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CHAPTER TWELVE

Piaget and Social Problems

H. Jay Corzine

Although the attention given to problems of teaching sociology greatly increased during the 1970's, the implications of Piaget's ideas for college level instruction remained unexplored by most sociologists. In 1978, only one of twenty-five articles published in *Teaching Sociology*, the discipline's only journal devoted to teaching-related issues, contained references to Piaget's work. Thus, the social problems course offered through the ADAPT program during the 1980 spring semester represents one of the few attempts to apply Piaget to teaching sociology in a university classroom.

Recent developments in social problems theory (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977) are complementary to the constructivist epistemology underlying Piagetian theory and research. From the end of World War II through the 1960's, most sociologists viewed social problems as objective conditions which negatively affected large numbers of people. The difficulty with this perspective is that many "problems" which upset large sections of the general public, such as long hair on males in the 1960's, are not demonstrably harmful. And others, such as witches in Puritan Massachusetts, simply do not exist as empirical phenomena. Recognition of the inherent problems with the objectivist approach to social problems has created renewed interest in the value-conflict perspective originally developed in the 1930's. Instead of studying conditions alleged to constitute social problems, proponents of this school concentrate on the definitional processes through which groups define selected characteristics of their social environment as problems requiring corrective measures. In other words, the focus is on how people "construct" social problems. The ADAPT course was taught from the value-conflict perspective

Structure of the Course

A major difference between the typical social problems course and that offered through ADAPT is that racism, poverty, environmental pollution, and similar issues were largely ignored. The content of the course was the ways in which people define, debate, and attempt to regulate social problems. The primary goal was to develop the students' abilities to analyze, or "think about" social problems, especially the various claims made by individuals and groups involved in the discourse surrounding public issues. This goal is based on my belief of the benefit an average student can obtain from a social problems course. Usually, students enroll in them to fill an elective requirement in the social sciences. Few are sociology majors or enter occupations directly related to social problems. But in their roles as citizens and voters, they will be asked to make decisions affecting themselves and others on a wide range of public issues. A good example is provided by the spending lid proposals that have recently appeared on ballots in several states. Unfortunately, many people make decisions and vote on complicated questions on the basis of simplistic rhetoric and stereotypical beliefs instead of an informed and critical analysis of available information. In Piaget's terms, they reason at the concrete level. Optimistically, a well-designed social problems course can create the cognitive conflict necessary to advance their skills toward the formal level.

As most Piagetian-based teaching and research has occurred in the natural sciences, there has been little consideration as to what characterizes concrete and formal reasoning in sociology and the other social sciences. I generally agree with Duly (1978: Chapter 7) who described the concrete thinker as one who “sees only limited, immediate relationships (and) single causation,” with “little awareness of inter-relationships.” On the other hand, the formal thinker “unites generalizations to formulate observations and insights about man in society, unites periods of time (and) sees the interplay of ideas and actions.” I would add that the concrete thinker relies more on stereotypes (“women are emotional”) than empirical observations and experiments as a basis for decision-making and is more likely to accept or reject information according to its source rather than after critical reflection.

While lectures and readings were used in the class, emphasis was on creating dissonance, or disequilibrium, by acting on the student's environment, both in and out of the classroom. As an example, students were required to attend and report on two public meetings of the Lincoln (Nebraska) City Council, the Nebraska State Legislature, or the University of Nebraska Board of Regents. (Only one of nineteen students had previously attended a session of any publicly elected body.) Not surprisingly, the most popular meeting of the semester was the legislature's public hearing on a proposed drug paraphenalia law. The common student response to the meeting was disillusionment, typified by the comment: “I never realized (state) senators pass laws on things they know nothing about.” This critical attitude created a unique situation for utilizing a learning cycle, described below, designed to explore factors influencing legislator's policy decisions on drug use.

Drug Policy Learning Cycle

Exploration Stage. In the initial stage, the students were divided into groups of four or five and told they were the Judiciary Committee of the Legislature, meeting to review the state's drug laws. They were then asked to determine the legal availability of ten drugs² according to the following system of controls: 1 = over-the-counter, 2 = prescription, illegal possession a misdemeanor, 3 = prescription, illegal possession a felony, 4 = not available, illegal possession a misdemeanor, 5 = not available, illegal possession a felony. In the group discussions, students are exposed to different perspectives on drugs and are often forced to make compromises to reach a consensus. After finishing the first task, the students are given a second list which summarizes the physiological and psychological effects of eight drugs but does not name them.³ They then repeat the process already completed for the first list.

