CREATIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR THE APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES

Prof. Nancy Sherman *Bradley University*

Prof. Linda Lyman *Illinois State University*

Associate Prof. Margo Heydt   *Xavier University*

Abstract: *The authors describe teaching strategies they have developed for graduate education in Educational Administration, Professional Counseling and Social Work. In these applied professions, adult learners are best served by active, engaged, and reflective teaching strategies. The strategies are based on principles of adult learning theory and cooperative learning and have been evaluated by students as valuable learning experiences. Three strategies, a symposium presentation, prevention program, and group budgeting project are described in term of design, structure, outcome and evaluation. Additional strategies are briefly described that utilize the latest technologies. The strategies aim to exemplify the process of teaching theory to practice in the chosen profession.*

Wordskey: *technologies, teaching strategies, adult learning theory , cooperative learning.*

INTRODUCTION

  In teaching graduate students in professional master's programs in the social sciences, it has been the authors' experience that cooperative learning approaches are particularly well suited to graduate education. In professional programs, students are embarking on careers in which their ability to successfully interact with a variety of people in a variety of roles is essential. As school principals, students with the master's degree in Leadership in Educational Administration need skills in organizational leadership, effective personnel practices, and community building in many different settings. As school and mental health counselors, students will work with organizations, individuals, groups, families, and the larger community in promoting mental health. Cooperative learning approaches at the graduate level accomplish the goals described by Natasi and Clements (1991) such as "enhanced academic achievement and cognitive growth, motivation and positive attitudes toward learning, social competence, and interpersonal relations" (p.111). In addition, at the graduate level, cooperative learning approaches can provide "real life" experiential learning depending on the nature of the project, utilizing the process of theory to practice.

  The authors believe in the power of a "connected class." Describing a connected class as providing a culture for growth, Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger and Tarule (1986) explain that "the connected teacher tries to create groups in which members can nurture each other's thoughts to maturity" (p. 221). The cooperative learning projects presented use strategies that are interactive and facilitate connected knowing. "Connected knowing builds on the subjectivists' conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than pronouncements of authorities. . .Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge" (pp. 112-113). Successful teaching of graduate students requires an understanding of adult learning. Extrinsic motivation to learn as an adult may include the opportunity for a promotion, entry to a new career, more money, or simply a need to keep up with change (Rogers, 1989). Intrinsic motivation varies from student to student. Whatever the motivation, graduate students respond to teaching that actively involves them in a learning process, allows for choice and working at their own pace, is directed toward relevant or practical skills and knowledge, and makes use of their experience (Rogers, 1989). Active learning strategies, which form the basis of cooperative learning projects, have been shown to increase student motivation, especially for graduate students (Bonwell & Eison, 1995).

Cooperative group learning projects are particularly suited to graduate students. The problem-centered orientation to learning characteristic of adults was identified by Knowles (1970) as one of the most basic characteristics of adult learning. According to Knowles (1984), there are four important distinctions between adult and child learners: These assumptions are that, as a person matures, (1) self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directing human being, (2) the adult learner accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that become an increasing resource for learning, (3) readiness to learn becomes oriented to the developmental tasks of social roles, and (4)   time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject centeredness to one of problem centeredness. (p. 39) Cooperative learning methods, in general, share characteristics that contribute to the learning of adult students. While working in cooperative groups, students use collaborative, pro-social behavior to accomplish learning tasks or projects. Projects and activities are structured so that students are positively interdependent as well as individually accountable for their learning. Successful teaching and learning for graduate students involves organizing learning experiences that take into account these characteristics of adults. Links between what we know about adult learning and cooperative learning led the authors to develop the variety of cooperative learning strategies described in this paper.

