RONA'S STORY AND THE THEORY OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

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Abstract

This article presents a method for teaching the theory of symbolic interactionism in a high-school course - Introduction to Sociology. The role-playing game used as a method for teaching the theory is grounded on a philosophy of education whose principles call for meaningful and relevant learning, based on experiential activity and investigation of those experiences, as the preferred form of learning. The game was designed in Israel and is used there by high-school teachers of sociology; it is relevant for high-school students in other countries.

Why is it difficult to teach theories to high-school students?

Sociologists are helped by basic perspectives in order to cope with different dimensions of social explanations. Those basic perspectives are the fundamental approaches or sociological paradigms. The following approaches are widely accepted as being fundamental - the functionalist approach; the conflict approach; and the symbolic interactionism approach. Generally, an introductory course to sociology includes the study of these fundamental approaches.

Critics of "the great theories" (the fundamental approaches) in sociology argue that they are abstract to such an extent that they lose touch with reality, that is, with the phenomena to which they must be applied (Mills, 1970). Some of those critics maintain that the theories are not capable of providing explanations, that they are detached from reality, that they tend to create screening and categorizing systems that do not broaden our understanding, and preclude engaging in concrete observations. The inherent hazards of such "over-abstraction" can also be found in the field of teaching sociology in high-schools. In the field of education, though, with certain theories we can create "perspectives" that are helpful when examining phenomena. Theories generally address categorization and categorizing concepts, so they offer arrays of factors that can assist in explaining phenomena (Adar, 1973).

Education researchers and educators report particular difficulties in teaching theories. Because it is abstract, a theory often is hard to understand. Students may perceive it as not relevant, not concrete, and as being remote from their familiar reality. Teachers have to seek ways of overcoming the difficulties and transforming the study of theories into something relevant and meaningful for the students and their everyday lives.

How teachers can surmount the difficulty

Teachers apply a range of means for coping with these difficulties, and active learning is one of them. Holtzman (2005) provides an example of teaching abstract theories of social stratification (the functionalist theory, and the conflict theory) using active learning with the goal of demonstrating the theories' relevance to the students' lives. Another form of coping is by using collaborative learning (Rinehart, 1999). Airsman (2002) demonstrates the use of organizational case-studies in teaching the four great theories: functionalism; conflict; exchange; and symbolic interactionism. These diverse teaching-programs are aimed at generating motivation to learn the theories and creating an environment for meaningful, relevant learning that provides students with activities and experiences. In this article I present a teaching method based on active learning using role-playing.

The symbolic interactionism approach

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the face-to-face interaction - in the micro dimension - and views society as a cluster of everyday interactions. Part of this theory is based on the work of Max Weber, who underscores the need to understand social situations from the point of view of the people within them. Society takes shape as a shared reality that is structured in a series of interactions, through a process of explaining or interpreting them to those around us. This process of explanation, interpreting, and defining differs from person to person, and so symbolic interactionism considers society to be a system of subjective meanings and changing reactions. It perceives the social reality as the outcome of interpretations made by the individuals who form a society. Human behavior is the outcome of definitions of situations made by people who participate in them. People interpret the social situations that they encounter and act in accordance with their own interpretation. Defining situations is the way in which individuals interpret social reality subjectively, by means of the interpretations with which they endow symbols. When people interpret a social situation in an identical way, it is a shared definition of the

situation, and it is only when a "shared definition of the situation" exits that effective interaction can take place, in terms of the people who share it. An absence of a shared definition is liable to result in the cessation of interactions, or even conflict and frustration. Goffman (1959) engages with social interactions and tries to learn about the basic foundations of the social context: he maintains that people enlist symbols to plan the impression they will leave on others, so that it is their definition of the situation that prevails in a given reality. Goffman formulates the dramaturgical perspective, in which he likens people to actors, and the world to a theater stage. Human interactions change constantly and undergo a process of structuring and restructuring that sociologists call the "social structuring of reality."

Role-playing as a teaching method

Role-playing belongs to the group of didactic games known as simulation games, and it takes place within the imagination. Although a story is involved, the participants do not receive a "ready-made" story in which they play a passive role as auditors, readers, or spectators: in role-playing we become the story's protagonists and we determine how it unfolds. Role-playing involves dramatic activity in the group format, where actors assume the roles of people in a problematic social situations. Presenting such situations help to clarify positions and interpersonal problems, as well as to identify alternative methods to solve the problems. Generally, the "performance" is spontaneously presented, and the actors do not compare or coordinate their roles upfront, and do not rehearse a script or behavior pattern in advance.

The facilitator is present at the start of the story, and s/he is the person who has written the story and its background. In addition, it is the facilitator's role to describe to the actors the particular situations of the characters. The other actors create their own characters. Each character is a whole imaginary personality, with his or her own history, traits, skills, and goals. The actors control their characters and lead them throughout the story as it develops, "becoming" their assigned character.

For teachers to successfully implement their strategy, they must perform various preparatory activities before the role-playing activity begins in the classroom. Among other issues, they must think about how to prepare the participants properly, and the ideal size of the group.

Rona's story

An issue from the students' school-life is chosen as the subject for the role-playing, such as an incident deriving from the teacher-student relationship, of a kind quite common in high schools. Case-study analysis - apart from its sociological value - also has inherent educational value.

Background story to the game
"Rona's story"

Rona is a student in the 11th grade at Carmel Heights School. She's an average student – with average achievements, normative behavior, and is reasonably diligent in terms of studies.

It's Monday, and as usual there is a math class, taught by Amos. At the start of class, he goes over his explanations from the previous lesson on the subject, then tells the students that they will have ten minutes practice using worksheets that he has prepared. Amos hands out the worksheets and asks the students to work alone and fill out the sheets. The idea is that all of them can ensure that they fully understand the material and have a good command of it. He then walks along the rows, checking their work, guiding those students who need help, encouraging ones who find it hard, and answering questions.