Invention Stage. In the second stage of the learning cycle, the mean group ratings for the nine drugs appearing on both lists are placed on the board. The results for the ADAPT course are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Controls Placed on Drugs ¹

Drug	List 1 (Name Known)	List 2 (Effects Known)
Alcohol	1.00	2.75
Nicotine	1.00	2.50
Caffeine	1.00	2.50
Marijuana	2.00	1.50
Cocaine	4.25	4.75
LSD	4.50	2.75
Barbiturates	2.00	2.75
Amphetamines	2.00	4.75
Narcotics	3.75	2.75

¹ The numbers reported are means for four groups, with 1 = over the counter, 2 = prescription, illegal possession a misdemeanor, 3 = prescription, illegal possession a felony, 4 = not available, illegal possession a misdemeanor, 5 = not available, illegal possession a felony.

As can be seen from Table 1, the degree of control students placed on drugs from the first list, with the exception of marijuana, closely approximates their actual legal status in most states. Alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine were made available over-the-counter, and tighter restrictions were put on other drugs. When the students made decisions knowing the effects but not the names of the drugs, a different pattern emerged. Controls on legal drugs were strengthened, but those on other drugs were generally relaxed.

The differences between ratings of drugs when their names but not their effects were given and vice versa served as the basis for discussing the criteria the students used to make decisions during the exploration stage. Among those students recognized as affecting their choices are public beliefs about drugs, the social groups associated with the use of particular drugs, personal experiences, and the legal status of drugs. The point of the invention stage is that the same factors influence legislators. The importance of the learning cycle for increasing understanding of the legislative process is that students are actively involved in a simulation of policy decisions made by elected representatives.

Application Stage. It is possible to plan different activities for the application stage to fit the goals for the course. Students could, for example, explore the effects of public beliefs on the passage of civil rights or welfare legislation. For the social problems course, students were asked to go back to their small groups and formulate a set of working principles that would allow legislators to devise a rational and consistent policy for the legal control of drugs. All groups emphasized the need to make better use of scientific findings about the effects on users. Most professionals in the drug abuse field would agree with their assessment.

Evaluation

In addition to the legislative process, public perceptions, the media's role in disseminating information to the public, the influence of voluntary organizations (for example, the National Organization of Women), pitfalls in interpreting statistics, the role of vested interests, and other topics related to social problems were covered in the course. As should be expected, the chosen format did not allow for as broad a coverage of relevant issues as does the traditional lecture and reading approach.

The logical way to end this paper is by addressing the question: "How successful was the course?" The answer is equally straightforward: "I'm not sure." At the end of the course, students were given a final test consisting of essay questions designed to measure their ability to analyze social problems. They were also required to produce a short paper comparing two opposing arguments on an issue such as abortion. By looking at the finals and papers in relation to their earlier work, I believe only two students made substantial progress during the semester. Of the remaining students, several were reasoning at the formal level in the social sciences when they started the course. Others made no progress or, in one or two cases, seemed to regress. Unexpected and somewhat disturbing was the fact that a majority of the students, eleven of nineteen, did not finish the requirements for the course by the end of the semester.

As a final note, my experiences with the course have convinced me that there is at least one problem in adapting Piaget's ideas for teaching in the social sciences that does not pose as serious an obstacle in the natural sciences. Students employ their knowledge of mathematical formulas and physical laws to confront problems in their everyday lives, and there is often some resistance to changing methods that have proved successful in the past. But beliefs about the nature of the social world; what is moral behavior, what traits are characteristic of minority groups, what is the function of government, what role should religion play in daily life, etc., are interwoven with self-image, views of significant others, and patterns of daily behavior. In brief, the subject matter of the social sciences is more personal than that of the natural sciences. Challenging beliefs about how society works generates more resistance to change, regardless of conflicting experiences, because of the threat to attitudes and values frequently held since preadolescence. The function of selective perception in maintaining beliefs in the presence of challenging information is well-established, and there is no reason to believe the process does not operate in the classroom, regardless of pedagogical techniques. The problem this heightened resistance poses for utilizing Piaget in the social sciences is formidable and may require the development and use of specific countering strategies. However, the potential benefit for the teaching profession and the wider society is likely to be well worth the effort.

Notes

¹The text used was William M. Hastings, *How to Think About Social Problems: A Primer for Citizens*. Like the course, the book is structured around obstacles to clear thinking about social problems.

2. The drugs were alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, marijuana, cocaine, LSD, and other hallucinogens, barbiturates, amphetamines, narcotics and PCP.
3. The drugs were aspirin, LSD, cocaine and amphetamines, alcohol and barbiturates, caffeine, nicotine, heroin and marijuana.

References

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