- (2) Students choose three or four viewpoints they would like to defend before the entire class.
- (3) I put all of their names in a hat and have a student draw a name. The student whose name is drawn gets to choose the political position she or he will defend. We all write this student's name down on a sign-up sheet I hand out (that way, everyone knows what positions are left to defend). We draw another name from the hat, and so on.
- (4) Besides the three political positions the students can choose from, there is a fourth position, the moderator, for each Friday session. The moderator introduces the issue to be discussed for that Friday and starts questioning the three panelists. The moderator can ask a panelist a specific question or can ask the same question to the entire panel to get a comparison of how each panelist answers the question.
- (5) The remaining students can ask the three panelists any question at any time.
- (6) Frequently students who are not on the panel begin to disagree with each other. Students ask each other the rea-

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sons for their beliefs. They defend themselves or one of the positions of the panelists. At this point, not just the three students who are representing the three political positions are engaged, but the entire class is caught up in this issue. This is a very satisfying experience, especially at the end of an academic week.

- (7) With about five minutes remaining in the 50-minute class period, I tell the three panelists and moderator (who were placed in front of the room where they had put their names and political positions on the blackboard behind their seat) to step out of their respective roles. I then ask the class what their views are after this debate. Usually, I have a particular question in mind that leads to closure on the topic.

LITERATURE ON STUDENT DEBATES

Debates have been discussed and tried in the sociology classroom. Green and Klug (1990) conducted research on the use of debate in their introductory classes. They predicted that more drama would occur in the classroom. They found that "their expectation was fully realized: debates were lively and elicited a great deal of post-debate discussion on the part of class members not debating" (p. 463). They also found that "crucial critical thinking skills were being used: students challenged each other on such matters as definition of terms, unstated value premises, the lack or misuse of evidence, reliance on 'authorities' whose expertise was questionable, the pertinence, reliability, and validity of evidence, and the adequacy of logic" (pp. 463-64). A third discovery they made was that "debating and even hearing and later discussing those debates reinforced students' learning of the text material paralleling the content of the debates" (p. 464). I, too, found that the panel debate: (1) added drama to the classroom, (2) promoted critical thinking, and (3) reinforced the material I covered in class lectures, discussions, and

assigned readings.

Huryn (1986) contends that there are two main reasons to introduce some form of debate in the sociology classroom: (1) to prepare the student "to take an effective part in a free society" and (2) to get the student involved in critical thinking (p. 266). She has used debates in introductory and social problems courses, which suggests that some type of debate could be used in a number of sociology courses (p. 267). Her format may be of interest to instructors wishing to try debates in their sociology courses (pp. 266-68).

Smith (1996) uses what he calls the "split-class debate" (p. 69) where he divides the class into two groups. On the board, he writes two opposing views on an issue and students must defend the viewpoint "written on the board on their side, regardless of their actual opinions" (p. 69). After the debate, he summarizes what occurred during the debate. He suggests that the benefit of this exercise is that "it provides experience in thinking about and arguing for a position other than one's own, and airs different views on crucial issues under consideration" (p. 69).

Broderick (1982) found that introducing the debate in the classroom is advantageous because "students are motivated to make a greater than normal investment of time and energy in the course and this investment is used for...critical thinking" (p. 9). Thus, it appears that a recurring theme found in the literature, which supports what I have experienced, is greater motivation and more critical thinking by students—two goals that, I imagine, every teacher of sociology would want to achieve.

C. Wright Mills, in his essay "Mass Society and Liberal Education" (1967), asks "What is the task of the liberal college for adults?" (p. 367). Part of his answer is that it should become a hospitable framework for political debate because "if such procedures are built into the college for adults...that college [will] be liberal, that is liberating, and at the same time real; encouraging people to get in touch with the realities of

themselves and of their world" (p. 370). So, the use of the political debate in a college classroom not only creates drama, enhances critical thinking, and reinforces what occurs in other parts of the course as Green, Klug, and I find, but it also forms the core of a liberal education, as Mills argues.

GRADING

I grade students in three different ways. In the first five minutes of the class, I give the class a quiz of 10 questions. The purpose of the quiz is to give students incentive to read the chapter; otherwise, I have found that students may not read the chapter and therefore not be as likely to join in the discussion. The quizzes count for 10 percent of the course grade.

I also grade the four panelists on how well they represented their respective positions. For example, how well did the moderator ask the panelists questions and follow-up questions, and how well did the moderator call on people in the class who wanted to ask questions? As for the three panelists, I observe how well they defend their positions. That is, how consistent they are in remaining in their political position and how creative they are in the answers they give and in the questions they ask of fellow panelists. This counts for 5 percent of their semester grade.

A third way I grade on that day is to observe how the rest of the class participates. Are they asking the panelists questions? Are they making comments about something that a panelist said? The participation that they demonstrate on Fridays is part of their overall class participation grade, which counts for 5 percent of their semester grade.

Some instructors who have extremely large classes may not want to or be able to grade the audience's participation but still could grade the four panelists and give out the weekly quiz as two methods of evaluating students.

STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF THIS EXERCISE

Students fill out an evaluation at the end of the term on what they got out of my course in general and the panel debates in particular. The sheet has one question referring to the panel discussion that states, "Keep or not keep the Fine panel discussions." In my winter 1996 class, 94 percent of the students (31 out of 33 students) marked "Keep." Also, I take note of any comments on the required end-of-term evaluations of the instructor provided by the college. I have found that students like the change of pace at the end of the week and like the chance to say more and have more control in the classroom. For example, one student noted that the panel debates were "very interesting—allowed us to explore our opinions." Another student noted, "Very interesting!! Discussion Friday—fun debate." The students are not only learning to be aware of the various political perspectives on issues and their personal stands on each issue, but they also have fun learning and they experience a change of pace at the end of the week.

