Activating Theory in the Introductory Classroom: Erving Goffman Visits Wisteria Lane

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Abstract

Instructors of large, general education lecture courses face a number of student engagement and learning challenges. In this article, we develop and assess an interactive lecture that introduces a theoretical perspective and three related concepts to two introductory sociology general education classrooms ($n = 433$). This interactive lecture consists of narrated illustrative clips from the popular culture television series *Desperate Housewives,* a series of mini-lectures to accompany PowerPoint slides, gapped lecture note handouts, and student interaction. We assess student comprehension at three different points in time: in a pre-survey, in the class period following the interactive lecture, and on the midterm exam two weeks later. Students reacted positively to the exercise and showed an improvement on their scores at both assessment periods.

Keywords: Large interactive lecture, theory, popular culture.

Instructors of large general education college courses face a number of basic challenges. Their classes are often filled with first year students who may find this typically impersonal and standardized instructional format disorienting and overwhelming (Baker, 1976; Bassis & Allen, 1976). These courses often suffer lower attendance, interaction, interest, and engagement (Borden & Burton, 1999). Instructors note that it is difficult to connect with students (Armstrong, 2008; Geske, 1992) and elicit their feedback (Bridges & Desmond, 2000; Wilson & Tauxe, 1986). In these settings, lecture is still the most commonly used format (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Lectures help instructors organize materials, provide context for reading materials, and demonstrate enthusiasm about course materials (Cooper & Robinson, 2000); however, they are also limited in their ability to maintain students' attention (Barak, Lipson, & Lerman, 2006) and to appeal to multiple learning styles (Cooper & Robinson, 2000). Social science instructors also encounter an additional challenge: effectively teaching students to understand, apply, and retain several competing theoretical frameworks such as functionalism, conflict, and symbolic interactionism so they may understand disciplinary knowledge in an organized manner. In general, theory is a difficult subject to teach to students (Holtzman, 2005); and in our experience with previous classes, students became bored and inattentive when we presented these concepts in a typical lecture format. They also showed low comprehension and retention of

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these theories as evidenced by their inability to answer basic recall and application questions on examinations.

We wanted to address these challenges by providing a memorable and engaging educational classroom experience that would allow students to understand, apply, and retain the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman which corresponds to the symbolic interactionist theory. To those ends, we developed, piloted, and evaluated an interactive lecture featuring popular culture clips from *Desperate Housewives* in two sections of introductory sociology. In this article, we detail these steps which could easily be adapted for other social science courses in disciplines such as communication studies, women's studies, psychology, and criminal justice.

Engagement and Learning Strategies in the Classroom and the Interactive Lecture

Research suggests that students who are actively engaged in a variety of ways during their college experience increase and even accelerate their learning (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009). Many scholars have called for active engagement techniques in the classroom to facilitate student engagement and learning (Carpenter, 2006; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Clark, 2008; Rubin & Hebert, 1998). The extent to which they advocate that students take control of their learning could be placed on a continuum from completely self-guided discovery where students actively construct knowledge on their own through "hands on and free activities" to a more structured process where they are encouraged to select, organize, and integrate knowledge (Mayer, 2004). Techniques for large lecture classes typically fall on the latter end of this continuum due to space and time constraints.

A number of techniques and technologies have been suggested to facilitate engagement and learning in varying class sizes: clickers with constructivist pedagogy (Judson & Sawada, 2002), flip video camcorders (Gao & Hargis, 2010), online blogging (Pimpare & Fast, 2008), music (Albers & Bach, 2003), crossword puzzles (Davis, Shepherd, & Zwiefelhofer, 2009), stories (Levy & Merenstein, 2005), and media clips from soap operas (Hood-Williams, 1986), reality shows (Berry, 2008; Misra, 2000), and cartoons (Scanlan & Feinberg, 2000). In addition, the ubiquitous feature of most large lecture halls, PowerPoint, while critiqued by some for passivity, has been lauded by others as a promising technology of learning (Clark, 2008; D'Arcy, Eastburn, & Bruce, 2009; Pippert & Moore, 1999). For instance, Clark (2008), citing Gilroy (1998), notes that students are socialized to accept the presence of screens and that technology such as PowerPoint can serve to "revitalize" lectures, by facilitating active learning and adding variety to the classroom. In short, previous research has shown that students respond positively when technology is used to enhance traditional lecture materials (Day & Kumar, 2010; Pimpare & Fast, 2008). Furthermore, Marsh and Sink (2010) indicate that students who receive gapped lecture notes report that they more efficiently encode lecture information. Gapped lecture notes are lecture-related handouts that provide a portion of lecture information such as an outline of the topic, headings, key concepts, names and dates as well as space for students to take notes. Together, these studies provide evidence that additional visual

