

[*Editor's Note:* This article appeared in the Education Connection column in *The Community Psychologist* (February 1996, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 10-14). Foster-Fishman's approach, exercises and tips are still timely for engaging students (even in large classes) in active discussion. Her analysis of the limitations of cooperative learning methods is perceptive. She also includes two excellent exercises on gender issues. *The Community Psychologist* is a benefit of membership in the Society for Community Research and Action (see elsewhere in this website for information on joining SCRA).]

Applying Collaborative Learning Techniques in Undergraduate Community Courses

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To teach is to engage students in learning...The aim of teaching is not only to transmit information, but also to transform students from passive recipients of other people's knowledge into active constructors of their own and others' knowledge. (Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991, p. 1).

Learners need to be empowered to think and learn for themselves. Thus, learning needs to be conceived of as something a learner does, not something that is done to a learner (Fosnot, 1989, p.4)

Collaboration has become a critical value guiding many of our endeavors as community psychologists. We strive to develop relationships with community members that support and nurture their expertise. As such, we hope that our endeavors not only result in better, more contextually-appropriate programs for change but also create empowering experiences for the community members. Ultimately we hope that this collaborative interaction will enable community members to independently tackle future social issues in their communities.

Another setting that could significantly benefit from this collaborative paradigm - but one where its application is less frequently discussed - is our classrooms. In this column I describe my attempt to integrate a collaborative model for education - also known as active or cooperative learning (Smith, 1993) - into an undergraduate community psychology course. Both professional and personal reasons sparked my interest in using this model in my classroom. First, my experience as a teaching assistant for a large, undergraduate class concerned me. Students seemed disengaged and learning appeared to be minimal: outcomes frequently linked to traditional classroom settings (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). On a more personal level, after witnessing the synergy that can emerge out of an effective professional-community partnership, I became intrigued with the notion of generalizing this collaborative framework to my classroom.

Actually, collaborative learning is a model many other disciplines, such as engineering (e.g., Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981), physical sciences (e.g., Kreider, 1993), and computer science (e.g., Keeler, 1995) have integrated into their undergraduate classrooms. Instructors applying this model use a variety of learning exercises throughout the semester to engage students in critical thinking, problem solving, and cooperative team projects. In their meta-analysis of over

600 experimental and 100 field studies, Johnson & Johnson (1989) found that this approach, as compared to the traditional didactic, competitive learning environment, has significant positive effects on: 1) the student's achievement and productivity; 2) the quality of the student's peer relationships; and 3) the student's psychological health.

Using Exercises in Class

Over the past five years, I have incorporated a collaborative learning model into a mid-size (100-130 students) undergraduate introductory course in community psychology. I have taught this course in two land grant universities: one in Midwestern college town, the other in an urban setting. While I use a variety of techniques to create a collaborative environment, perhaps the most successful is the actual structure of class time. I keep my lectures to a minimum and instead attempt to actively engage students in the learning process. In many class sessions, I try to lecture for less than half of the class (which is 90 minutes). The remainder is spent on in-class exercises that illustrate a class concept or help students apply the community psychology perspective to a real-world problem. These exercises typically take one of four forms.

1. *Consulting Groups* (approx. 20/30 minutes): At the end of a lecture, I form students into groups of 4 to 5 students and assign them a social problem or essay question to discuss/debate. Students (as individuals or in groups) can write their answers/solutions to receive class participation points.
2. *Partner Discussions*: After 15 minutes of lecture (the attention span of most adults) I have students turn to the person next to them to briefly 1) answer a question I posed, 2) identify an example that illustrates the concept discussed, or 3) solve a problem. These discussions last no longer than 5 minutes.
3. *Learning Groups* (approx. 20/30 minutes): I start the class with an exercise developed specifically to illustrate a class concept or social phenomenon.
4. *Thought Exercises* (approx. 5 minutes): At numerous points throughout the lecture I pose a question for students to think about and answer in their notes. I frequently collect their answers for class participation points.

Students eagerly participate in these exercises and frequently note that they have significantly improved their understanding of community psychology concepts. Overall, they rate the learning exercises most positively - perhaps because they are both entertaining and instructive. I describe below my two learning group exercises most favored by my students and, from my experience, most powerful in their ability to engage students in critical thinking.

Exercise 1: The Drawbridge

The purpose of this class exercise is to introduce students to Ryan's (1977) concept of "blaming the victim." This exercise is held during the first day of a two day module dedicated to this concept and its particular application to the treatment of women in our society. On the second day of this module, I show the film *Defending Our Lives*, a chilling documentary of

several women, all victims of domestic violence, who are incarcerated for killing their abusers. While this video is not essential to this exercise, it does provide an excellent context for students to apply the concepts addressed in this exercise. Below I describe the exercise, the questions and issues discussed in the large class discussion, and the relevant class lecture.

At the beginning of class, I read and distribute the following story (Katz, 1978):

THE DRAWBRIDGE

As he left for a visit to his outlying districts, the jealous baron warned his pretty wife: "Do not leave the castle while I am gone, or I will punish you severely when I return." But as the hours passed, the young baroness grew lonely, and despite her husband's warning she decided to visit her lover, who lived in the countryside nearby.

The castle was situated on an island in a wide, fast-flowing river. A drawbridge linked the island to the mainland at the narrowest point in the river. "Surely my husband will not return before dawn," she thought and ordered her servants to lower the drawbridge and leave it down until she returned.

After spending several pleasant hours with her lover, the baroness returned to the drawbridge, only to find it blocked by a gateman wildly waving a long, cruel knife. "Do not attempt to cross this bridge, baroness, or I will have to kill you", he cried, "The baron has ordered me to do so." Fearing for her life, the baroness returned to her lover and asked him for help. "Our relationship is only a romantic one," he said. "I will not help."