WAYS TO ADAPT THIS EXERCISE

An instructor from a larger university who has to teach 100 or more students might ask, "How can I do this exercise when I have so many students?" You could use graduate assistants and divide the class into two or more separate classrooms on Fridays and cover the same chapter. You and your graduate assistants could use the same quizzes on the same chapters on the same Friday. Your graduate assistants would be responsible for grading the performance of the moderator and three panelists and the participation of the students in the audience. You will probably need to meet ahead of time with your assistants to create a uniform way to evaluate students.

A number of universities do not get the luxury of having two or more classrooms available to carry out this exercise so that

everyone in the class has a chance to be on one of the panel debates. Given that many large classrooms have immovable seating and that the acoustics will not allow for four or more panel debates going on at the same time, then the instructor can have one panel debate and pick or randomly select four students for each Friday panel discussion. All of the students in the class could be given a quiz at the beginning of the class just as I do in my classes of approximately 20 to 30 students, followed by the debate. Students in the audience could still ask the panel questions and thus the audience could still provide input and interact with the panel members. However, the moderator may want to limit the audience by not letting any student ask more than one question so that more students could ask the panelists questions.

The only two consequences for larger classes are: (1) not everyone in a large class will be on a panel and (2) the same student in the audience will not get to ask a number of questions, as he or she can in my class. Outside of these two restrictions, I see no reason why the professor with a class of 100 or 1000 students could not institute this exercise and enjoy many of its benefits.

Another question that might be raised is, "If the students in the audience sometimes get so involved that they become emotionally heated, does this exercise cause students to lose their sociological view for a more personal and psychological stance?" Although the discussions get heated, many of the discussion topics relate to major concepts in sociology, such as culture, socialization, deviance, race and ethnicity, gender roles, stratification, family, organizations, and social movements and collective behavior. To get students to adopt a sociological view, I assign these topics to coordinate with lecture and discussion class periods.

A possible limitation of this exercise is that in most classes, because of class size, the students are panelists only once. Yet it is better to let them have this experience at least once than not at all. Also, even though they are not a panelist most of the time, they

have to be ready for each debate because of the quiz. They can also be part of the exercise by asking panelists questions and asking other students in the audience questions and defending their own views if a student asks them a question. So, even without being on the panel for that day, I observe a heightened sense of participation and engagement by students.

A possible adaptation that some instructors may need to make comes when their class period is longer than 50 minutes. Typically, it takes 45 minutes to have a good debate. If an instructor has more time in the class period, he or she can use the extra time in three ways. First, ask students to reflect on what happened in the debate (e.g., Was the class coming to some general conclusion and, if so, why?). Second, ask them what sociological ideas and concepts were used during the debate. Third, ask them how today's debate relates to the normal class lecture and discussion.

BROADER APPLICABILITY OF THIS EXERCISE

This type of panel debate can be used in other sociology courses. For example, Dushkin Publishing Group publishes a series of books entitled *Taking Sides* that can be used in much the same way that I have used Fine's book in my introductory course (see the appendix for a listing of these books). This series could be used in various sociology classes studying such topics as crime, drugs, education, race and ethnic relations, the economy, the environment, the family, health care, sexuality, political issues, mass media, and science and technology. Also, an instructor in a sociology course could use Fine's three political views and have students choose topics of their own that are appropriate to the substance of the class and create a panel debate. This assignment would give students a chance to apply these political orientations to an array of sociological topics. Consequently, the advantage in working with Fine's format is that it is not limited to the 12 issues he chooses.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of benefits to using the panel debate. It creates a change of pace for both the professor and students at the end of the class week. It gets students more actively involved in the class—they are agreeing, disagreeing, probing, and qualifying. They develop their oral and critical thinking skills. Finally, they begin to see a predictable pattern of how people of certain political viewpoints address social issues. Considering all of these benefits, the panel debate is a useful tool for improving the teaching of sociology.

APPENDIX.

TAKING SIDES BOOK SERIES

- Alexander, Alison and Jarice Hanson. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Mass Media and Society*. 3rd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Bird, Gloria W. and Michael J. Sporkowski. 1994. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Family and Personal Relationships*. 3rd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Daniel, Eileen L. 1993. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Health and Society*. 2nd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Del Campo, Diana S. and Robert L. Del Campo. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Childhood and Society*. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Easton, Thomas A. 1996. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Science, Technology, and Society*. 2nd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Finsterebusch, Kurt. 1996. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Social Issues*. 9th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Francoeur, Robert T. 1994. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Drugs and Society*. 5th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Goldberg, Raymond. 1993. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Drugs and Society*. 2nd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Goldfarb, Theodore D. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Environmental Issues*. 6th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Katsh, M. Ethan. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Legal Issues*. 6th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- McKenna, George and Stanley Feingold. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Political Issues*. 9th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Monk, Richard C. 1993. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Crime and Criminology*. 4th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Monk, Richard C. 1996. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in Race and Ethnicity*. 2nd ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Noll, James. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Educational Issues*. 8th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.
- Swartz, Thomas R. and Frank J. Bonello. 1995. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Economic Issues*. 7th ed. Guilford, CT: Dushkin.

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- Hury, J.S. 1986. "Debating as a Teaching Technique." *Teaching Sociology* 14:266-69.
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- Smith, David Horton. 1996. "Developing a More Interactive Classroom: A Continuing Odyssey." *Teaching Sociology* 24:64-75.

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