or aural materials combined with a contemporary twist can facilitate student interest by allowing them to see course materials in a different light. Many also highlight the importance of using classroom assessment to determine if and how students learn from interactive formats.

Informed by these approaches, we combined techniques to construct what we call an "interactive lecture" specifically designed to engage students in a large class in a structured manner while appealing to multiple learning styles (Felder, 1996). Our format consisted of a series of three mini-lectures intended to introduce three concepts, each of which were followed with visual materials via PowerPoint featuring applied examples from *Desperate Housewives* to vividly illustrate our concepts with humor. We also provided gapped lecture notes and asked students to engage in two think-pair-share activities (Lyman, 1981) in which students individually reflect on a prompted topic and then discuss their thoughts with a classmate seated next to them. Volunteers are then invited to share their responses with the larger class. We assessed our project by asking students to answer survey questions immediately before and after our presentation, and a follow-up clicker question during the next class period. They were also tested on concept retention and application on their midterm two weeks later. We discuss the format of our interactive lecture featuring three segments (*Performances At the Grocery Store, Region Management at Home, Hiding Stigma*), the results of our student responses, the challenges and benefits of this presentation, and suggestions for classroom incorporation.

Symbolic interaction and *Desperate Housewives*: Perfect Together

Symbolic interaction is a primary theoretical framework that focuses on micro-level interaction. In contrast to functionalist and conflict theories which emphasize large scale societal influences on human behavior, this theory allows students to appreciate their own active participation in creating the world around them through social interaction. Dramaturgy, a related approach developed by Goffman, enlists theatrical metaphors to illustrate the ways in which people act in their daily lives (Edgley, 2003). In essence, dramaturgy reveals that the world is a theater where individual actors play multiple roles that create and express their identity. Goffman believed that while enacting these roles, people simultaneously construct a fragile sense of self (Brown, 2005). As a result, people must engage in a number of tactics (e.g., impression control) to preserve and perform the desired self. A dramaturgical lens sheds light on this performance and can be applied to any human communication, even those based upon fictitious events. Scholars have used it to illuminate a number of disparate social interactions such as communication of power in social movements (Benford & Hunt, 1992), the stigma associated with Mardi Gras (Redmon, 2003), and political candidates' presentation of self (Brown, 2005).

The primetime soap opera, *Desperate Housewives*, consistently portrays mundane events ripe for dramaturgical analysis: grocery shopping, home life, and neighbor interactions. Pedagogically, we enlisted it for three reasons. First, the larger than life characters and their humorously dramatic situations clearly illustrated the three dramaturgical concepts that we wished students to understand (i.e., performances, region management, and stigma). Second, as a show that averages over 12 million viewers (Nielsen Television, 2011),

its title and characters are part of a shared popular cultural landscape. Third, viewers do not have to be familiar with the plotlines to understand the concepts as *Desperate Housewives* narrator Mary Alice provides a running background commentary that contextualizes scenes and character motivations. Indeed, her narratives display some of the same bald observations that Goffman made in many of his works, almost as if he was visiting Wisteria Lane.

Methods

Bringing *Desperate Housewives to the Masses*

We presented our interactive lecture in two large sections of an introductory sociology class at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Students were primarily white, first year undergraduates. They met for 50 minutes twice a week in a lecture hall which held approximately two hundred and fifty students. The IRB approved this study (IRB# 2008028739EP).

Before class, we selected and asked students to read two excerpts from Goffman's *Stigma* (1963) and *Presentation of Self* (1959) that would allow them to encounter the theoretical terminology. We pre-selected and embedded into PowerPoint three short *Desperate Housewives* clips from Season One that corresponded with each of our key concepts. These were integral to students understanding dramaturgy in particular and symbolic interaction in general. Table 1 describes the clips we used in our interactive lecture.

