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Chapter 10: ADAPT Anthropology

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CHAPTER TEN

ADAPT Anthropology

Martin Q. Peterson

INTRODUCTION

ADAPT Anthropology focuses on the discovery of various social "rules" that govern social relationships. These rules are investigated through a combination of observation and participation, a traditional method in anthropology. Students use the learning cycle paradigm, first exploring relationships between people and events, then inventing new combinations of these events as a means of informing the relationships, and finally applying what they have learned to a new set of events.

In this essay, I shall consider three elements of my approach to Piagetian learning in anthropology. The first element is the successful use of the learning cycle paradigm. The second element is the difference between a quantitative based learning cycle, as in physics or mathematics, and a qualitative based learning cycle, as in anthropology and other non-physical or natural sciences. The third element is the difference in task group focus of students.

LEARNING CYCLE PARADIGM IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Exploration Phase

EXAMPLE OF CLASS PROJECT

I asked the class to figure out how college students greet each other in informal circumstances. Initially, I had asked how students greeted members of the opposite sex. This assignment created some confusion and apprehension, for, after all:

"You just say, 'Hi.'"

I told the students I was looking for a complete description of the way in which they greeted their friends, to describe distance, eye contact, body movement, and gestures.

After trying out some greetings in class with each other, they went out to the student union to collect data. The next class period one student told me:

"I was about 10 feet away from a guy, I made eye contact with him, smiled and he smiled back."

This seemed to break into the following steps:

1. At about 10 feet, I make eye contact with the subject and smile.
2. The subject returns the smile.

This is an incomplete description and I asked the student to clarify it by being more detailed and tell me next time what the subject did when the student made eye contact. Next class, the student said:

"I made eye contact, the guy made eye contact for a very short time, looked away, and then looked back at me making eye contact again. I smiled and then he smiled."

The steps in this interaction looked like this:

1. I made eye contact.
2. The subject made eye contact with me for a short period of time.
3. The subject looked away.
4. The subject looked back at me and made eye contact.
5. I smiled.
6. The subject smiled.

This is an important move. The student is now making observations that are sufficiently detailed to ask two important questions. The first is:

"What behavior goes just before that observation and what behavior comes just after that observation?"

The second is:

"What behavior occurs when that observation you just described does not happen?"

For example, when I asked:

"What occurs when you make eye contact, the subject makes eye contact, looks away and does not make eye contact again?"

This exploration phase must last long enough for the student to perceive the subtle elements of behavior. While some students seem to believe instruments cannot lie, very

few put similar trust in their own observations. It seems to take large amounts of time to bring to the student's awareness what happened in the social interaction.

This investment of time may seem excessive to both staff and students, especially when compared with the relative ease of establishing and measuring significant variables in physical science courses. Consequently, a fair amount of frustration accompanies this process, interfering with the learning, calling into question the procedure and casting doubt on the results.

INVENTION PHASE

The sequence of observations, questions and experience led the students to the following formulation of student greeting:

1. I look towards people walking towards me, that is, I turn my face towards people.
2. I find a person who I will try to greet.
3. At about 10 feet, I make eye contact with the person that I intend to greet.
4. I make eye contact for a short time period.
5. The subject turns his face towards me.
6. The subject makes eye contact with me for a short period.
7. If the subject does not break eye contact with me, I feel him stare at me and I look away and do not greet him.
8. The subject and I make eye contact again for a longer period of time.
9. If the subject does not make eye contact with me again, I do not do not greet him.
10. I smile.
11. The subject smiles.
12. If the subject smiles, at about 3 feet, I say, "Hi." If the subject does not smile, I do not say "Hi."
13. Just as I say, "Hi," I break eye contact and continue walking.
14. The subject breaks eye contact at the same time and also continues walking.

What the student is discovering either by himself or with another person is what people do, not what they say they do. I think this is important. Rather than generate a host of rules and look for their existence, the student looks at the spontaneous behavior of people, describes it in a set of expectations we call "rules," interacts with those people as a "test" and, as a result of this approach, the

student engages in self-regulation.

This kind of learning demonstrates understanding of the operation of the student's social system, that is, the anthropology of his own social system.

Application Phase

Now the student has some skills, experience and reasonable expectations. This follow up assignment is to exchange a comfortable greeting with an adult downtown. Eye contact and distance are still important, but the variables vary not only with each stranger, but with each student, that is, with each social context.

Conclusions About Learning Cycle Paradigm

This particular exercise demonstrates some advantages of the paradigm in a social science. Among these are the active involvement of each individual in his or her own investigation, with responsibility for his or her own behavior. The student learns that absolute differences between various experiences usually does not obscure general patterns of behavior.

QUANTATIVE AND QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

I am pleased with the usefulness of the learning cycle paradigm to anthropology. My reservations are not about the paradigm, but rather about the difficulty of using qualitative rather than quantitative measurements in such a paradigm. This problem is heightened when dealing with people who would prefer not to think in either quantitative or qualitative ways at any time. Instead they think in emotional or metaphorical ways, and I find it difficult to devise tasks that deal with their needs and the needs of the rest of the class at the same time. I will discuss a framework of digital and analogical thinking for considering this below.

