Title: Examining Student Achievement of Broad Learning Goals in a Psychology and Social Issues Course

Author: Ludwin Molina, Psychology

Summary: A psychology professor introduces pre- and post- course surveys and weekly reading learning objectives in order to better understand students' abilities to synthesize and apply course material.

Background

PSYCH 492: Psychology and Social Issues is an upper-division elective course, typically taken by students who have already taken some psychology classes (such as Introduction to Psychology and Social Psychology). Students are usually juniors and seniors, although sometimes there are a small number of sophomores.

The course is a small, seminar-style class. There are generally 15-20 students, and most in-class time is spent discussing the week's readings. I usually structure the course content around current social issues with an emphasis on what social psychological science research can contribute to such topics.

In past iterations, I taught 492 in the discussion style described above and gauged student learning through a pair of writing assignments and three to four exams. I found there were interesting interclass dynamics, particularly as a professor of color teaching a class made up of predominantly Caucasian students. I found this dynamic became more interesting when talking about issues of ethnic minority disadvantage and even more so when talking about issues of ethnic majority privilege. However, I was not sure if students were able to fully synthesize the material. Therefore, in the fall 2014 iteration, I wanted to see if making several small changes to the course would lead to an uptick in the students' ability to recognize and describe not only group disadvantage but also group advantage and provide examples.
Implementation

In order to increase my students' ability not only to grasp course information, but also to synthesize it and provide their own examples, I made two changes to PSYCH 492.

First, I added a survey built around the course's key ideas and themes. While there were a handful of open-ended questions, questions 1-3b were the five most substantive questions. I had students fill out the survey at the beginning of the semester and then again at the end of the semester. Students completed their surveys anonymously. My GTA then coded and helped quantify the data. My goal is to use the data to discover which topics students continue to struggle with so that, in the future, I can make changes to the course to increase student understanding.

Second, I altered my approach to the 492 reading assignments. In the past, I would post material on Blackboard for students to read before class. I would then provide handouts that included an article summary and the key take-aways/issues. Depending on enrollment, one or two students would sign up to lead one class discussion during the semester. While students would do the reading, they were sometimes at a loss when it came to discussing what they had read. In the fall 2014 iteration, I decided to restructure this order. Rather than having the students read and then receive guidance, they received learning objectives for all the main readings up front. When students went on Blackboard to download their readings, they would find a list of objectives under each piece. In this way, students could go into the reading with a sense of the main ideas.

As in previous iterations, I maintained two different writing assignments in which the students had to apply their social psychological knowledge to a film and then to a museum. I graded each with assignment-specific rubrics. These papers serve dual purposes. I hope that the papers help the students understand that the ideas discussed in class are readily applicable to the world around them. In addition, I want them to think like social psychologists and realize they can view everything around them through this lens.

I also maintained three exams over the course of the semester, with an optional final exam.
Student work

To focus my analysis of the pre- and post-course survey data, I focused on the five most substantive questions (those with the most value to the current project). These questions were:

1. What is social psychology?
2. What is group privilege?
3. What is group disadvantage?
4. How would you define psychological science?
5. How can psychological science inform social issues?

My GTA and I coded the student responses to these questions as either correct or incorrect. If, for example, the student's response was mostly or generally correct, we would code the response as "correct." I then produced charts comparing the numbers of correct and incorrect responses in both the pre- and post-surveys. Due to a difference in the number of respondents between each test, I charted the data so that the y-axis indicated percentage of student response. (The course had an enrollment of 20 students. All of the students completed the pre-survey, while only 15 completed the post-survey).

As the data show, over the semester there was decided movement in the right direction. These differences help indicate where students are gaining understanding, as the course set out to do, and in what areas more work is needed. The number of incorrect responses to questions 1 and 2 shrank, while, correspondingly, the number of correct responses grew. I am particularly (and pleasantly) surprised by the amount of change in identifying group privilege. Anecdotally, I had believed it would be easier for students to recognize group disadvantage rather than advantage, but the post-course survey data seem to indicate the reverse is true.

However, while there was some movement in the numbers of correct/incorrect responses for questions 3-5, the amount of change was a good deal smaller, which surprised me. For example, in the first two weeks or so, both the readings and the in-class discussion specifically addressed applying social psychology. During the remainder of the semester, as the students read empirical studies, I assumed that they would automatically see those studies as further examples of the applications of social psychology. Although the number of incorrect answers decreased, the lack of growth in correct answers does not support my assumption. This indicates that I need to reassess how the course addresses issues covered in the last three questions.
Reflections

Overall, I feel that the fall 2014 PSYCH 492 course went well, and I am happy to see positive movement in all five surveyed areas. I plan to continue using pre- and post-surveys to help me track areas of concern. Specifically, I plan to revisit how I address the topics from questions 3-5 in order to encourage greater growth.

For example, in order to address how psychological science can inform social issues, I feel I may need to make the topic more explicit throughout the term, rather than just at the beginning of term. One way I could do this would be by tweaking the questions the students receive before doing each class period's readings. In so doing, the application of knowledge may become clearer; ideally, the students would then see the readings as examples of how psychological science knowledge is applied to different social issues.

Of the three pre- and post-course survey questions that demonstrated little growth, I am most curious about the lack of movement regarding group disadvantage. This is especially because group privilege and disadvantage are core themes in the course. While it may be a question of better highlighting the issue in class, I will need to rethink how we approach the topic.

Regarding student participation in the pre-post survey, during the fall 2014 iteration, students completed consent forms allowing me to use their work in this portfolio on the same day that they took the post-course survey. This most likely accounts for a portion of the difference in participation: three students did not want to sign consents and therefore did not complete the post-survey. The remaining two students were absent the day of the post-survey. In the future, I will make sure to get student consents signed at the beginning of the term. I am not sure it was clear that the survey responses would be used mainly in the aggregate, rather than identifying answers from specific students. Therefore, I will try more clearly to illustrate how I plan to use their responses.

Finally, I intend to continue providing learning objectives and pre-reading guidance for each course reading assignment. I also plan to include a written assignment at the beginning of the semester in which I will have students create a summary handout for a particular reading in order to practice engaging with readings for the duration of the semester. In particular, this will be an exercise in determining the thesis/argument of an article, what data/evidence is brought to bear on the argument, critiques/criticisms regarding the article, and the relevance of this particular example of psychological science work to social issues.

Overall, I hope that additional alterations to future PSYCH 492 iterations will increase student understanding of key ideas, as well as student abilities to engage with, synthesize, and apply those ideas.