Table 1. Key Concepts as Illustrated by *Desperate Housewives*

Dramaturgical Concept	*Desperate Housewives* Episode	Television Clip Description
Performances	"Pilot"	Lynnette lied to a former colleague about enjoying being a full-time mom.
Region management	"Pilot"	Bree did not show her husband how devastated she was by the news that he wanted a divorce.
Stigma	"Ah, but underneath"	Gabrielle engaged in stigmatizing behavior when she had an affiar with her teenaged gardener.

At the beginning of class, we distributed a brief pre-survey and provided students a gapped handout with summary slides of the dramaturgy concepts. In what follows, we very briefly sketch how we verbally introduced the concepts, provided contextual information before each clip, and briefly reinforced the information through reiteration and discussion.

Performances at the Grocery Store

According to Goffman, it is fundamental to understand that we are all performers. Thus, performance was the first concept that we addressed in our opening mini-lecture, on Po-

werPoint, and in their handouts. As performers, each of us acts to present or maintain an impression of who we are. Because we often feel pressured to perform according to social norms and values, we can become "cynical performers"—people who perform in line with societal standards that they do not necessarily hold (Goffman, 1959). To illustrate these ideas, we showed Lynette Scavo's performance at the grocery store. Lynette, a formerly successful advertising executive who has recently opted to be a stay-at-home mom, has found that domestic life is much more stressful than the workplace. In our video excerpt, a harried Lynette chases her four unruly children around the grocery store. Suddenly, she bumps into a former co-worker (Cherry, 2004c):

> *Former female co-worker*: "So, how's domestic life? Don't you just *love* being a mom?"
> *Narrator*: "And there it was. The question that Lynette always dreaded."
> *Lynette*: "Well, to be honest…"
> *Narrator*: "For those who asked it, only one answer was acceptable. So Lynette responded as she always did. She lied."
> *Lynette*: "It's the best job I've ever had."

After the clip, we emphasized that Lynette's grocery store conversation and the facade of perfect motherhood that she projected illustrated Goffman's idea of a cynical performance.

Region Management at Home

We next wanted to show students how performances can vary by locations, identified by Goffman (1959) as "regions." Depending on the desired image, people separate their activities into the appropriate front, back, and outside regions. The term "region management" refers to this process. Again, we briefly defined region management using PowerPoint. Then, we segued to a clip of an exceptionally adept region manager, Bree Van De Camp, who routinely engages in region management by projecting a consistent image of the perfect wife and mother. In this scene, when her husband Rex announces that he wants a divorce, Bree retreats alone to the bathroom to cry. After a few minutes, she returns perfectly composed. The narrator then says, "Bree sobbed quietly in the restroom for five minutes. But her husband never knew because when Bree finally emerged, she was perfect" (Cherry, 2004c).

After the clip, we asked students to participate in a think-pair-share activity (Lyman, 1981) by first having them think of an example of region management in their own lives. They then discussed their answers with the person next to them. Finally, we asked for volunteers to share their answers with the class. Students seemed to enjoy the activity as they provided appropriate and humorous examples that provoked audience laughter.

Hiding Stigma

Lastly, we wanted students to understand that although people generally attempt to present a consistent self, they sometimes are unable to maintain a desired performance. One

threat to maintaining a successful performance is stigma, which refers to any personal or social attribute that is deeply discrediting (Goffman, 1963). We explained that Goffman was very interested in these presentation failures and the anxiety and anguish that they may produce. We cited the opening example from *Stigma* (1963) from the students' assigned reading which details a number of ways stigma alters interaction. It opens with a "desperate" letter from an advice column seeker who cannot have normal social relations because she lacks a nose. The woman signs her letter with only three words: "Sincerely Yours, Desperate." As such, this letter demonstrates how physical attributes can negatively impact social interaction.