GROUP INVESTIGATION: SYMPOSIUM

 For graduate course titled "Legal and Social Change," the author adapted for graduate students the group investigation model developed by Thelen (Joyce & Weil, 1986). The course description is as follows: "Analysis of effects of legal and social change on the lives of young people and on the work of educators and other helping professionals." Course goals are: (a) to stimulate reflection on aspects of life in our culture that limit both freedom and the full development of human potential, (b) to consider creative responses to these limitations, and (c) to examine one's own personal commitment to valuing of diversity, dignity, dialogue, and democracy. The course meets weekly for two and one-half hour sessions and typically involves 20 to 25 students.

Design

 This adaptation of the group investigation model requires groups of from four to six students to confront a social issue and report on the results of their investigation in a Symposium, a 90 minute workshop style presentation. A Symposium is defined as "a conference or meeting for the discussion of some subject, especially an academic topic or social problem" (Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus, 1987). Students become experts on social issues and work through the processes of: (a) selecting and refining a topic, (b) formulating an investigation process, (c) completing additional research and developing the workshop, (d) and presenting the Symposium. Topics are investigated both nationally and in terms of the local area.

Structure

 Symposium group members use some class time, approximately an hour from each of several class periods, to plan and develop the Symposium presentation. Groups of from four to six persons are created by the instructor to give students the experience of working with diversity. The first phase of the project, selecting and refining a topic, can be structured in several ways. Sometimes the topics have been predetermined and are simply broad categories such as changing families, welfare, poverty, or racism, for example. When this approach is used, students' topic preferences are taken into account in making group assignments. Other times students are put into diverse groups and then challenged to develop a topic of interest to all. Another variation has been to assign students to groups by age diversity and to give each group a different decade to investigate, beginning with the 1950s. Subtopics for the decade group investigations are the same for each group and identified by the instructor. Each week a new decade is presented and as the weeks unfold, students develop a better historical understanding of social issues such as poverty, housing, racism, violence, and gender and lifestyle issues. Whatever the topic, each student is expected through reading and research to become well informed about his or her Symposium topic generally, as well as about the sub-topic specifically. Once the topics have been decided students are guided in refining the topics through a series of questions. By the end of the first in-class planning session

sub-topics for individual research typically have been identified by each of the groups and selected by individual

Outcome

One memorable Symposium was titled "Living with Urban Poverty." The introduction focused the presentation with this statement: "Our group's enlightenment to the poverty that engulfs our society as a whole has deepened our awareness of the complex avenues that lead to the inequities that our society possesses. As a group we want to allow others to gain experience and education. Perhaps we will even shock some with the information we have learned about urban poverty. With no food, no bed, no money, clothes or family, circumstances beyond one's control, where would we go?" Also included in the introduction was an opening video created by group members featuring scenes of poverty in the local community. The video was well done, included interaction with some of the subjects being filmed, and was thought-provoking. Individual subtopics were the following, with information conveyed through individual presentations: Pregnant Teens, Poor Children's Education, Welfare Legislation, and Gang Problems. The group activity was a roulette game called "Resources vs. Problems" that simulated the consequences of poverty for the life chances of those living in poverty. The game was designed to show how those with more resources get better educational opportunities and typically more wealthy, while poverty breeds poverty. Students moved around the room to different dealers, experiencing the consequences of their assigned roles and the cards they were dealt. The presentation concluded with excerpts from a commercial video called "Life's Little Instruction Book." In a reflection about memorable concepts from presentations other than your own, one student wrote the following: "The concept that when you start with nothing it is very hard to gain was a very powerful message in the poverty symposium. The card game really made you aware of this by not giving you the resources needed when you were poverty-stricken. After that activity, I can understand why so many people feel hopeless. . . I felt this activity really gave you a feeling of what it would be like to have your cards dealt against you."

