

Bringing lessons to life

A growing number of psychology professors who use ‘action teaching’ say their students are learning more and working toward a more compassionate world.

BY BETH AZAR

For one week each spring, a refugee camp takes shape on the University of California, Santa Cruz, campus. Psychology professor Tony Hoffman’s students erect a displaced persons shelter and a refugee tent as part of his children and war course. Meant to raise awareness of the more than 9 million children worldwide who are dislodged by war, passersby can enter the shelter, crawl into the tent and peruse the posters, photos, handouts, charts and flyers that Hoffman’s students create.

Visitors learn, for example, that refugee children are malnourished and are at higher risk for disease. These children are also more likely to be victims of sex- and gender-based violence and are more likely to be recruited into the armed forces.

This project is an example of what Wesleyan University psychology professor Scott Plous, PhD, calls “action teaching”: turning a textbook lesson into a live experience through field work, classroom activities and other assignments. The experience, he says, “leads not only to a better understanding of psychology but to a more just, compassionate and peaceful world.”

Plous coined the term in 2000 as the teaching equivalent of what psychologist Kurt Lewin, PhD, called action research in the 1940s. Lewin believed that it wasn’t enough to study issues academically. He believed research should lead to social action.

“Lots of teachers go into teaching because they want to help

society,” says Plous, who earned the American Psychological Foundation’s 2008 Charles L. Brewer Award for Distinguished Teaching of Psychology in part for developing the action teaching model. “Action teaching means you can have it both ways. You can teach the individual and contribute to society.”

Creating lasting memories

One of Plous’s favorite examples of integrating coursework and social action took place just after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif. Assistant professor Debra Mashek, PhD, and her introductory psychology students wanted to do something to help hurricane victims, but she didn’t feel comfortable using class time unless she could integrate learning. That’s when she hit upon the idea of combining her usual tutorial on persuasion with a lesson on raising money for hurricane aid.

Using the introductory psychology textbook, the class identified four basic persuasion strategies that students could use to ask for hurricane-relief donations: “door in the face” where students ask for a sum that people are likely to turn down — say \$20 — and then say, “OK, then will you give me \$1?”; “foot in the door” where students ask for a tiny sum — 10 cents — and then say, “Actually, could you make it a dollar?; reciprocity where students give a small gift — say a piece of candy — and then ask for a donation; and direct order where students simply ask for a donation.

The students then fanned out across campus to test which



Wesleyan University psychology professor Dr. Scott Plous coined the term “action teaching.”

strategies worked best and, after an hour, returned to class not only with data to analyze and discuss, but with \$600 to donate to the American Red Cross for disaster relief.

“I was doing it initially because I was compelled by the disaster,” says Mashek. “But it ended up being a great platform for teaching.”

As Mashek found, action teaching inspires critical thinking better than standard “lecture and test” techniques, says UC’s Hoffman, who taught the more traditional way for most of his 20-year career.

“Instructors are always looking for ways to show how their discipline is relevant,” he says. “Action teaching does that by making the course material come alive in a way that makes the students care about what they’re learning.”

Though formal studies comparing action teaching with other methods need to be done, says Plous, many action teaching instructors conduct informal evaluations of their projects. Students say that they prefer action teaching projects to standard research papers and lectures, even if they take more time and effort. They also say they feel more connected to the material. And, says Hoffman, more engaged students are better students.

Short and sweet

Not all assignments need to be elaborate to get the point across. Purdue University psychologist Kip Williams, PhD, for example, punctuates his unit on ostracism with a 20-minute exercise called the “O Train.” He arranges chairs in rows of three to mimic a train. Students randomly assigned to sit in middle seats become targets of ostracism by the two students next to them based on scenarios written in instructions handed to them as they “board” the train.

For example, the students sitting in side seats might read that they are angry with the middle-seat student because of a social slight and once the “train” starts they should let the student know how they feel. Then, at the first whistle, they should begin to ignore and talk over that student. Students in middle seats are told their neighbors might be angry, but that they should try to talk to them anyway. After five minutes, Williams ends the role play and uses the rest of class to discuss what happened based on what students have learned about ostracism in class.

“It allows students to learn firsthand how ostracism works,” says Williams. “It’s a memorable lesson that’s not at the expense of learning psychology but in the service of learning psychology.”

Action teaching in action

Other examples of action teaching include:

- “The Election Challenge,” developed by Wesleyan University’s Scott Plous, PhD, to teach the psychology of persuasion and broaden civic participation. He challenged students to persuade at least three people to vote for the U.S. presidential candidate of their choice. They then had to write a report describing the psychological strategies they used, the reactions people had and the number of votes they secured for their candidate.
- “Using Lessons from the Holocaust to Reduce Bullying,” created by Ruth Hannon, PhD, of Bridgewater State College. After students in a course on “Perspectives of the Holocaust” learn about research on such psychological factors as conformity, obedience and diffusion of responsibility, local middle school teachers visit the class and describe the challenges their children face from bullying. Students develop and present to the middle school children lessons from the Holocaust that teach about prejudice and bullying.
- “Research for Community Action,” used by Emerson College’s Lori Rosenthal, PhD, teaches students research methods while engaging them in community service. Students pick an organization to work with and create and conduct a research project that not only teaches them research methods, but also helps the organization. For example, students worked with a local library to develop new programs that would help attract under-represented populations to the library. Students designed a study to find out why certain people don’t use the library and what programs would entice them in.

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Because some students may find action teaching assignments such as Williams’s “O Train” or Mashek’s persuasion project uncomfortable, teachers should always offer

alternatives to those who want to opt out, says Plous. Hoffman, for example, allows students to do a research report in lieu of working on his more time-intensive refugee camp project.

Action teaching can expose instructors to accusations of proselytizing, says Hoffman, so they need to be prepared to defend their projects with campus staff, deans, facility personnel, and the students themselves.

“They will question your motives but be supportive once they understand that this is a great form of student learning,” he says.

“The educational philosopher Paolo Friere said that all education is about promoting humanity,” says Hoffman. “Action and education don’t seem too far apart when one has that perspective.” ■

Beth Azar is a writer in Portland, Ore.

*As part of his effort to encourage action teaching, Wesleyan University psychologist Scott Plous, PhD, created an annual Action Teaching Award. Winners receive \$1,000 and a free one-year membership in the Social Psychology Network. **The deadline for the 2009 award is Jan. 20.** For more information as well as award-winning action teaching resources, visit www.socialpsychology.org/awards/teaching.htm.*



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