Thirty-something former model Gabrielle Solis does not have such identifying physical blemishes. Instead, her adulterous affair with her underage gardener could cause her to be stigmatized in public and in private. In our clip, Gabrielle and a scantily clad teenage gardener are in her bedroom when her husband Carlos unexpectedly returns home. Gabrielle quickly throws the teenager and his clothing out the window. According to the narrator, "What her husband couldn't see couldn't hurt her" (Cherry, 2004a). Thus, for the moment Gabrielle has successfully hidden her stigmatizing behavior. After this clip, we again asked students to share an example of stigma (either physical or behavioral) with the person sitting next to them. Again, the lecture hall was buzzing with student conversation. Several students then volunteered good examples of stigma.

At the end of class, students completed a post-survey of their perceptions of the interactive lecture. During the class period immediately after the presentation, students responded to a follow-up clicker question on these materials. We present the results of our pilot interactive lecture assessment in the following section.

Assessment

Our assessment combined pre- and post-survey results from both classrooms. Both contained measures of how thoroughly students read the assigned materials, whether they understood and retained the key concepts, and if they liked the theoretical excerpts and presentation. Two of the concept questions were also included on the midterm exam. We compared the midterm responses to the pre-survey responses to measure concept retention.

Because their survey responses were anonymous, we were unable to restrict our clicker responses and midterm examination scores to include only those who attended the interactive lecture. Furthermore, class attendance was not mandatory, and the number of respondents fluctuated between the assessment periods. As such, 433 students participated in the interactive lecture and pre- and post-surveys, 377 responded to a follow up clicker question in the next class, and 471 took the midterm exam. All of the students consented to have their responses used for research ($n = 433$).

Student Preparation and Interest

In a large lecture setting, instructors often wonder whether students read the assigned materials. We were pleasantly surprised by the pre-survey results that showed a majority of the students (53.4%) reported reading the entire articles before class. Only about 7% ($n = 30$), however, felt confident in their ability to explain any two main ideas from the article. Their confidence levels sharply increased after the interactive lecture: 62.5% ($n = 271$) indicated on the post-survey that they were very confident or confident in their ability to explain two main concepts, and 34.2% ($n = 148$) noted that they felt fairly confident. We were encouraged by these results, especially because previous sections of students struggled with theoretical concepts.

In our experience, students struggle with theories because they seem inaccessible and removed from their lives. At the beginning of the lecture, we asked for a show of hands of those who liked learning theories. No one raised their hand in the first class, and only a handful from the second responded affirmatively. We directly asked why they were not interested in theory and several volunteered "it's boring" and "it's too hard" while others nodded their heads in agreement. We said we hoped to change their opinions. We were not surprised that the pre-survey revealed only 20.6% ($n = 88$) reported interest in the assigned materials while most (43.1%; $n = 184$) reported feeling "indifferent" to them.

Table 2. Comparison of pre-survey and midterm exam scores.

Goffman Concept	Percentage of Class Correct on Pre-Survey	Percentage of Class Correct on Midterm	Change Score
Performances	63.0% ($n = 271$)	--	--
Region Management	16.80% ($n = 72$)	47.60% ($n = 224$)	30.80%
Stigma	54.20% ($n = 232$)	75.50% ($n = 355$)	21.30%

Note: Students were only asked a question about performances on the pre-survey.

Student Comprehension and Retention

The scores on three pre-survey concept items indicated that the students understood or retained little from their own reading (please see Table 2). Only 16.8% ($n = 72$) could correctly identify an example of region management. More students selected the correct answers for question about the best example of stigma and performances (54.2% ($n = 232$) and 63% ($n = 271$), respectively). In the class period following the interactive lecture, students responded to one clicker question that asked them to apply the three concepts previously covered to a different scenario. Approximately 80% ($n = 301$) selected the correct response, although probably not all of the clicker respondents were present for the interactive lecture.

As an indication of their longer-term retention, we included two of the pre-survey concept items on the mid-term exam two weeks later. Even though different numbers of students participated in the phases of this project, the percentage of students who selected correct answers greatly increased on the midterm. For example, 75.5% (*n* = 355) selected the correct response for the stigma question on the mid-term exam compared to 54.2% (*n* = 232) on the pre-survey. Similarly, the percentage with correct answers on region management (47.6%, *n* = 224) increased. It is possible that a higher percentage correctly answered the "stigma" question because this term is commonly used outside of sociology.