Evaluation

Evaluation of the Symposium project has three basic components. When the Symposium project is introduced students receive a copy of the Feedback Form that the instructor will use in assessing each presentation. A total of 30 points are possible and each student in the group receives the same grade. The form includes the following criteria and point specifications: (a) introduction that focuses the topic and gets attention (3 points), (b) clear presentation of information (12 points), (c) creative participatory learning experience (3 points), (d) clear and memorable summary/conclusion (2 points), (e) creativity in how the investigation was carried out and in the presentation (5 points), (f) well organized and helpful handouts (3 points), and (g) Time/Activity logs that demonstrate investment of individual time and energy (2 points). The instructor awards points and provides comments on each component, making copies of the completed feedback form for each group member. A second component of the evaluation involves the individual Time/Activity logs for the Symposium project. Logs are not graded as such but influence whether the student earns the full credit available for class participation. Finally, each student in a Symposium group evaluates the other group members. Group members develop their own criteria and award each other from one to five points. These assessments are due the night of the presentation and also become part of each student's class participation grade.

Students' evaluative comments about presenting the "Living with Urban Poverty" Symposium included, "My work with the group helped me understand the desperateness of poverty. Several issues we as a group agreed upon, but other issues brought about some intense debate, which helped me to look at more than my own view of a given situation." Another student wrote, "As we discussed our individual topics and learned information from one another, we were culturally more aware. Our discussions on how to create our symposium brought more information into our world." These comments illustrate that connected knowing works.

PREVENTION PROGRAM IN COUNSELING

In a graduate course in professional counseling, the goals for the course include providing students with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for effective community counseling. A cooperative learning project such as the development and implementation of a prevention program fulfills this goal in several ways: (a) students learn how to work cooperatively as a team to plan, develop, and implement a program much in the same way they will when working for a community agency; (b) students acquire first-hand knowledge of community resources available and how to access those resources; and (c) students learn the process for developing community/agency based prevention programs from the initial stage of assessment to the final evaluation.

Design

The overall design of the cooperative project encompassed four phases: assessment of the needs of the target population, development of prevention activities to meet those needs, presentation of the program, and evaluation of the total program and component parts. Students worked in cooperative groups through each phase of the design. In a class of 20 students, four groups of five were used. During class time, group members were assigned roles such as reporter, recorder, time-keeper, and facilitator to assist with the group process. Work outside of class was structured as the students desired. At the end of one phase, students have the option to work with a different group. During the assessment phase each group was assigned separate areas to research to avoid overlap in information gathering. For example, one group was assigned to research the Internet and current literature while another was to interview professionals in the field. After completing the research, each group presented their information to the entire class.

With the necessary background information shared, groups moved to the next phase of designing prevention activities based on the research. The initial task of developing goals was accomplished by each group sharing their ideas and final goals were then developed by consensus of the whole class. Each group was then assigned a goal from which to brainstorm ideas for activities that would accomplish the goal. When the activities were formulated and agreed upon, students were provided with the opportunity to decide with which activity they wanted to work. After developing a detailed plan for the activity, along with resources needed and an evaluation component, the total program was developed from the activities of the five groups. The program was implemented by the students with clients from a cooperating community agency. Clients and professional staff provided evaluative information for further development of the prevention program. At the end of the project, students evaluated themselves, their peers, and the program.

Outcome

Prior to the semester's start, the course instructor arranged for the prevention program to be developed in collaboration with a local community counseling agency. The director of a program serving homeless youth agreed to assist with access to information and clients. A prevention program on preventing HIV/AIDS was agreed upon due to the high risk of homeless youth to contract HIV/AIDS. A small grant for materials and resources was obtained from the university. Student groups obtained information about HIV/AIDS and homeless youth from investigating current literature, the Internet, interviewing professionals who provide services for homeless youth, and by interviewing former homeless youth program clients. Based on this research they developed the following goals for the prevention program which was now entitled All Individuals Deserve Support (AIDS): (a) to educate Homeless Youth Case Managers in HIV/AIDS prevention information and methods for the purpose of ongoing education and support of their clients; (b) to incorporate homeless youth into program development and implementation; (c) to provide client specific information materials; and (d) to integrate the program into existing services as appropriate. The activities designed to meet these goals included developing a resource library consisting of client-appropriate brochures, pamphlets, videos, books and other materials organized for accessibility and housed in the offices of the homeless youth program; in service training program for the case managers who provide direct service and support to the homeless youth addressing current information about AIDS/HIV and its transmission and how to talk to clients about prevention; a three-part psycho educational group for clients