When Amos reaches Rona's desk, he notices she hasn't started answering the questions. "What's up?" the teacher asks her. Rona doesn't answer, and Amos repeats his question "What's the matter, why aren't you working on the questions? I see you're doodling on your worksheet. Are you an expert in modern art?" Rona waves her hands at him, and bursts out angrily "Just leave me alone, Amos, you're just too much for me today." The class falls totally silent.... and Rona looks at Amos, to see how he's reacting. "Leave the class at once, and go to the staff room," Amos says in a loud, angry voice.

Rona walks out of the classroom and goes towards the staff room. What will happen now? she wonders, how will he respond? Rona is very anxious about the upcoming conversation. The bell rings at the end of class, and Amos goes to the staff room. "We'll talk in ten minutes time," he tells Rona, then enters the staff room. Sitting in his chair, Amos ponders how he should conduct the conversation with Rona.

The game process

The class is divided into two groups, according to the rows of desks. The teacher tells the students that they will be taking part in a role-playing game, explains what role-playing is, and emphasizes the importance of adhering to the rules of the game and the activity, according to the instructions they'll be given. Half of the students are assigned the roles of the teacher and the other half are assigned the student's role. The students get ready for the role-playing game by answering the questions on the sheet. All students receive the background story: "Rona's Story," as well as personal sheets on which they write their answers to the preparatory questions ahead of the role-playing game. The actors in the role of the teacher receive a specific preparatory sheet, and those playing students receive a different one.

Preparation sheet for role-playing Amos

- What do you think is upsetting Rona? Could it be a health problem, or a family problem?
- Plan your conversation with Rona - what direction will you take in your conversation with her? Note at least three points.
- What will your objective be when you talk to Rona?

Preparation sheet for role-playing Rona

- Why did you behave like you did? Was it because of an argument with a boyfriend, or problems at home?
- In your conversation with Amos, what would encourage you to cooperate with him? List three things that Amos can do that would make you cooperate with him – for instance, if he asks about your studies.
- In your conversation with Amos, what would prevent you from cooperating with him? List three things that the teacher can do that would prevent you from cooperating – for instance, if he uses threats.

After the students complete the preparatory stage, the teacher invites two volunteer students to present to the class a dramatized version of the conversation between "Amos" and "Rona." The volunteer actors give the teacher the sheets they filled out ahead of the

role-playing, and the teacher asks them to act according to what they had written in their worksheets. All the other students are asked to write down what they think the actors' worksheets contain, but not to intervene in the conversation being played out in front of them. For example, they must try and identify what answer "Amos" gave to the question "What will your objective be when you talk to Rona?" or they must guess the answer that "Rona" gave to the question "In your conversation with Amos, what would encourage you to cooperate with him?"

At a certain stage the teacher stops the play and asks "Rona" if it's worth continuing - in other words, is "Amos" likely to make progress as the conversation continue, or perhaps there's no chance of reaching understanding and progress with him. If "Rona" answers in the negative, "Amos" can be given another chance or the conversation can be assigned to another student who then takes on the role of "Amos." The conversation process can be repeated twice or three times, or alternatively another pair of students can be asked to perform the conversation between "Amos" and "Rona."

At the end of the performances in front of the class, the teacher convenes the entire class for a discussion. It is an important section in structuring understanding of the event, with the help of the symbolic interactionism theory. First of all, the teacher questions the actors about the conversation that they conducted. He asks the student who played "Rona" what she thinks was written on the sheet filled out by the student who played "Amos". The students are requested to explain why they think so, with the help of facts elicited from the performance process. The teacher's questions are aimed at discovering whether each of the role-playing students interpreted their partner's behavior in the way that complies with the partner's intentions, or not, and what the results were.

Following is an example of how the process develops. The teacher asks the student who has assumed the role of "Rona" what she thinks is contained in the sheet filled out by the student who assumed the role of "Amos" in response to the question "What direction will you take in your conversation with Rona?" Let's assume that "Rona" replied "He wrote in his worksheet that he should investigate to find out why I behaved like I did, ask me questions to learn about my problems." The teacher asks her "What was it in "Amos"'s behavior" that made you feel like this? What did he do?" While this is going on, the other actor is not permitted to confirm or deny the reply; however, the teacher can look at the sheets that the students filled out and thus channel his questions to specific cases where "misunderstandings" between the actors are predictable. It is very likely that each actor

will interpret the word "question" differently: for example, what appears to one to be an investigation will seem to the other as a display of interest. The teacher can also bring into the conversation other students who haven't participated in the game and ask them what they think is written on "Rona"'s or "Amos"'s sheet, and to provide reasons for their reply.

The teacher now moves to an analysis of the role-play, using essential concepts in symbolic interactionism theory: significance, symbol, interpretation of symbols, interactions, negotiation, social structuring of reality, self-presentation, behind the scenes, role-playing, symbolic interaction, situation definition, and shared situation definition. An analysis performed with the help of these concepts facilitates both understanding of the theory and an explanation of phenomena in reality (Naveh, Elad & Ron, 2003).

<u>Summary</u>

"Rona's story" is an attempt to cope with teaching theory in a creative, experiential way, by drawing on contents from the learners' world (the school environment and the teacher-student relationship) in a manner that's relevant, concrete, and meaningful for the students.

We chose a role-playing game as a teaching method because it represents the central idea of the symbolic interactionism approach - "all the world's a stage and all the men and women are … players."

Besides role-playing's learning value, we also discern in it important educational values. Through acting, students foster the perspective of other viewpoints, tolerance to others, an understanding of the causes of conflicts and learn, among others, about ways of resolving them.

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