Student Engagement

Overall, the students appeared to be very attentive during class and reacted positively to the interactive lecture. In the post-survey, 84% (*n* = 365) indicated that the presentation was "interesting" and 83% (*n* = 358) recommended that we use the presentation in future classes. Indeed, several approached us after each class, informing us that they enjoyed and had learned from the presentation. One emailed us with suggestions for additional scenes. Nearly two months later on end of semester course evaluations, a handful of students from both classes wrote positive comments specifically about the interactive lecture. Because students seemed engaged during this lecture, had positive comments about the activity, and were able to retain this material for the midterm exam, we plan to use this material and our interactive method in future classes.

Discussion

As Holtzman (2005) observes, students are often resistant to theory. Instructors of larger general education courses in particular must be innovative when presenting difficult but foundational concepts, and students often respond well to an entertainment factor in the classroom (Delucchi & Pelowski, 2000). For this interactive lecture, we deliberately selected materials and combined technologies and strategies to introduce Goffman's concepts not only to engage and involve our students in understanding a key theoretical framework, but also to provide memorable examples that might help them to retain this information. In this paper, we outlined our approach that combines a series of mini-lectures around three concepts enhanced by popular culture examples, handouts, and peer discussion. We also evaluated the interactive lecture at different points in the semester through paper and clicker formats. Although these additional steps were time consuming, evaluation of the methods helped us to assess whether or not we were moving towards our educational goals. Our pilot results suggest that this interactive lecture was well received and that our method may encourage comprehension and retention.

We would be remiss not to briefly note technological, methodological, and content concerns associated with this activity. Technologically, it is challenging and time consuming to locate and edit television examples. Websites such as abc.com, hulu.com, youtube.com, or netflix.com can be enlisted to locate appropriate video materials. Methodologically, it is also important to have the same respondents participate in each assessment phase. In the future, we would like to match respondents at the different assessment periods to determine more definitively whether bringing Goffman to Wisteria Lane has a

positive impact on student retention of these materials. Additionally, we may include a comparison group and concept items on the final exam to assess longer term retention.

Finally, while *Desperate Housewives* has inspired academic analysis (McCabe & Akass, 2006), its content has also been the subject of critique because of its stereotypical gender images (Pozner & Seigel, 2005). Popular cultural images can be read in multiple ways— as sources of oppression or of subversion and resistance. As gender scholars, we are aware of our responsibility to not only discourage stereotyping but also to enable students to critically view cultural images. We addressed these pitfalls in three ways in our classroom. First, we acknowledged at the outset of the lecture that *Desperate Housewives* presents stereotyped gender images. Second, we encouraged students several times throughout the semester to critically examine and discuss media images and stereotypes. At those times, we used the characters as an example of stereotypical images. Third, we offered an extra credit assignment examining gendered media images using the DVD *Dreamworlds III* (Jhally, 2007). In essence, bringing *Desperate Housewives* to the classroom actually provided further opportunities to analyze gendered images.

There are also important strengths associated with introducing theory and other academic topics via popular culture exemplars such as *Desperate Housewives* in other classes. For example, criminal justice students can learn more about electronic monitoring devices as well as the personal and familial challenges associated with house arrest by viewing a *Desperate Housewives* scene featuring Carlos and Gabrielle on this topic (Cherry, 2004b). Like Misra (2000) and Scanlan and Feinberg (2000), we believe that using television shows is an effective approach to pique student interest. Students often feel alienated from instructors in large classrooms because the instructor seems to be a remote authority figure (Geske, 1992). Our use of a popular show may have supplied an important link to our students as they were able to see that we watched and enjoyed common television programs. Additionally, the *Desperate Housewives* scenes provided an interesting and relevant popular culture application of theoretical concepts and may have assisted with long-term concept retention and piqued their interests in theoretical topics. The format used in this article also allows instructors to assess student performance and comprehension at different time periods using multiple methods. Finally, although *Desperate Housewives* may present stereotypical situations and images, bringing it into the classroom allowed us to encourage students to think critically about these and similar popular culture images and messages at several later points in the semester.

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