focused on developing self-esteem and assertiveness; and development of a peer helper program where homeless youth who had successfully completed the program would assist those still struggling with homelessness and related concerns. The first activity, designed to serve as an 'attention-grabber" was a pizza dinner and talk with a person living with AIDS. The speaker, who was close in age to the audience, told her story and answered questions. The other activities were scheduled following this initial program.

Evaluation

  Evaluation for grading consisted of an activity log and a portfolio completed by each student as well as an evaluation of the student by his or her group members. The activity log was a listing and description of all activities related to the project and the time involved. The portfolio included all materials found and developed as a part of the project. At the initial group meeting, students were assigned the task of developing a method for evaluating the contribution of each group member. Groups developed the criteria for evaluation based on their expectations of themselves and each other in the group process. The instructor assigned a grade for participation based on the group evaluation and the activity log for individuals and a single group grade for the group's performance in the program. Student comments regarding the prevention project included, "I've learned more from this project and the people I worked with than any other so far" and "This was an excellent learning opportunity, working with real clients was so much more satisfying and assisted in my understanding of what I will face after graduation." Overall, quantitative and qualitative evaluations by students suggest that they find this a valuable learning experience on many different levels.

BUDGETING A POVERTY LEVEL INCOME

  When teaching about cultural competence, the "isms" related to gender, race, and ethnicity tend to be more commonly addressed. Teaching strategies that establish a micro as well as macro understanding of poverty and class issues that reaches students at both the cognitive and affective levels can be more challenging to find. One author has used a variation of the "Budgeting a Poverty Level Income" exercise from Lieberman's (1998) *The Social Workout Book: Strength Building Exercises for the Pre-Professional.* As stated in the text, the goals of the workout are to explore assumptions and enable critical thinking about the meaning of poverty, the reality of the poverty threshold, minimum wage debates, and welfare reform in the United States.

Design

  Lieberman (1998) provides an introductory reading that sets the stage regarding the macro poverty policy issues as well as describing an imaginary family of four with two recently laid off parents and two children, ages two and six. The family has recently moved in search of new jobs and has been able to bring a few belongings with them. This is followed by a family annual line item budget listing the following thirteen categories: housing, utilities, maintenance, transportation, education, insurance, food, wardrobe, personal care/sundries, medical care, dependent care, discretionary expenses (entertainment, birthdays, vacation, holidays, postage), and miscellaneous. The class is divided into small groups and assigned two, three, or four of the budget subcategories, depending on the size of the class. Each group must research the items in their categories, and make decisions about things such as renting or owning a home, owning a car vs. using a bus pass, private vs. public schools, and so on. The ultimate goal is to access as many resources as possible as economically as possible in order to stay within the annual poverty budget figure for that year ($18,400 for a family of four in 2003). Students keep notes about how they arrived at their figures and bring it all to class on the assigned day.

Outcome

  In class, a sheet of newsprint is posted on the wall for each budget category with line items listed for each category. Each group presents their research to the class, fills in the budgeted numbers for each line item, and subtotals that budget category on the newsprint. On the final sheet of paper, the class totals all the subtotals to find out how close to the poverty budget figure they have come.   This entire process is accompanied by much discussion about how various monetary decisions could be made. Over the five years of using this class exercise, the closet any class came to the poverty line threshold was double the

amount. The class that came in the closest to the actual figure forgot several items such as disposable diapers for the two year old child.