The baroness then sought out a boatman on the river, explained her plight to him, and asked him to take her across the river in his boat. "I will do it, but only if you pay my fee of five marks." "But I have no money with me!" the baroness protested. "That is too bad. No money, no ride," the boatman said flatly. Her fear growing, the baroness ran crying to the home of a friend and, after explaining her desperate situation, begged for enough money to pay the boatman his fee. "If only you had not disobeyed your husband, this would not have happened," the friend said. "I will give you no money."

With dawn approaching and her last resource exhausted, the baroness returned to the bridge in desperation, attempted to cross to the castle, and was slain by the gateman.

I then ask students to take the next 5 minutes to rank order the 6 characters in this story (baron, baroness, lover, gateman, boatman, friend) in terms of their responsibility for the baroness's death. Students then get into groups of 5-6 students, share their rank orders, create one list, and then write their final list on the chalkboard (approx. 20 minutes).

Large Class Discussion. The purpose of the group discussion is to examine the rationale we use for assigning blame in our society. While most groups rank the baroness as the most responsible, there are usually (hopefully!) a few that list her last. Having those groups that differed in their rankings describe their reasoning often provokes an active, class debate about responsibility. I simply act as a facilitator during this discussion, probing students for clarification, asking other students to comment who agree and disagree.

I then ask students the following question: "If the baroness was visiting her dying mother - who the baron forbade her to visit - who would be the most responsible for the baroness's death?" The class usually, in unison, answers "The baron!" I then immediately remark "So, you are suggesting that in some situations, it is alright for a man to kill his wife; in others it is not." This remark typically results in - first a large class sigh - then a class discussion about blame, how we make assumptions and use information to assign blame, and individual responsibility for behavior. We end the class discussion with an assessment of who the six characters represent in modern society. (approx. 20 minutes)

Class Lecture. At the end of the group discussion, I introduce students to Ryan's (1977) concept of "blaming the victim," illustrate how this process does not take an ecological approach to behavior (a concept covered in previous lectures), and offer numerous other examples of "blaming the victim" that exist in our society. I end the class by posing the following: "Take the next minute to think about whether you agree or disagree with Ryan. Why? Write your response on a piece of paper and hand it in before you leave class." These minute papers help me assess their understanding of this difficult concept.

Exercise 2: Gender Images

This exercise, adapted from Blake, Mouton, and Sloma (1965), is used to kick off our class discussion on diversity.

Women and men are asked to sit on opposite sides of the room and form groups of ten. Each group is given 3 sheets of butcher paper, a magic marker, and asked to write their answers to the following questions:

1. List the characteristics or adjectives that you feel define you as a (man or woman);
2. How do you think that opposite sex perceives you? What characteristics do they use to describe you?
3. List the characteristics or adjectives that best describe the opposite sex. (30 minutes)

These images are then presented to the class in the following order: women present their answers to question 1; men their answers to question 3; and women their answers to question 2. All answers are taped on the wall. The images of men are then presented in a similar fashion. Students are welcome to ask questions during these. (30 minutes)

Class Discussion. Students are asked to describe their reactions to this exercise and the images presented. The implications for the images presented (which are typically very stereotypical) are discussed and possible interventions that could be implemented to reduce the prevalence of gender stereotypes are proposed. (20 minutes)

Student Reactions

These two exercises are typically ranked as the most favorite in-class exercises by students. As one student remarked on a recent evaluation: "The Drawbridge exercise made us see something that we would never see otherwise." Similar remarks are made about the imaging exercise as well. Of course, there are always a minority of students who reject the notion of "blaming the victim" or the fact that stereotypes exist in our society - but I find that those students seem to reject many of the other concepts we discuss in class. Despite my best

attempts, I have yet to discover a class exercise that converts all to the community psychology perspective!

The Limitations of a Cooperative Learning Model

In my experience, most undergraduate students have limited experience working in groups. Consequently, they often find group work uncomfortable and lack experience in conflict resolution or group problem-solving. Only recently did I start to address this directly, by instructing students at the beginning of the semester in group processes and problem solving strategies. While I think this has reduced some anxiety and improved group functioning overall, I still have a few students who feel uncomfortable expressing their opinion in groups.

Perhaps the most significant barrier to the collaborative learning model that I have faced, however, is the fact that most students have been socialized by an educational system that only rewards independent work and only requires that they sit back and take notes. Some students have noted in their evaluations that "They pay a lot of money to hear me lecture," and would prefer it if I did only that. I now address this issue directly at the beginning of the semester by describing the collaborative learning model and its benefits (for their learning and preparation for the job market.) I explicitly describe the amount of class time that will be spent in lectures versus in-class exercises. While this realistic preview seems to increase their understanding and reduce ambiguity, it does not completely eliminate their resistance to change.

I have also found that different student populations react differently to this learning model. Older, returning students seem to most appreciate the responsibility associated with this model. Students who immediately connect to community psychology concepts also particularly enjoy taking on a more active role and thinking critically about the concepts. I consistently receive the most resistance from students who value a more passive role in the classroom.

Despite these barriers, I believe that collaborative learning fits well with many of the ideals guiding community psychology. Collaborative learning appeals to community psychology's desire to create more empowering settings. It parallels our commitment to developing relationships with others in ways that promotes and strengthens their independence and capacities. It mirrors the goals of many of our own interventions that aim to improve the academic performance, psychological health, and social support networks of others. Overall, it provides an excellent metaphor for illustrating "Community Psychology" to our students.

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