Evaluation

  The exercise concludes with students writing a reflection paper after the classroom part of the exercise is conducted. Students respond to questions such as: 1) prior to completing this project, how reasonably did you believe that the government poverty-line calculation for a family of four represented the funds needed for a particular family to live on? 2) What are three budget items you consider necessary but had not really thought about prior to this project and where would you cut this budget? 3) How has completing this workout changed your thinking about how poverty is defined or how one defines what is essential for an adequate standard of living? And 4) If you could change policy, what would you change?

Students report that this exercise made a lasting impact on their understanding of poverty and how macro policy affects families in micro ways on a daily basis. The reflection papers repeatedly reveal changed self-awareness on both cognitive and affective levels from both students who have and have not been touched by poverty in their lives. Students begin to understand how they can consciously make choices as social workers that can influence policy change and its implementation.

ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

  Recent advances in technology have increased the opportunities for creative teaching strategies for graduate students. For institutions of higher education with access to Internet2, many opportunities exist for the social sciences. Internet2 is a research and development consortium led by over 200 US universities working in partnership with industry and government to develop and deploy advanced network applications and technologies. Internet 2 allows for face to face interactions with people who are located at another Internet2 site, university or organization. Internet2 can be used to bring groups of students from different universities together in real time to work together on projects. Another use has been to invite a leader in the profession to join a class and present a lecture utilizing Internet 2. Recently, at Bradley University, the Theatre Department received an award for a collaborative production that utilized Internet 2. Bradley UniversityTheatre, the University of Waterloo in Canada, and the University of Central Florida, were awarded the 2008 ORION Learning Award of Merit (The Ontario Internet2 Award) for their collaborative production of Alice (Experiments) in Wonderland, which was performed simultaneously on the three campuses. Through the use of broadband computers, 2-D and 3-D sets with multiple screens and lighting effects, the three institutions staged the play simultaneously in front of a live audience. Eleven actors appeared on stage in each venue. Romania is one of the countries currently developing a memorandum of understanding to partner with Internet2. Information about Internet2 can be accessed at www.intenet2.edu/info/.

  In addition to Internet2, virtual communities such as Second Life provide opportunities for teaching and learning. In a graduate course in counseling, the entire class participated in group projects on Second Life, choosing their individual avatars and working together in the virtual community to develop a grief counseling component for the public. Information about the Second Life virtual community is available at http://secondlife.com/whatis/ and   ttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOFU9oUF2HA.

CONCLUSIONS

Johnson and Johnson (1994) identify five elements that must be present for effective cooperative learning.

The elements include positive interdependence, individual accountability, group processing, interpersonal

and group skills, and face to face interaction. These elements contribute to successful adult learning as

described by Knowles (1984). The group investigation, prevention program and other cooperative learning

projects described exemplify this approach to learning. Graduate students report that some of the most

important learning occurs through the planned interactions, research and processing. Although significant investment in planning and preparation time is required for cooperative learning projects, the learning that results is well worth the effort.

REFERENCES

1. *Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N. & Tarule, J. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Voice, Self, and Mind. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986.*
2. *Bonwell, C. & Eison, J. Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. Paper presented at the 15th Annual Lilly Conference on College Teaching, Miami, OH, 1995.*
3. *Johnson, R. & Johnson, D. An Overview of Cooperative Learning. In R. Villa & A. Nevin (Eds.) Creativity and Collaborative Learning: A Practical Guide to Empowering Students and Teachers. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks Publishing, 1994.*
4. *Joyce, B. & Weil, M. Models of teaching (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986.*
5. *Knowles, M. S. The modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy. New York: Association Press, 1970.*
6. *Knowles, M. The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species (3rd ed.). Houston: Gulf, 1984.*
7. *McLeod, W. (Ed.). Collins dictionary and thesaurus. London: Collins. Millis, B., 1987.*
8. *Lieberman, A. The Social Workout Book: Strength-Building Exercises for the Pre-Professional. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1998.*
9. *Natasi, B. & Clements, D. Research on Cooperative Learning: Implications for Practice. School Psychology Review, 20, 110-113, 1991.*
10. *Rogers, E. Adults Learning. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1989.*