When I use the learning cycle paradigm, I cannot lose focus of the actual problem, that is, changing the behavior of college students who do, and do not, adapt to the learning cycle. Elsewhere in this group of papers, many of us discuss the problems we have had in dealing with our ADAPT program, problems that plague both staff and students.

One of the major problems I have faced is in the distinction between tasks that require measurements, as in physics and, often, economics, or tasks that have a defined answer, as in mathematics, as compared with tasks that require judgments, as in anthropology, history and English.

All tasks require identification, definition and manipulation of variables. Not only are these tasks difficult for professional social scientists, but they present several critical problems for freshman college students.

The first problem is the contrast in observational methodology in the physics lab and in the anthropology lab. In physics, the student is introduced to a measurement apparatus that, when correctly used, identifies and defines the variables for the exercise. A casual tour through the physics lab will show that the process is quite difficult for the student to master, the variables are not always clear:

"What do I measure?",

and once found, they are difficult to quantify accurately:

"The last time I measured this, it was 10cm shorter.",

and the manipulation is generally obscure:

"I think I understand how you got your answer, but I don't know how I get an answer."

In anthropology, all of these problems are increased, seemingly by an order of magnitude. During the non-verbal behavior exercise, I have students who do not see the same behavior, even though each person was looking at the same event at the same time:

"He smiled."

"No he didn't...he flashed his eyebrows and looked away."

While there are means of recording such behavior, I do not like to introduce photography and video tapes at this level course. Instead, I have to teach the student to be careful and precise in observation and then check out what they have observed by controlled participation. This requires much more experience than measurements with an instrument and continual independent judgment which makes the task often extremely slow and taxing.

If we chase these variables around for any length of time, the task gradually changes from one of considering the relationship between variables to one defining the variable. While I believe dynamic relationships are more fruitful than the static taxonomic approach, the students are very happy to get into long arguments about the reality of the variables. At first, I was sure that this was to avoid

work, but I now think that such arguments are in response to the pressures from the quantitative ADAPT classes. I think the pressures to quantify and validate are part of the scientific method and they naturally emerge in ADAPT classes.

But some students fight any quantitative or qualitative handling of variables. In my search for an understanding of why this might be, I was impressed by the usefulness of the ideas of digital and analogue thinking, as discussed by Jay Haley, Problem Solving Therapy, Jossey-Bass, 1978, to make more clear the difference between quantitative-qualitative approaches and emotional approaches.

As I understand these ideas, humans have two distinct ways of thinking, the one being digital, or logical and precise, and the other being analogic, or metaphorical language. Now, accepting for the moment this notion, without an attempt to rigidly define these categories, the implication is that we cannot use the terms, or methods, of one to deal with the other. I think that my students are often in a metaphorical, or analogical, frame of thinking when looking at social relationships and thus find great difficulty in shifting to a digital, analytical mode. Student complaints seem to confirm this:

"It's not fair to look at humans that way.",

or:

"When you reduce behavior to variables, you remove what makes us human.",

and:

"I won't count, it's just not the way I think."

These statements are mild compared to the outrage of one student:

"I first must question your motive for assigning that rules for door-opening behavior, based on observations of that situation. I would think that you would expect that, once these rules are established, they should be followed, even though this has only been implied by you in class. After all, in any situation where rules have been set up to govern and control one's behavior, these rules are expected to be enforced (or perhaps a better word would be 'followed'). Look at the Ten Commandments in the Bible: Are these not rules by which man is expected to live? ('He who keeps the commandment keeps his life; he who despised the word

will die.' PROVERBS 19:16)

"I would then conclude that making a list of rules of door-opening behavior would directly (but perhaps not even consciously) affect one's own behavior. I would have to take issue with... (another student's)... comment that 'The objective is not to change our door-opening behavior but rather to simply make us aware of what we are doing, how we are interacting with others.' I would definitely say that you are in fact trying to change our behavior in interactions with other human beings, or are at least trying to establish an 'ideal set' by which one or all should follow if one's behavior is to be accepted." (From a journal of a 19 year old freshman student.)

Betty Carpenter remarked that thinkers of digital hue will feel uncomfortable and unsatisfied with "analogical" answers or descriptions and the analogical-minded will be threatened by the digital-minded. Therefore, groups are not liable to reach useful consensus very quickly at all. And students of one type will feel threatened by the idea that they are being graded against one another. I assume that this is what happened to get the above responses.

GROUP DIFFERENCES

Groups of students seem to follow their own rules, behaving in ways that frustrate the most organized and well prepared curriculum. The whole subject of small group behavior is rich and well researched and my own favorite work on the subject is W.R. Bion's collection of seminal papers Experiences in Groups, Tavistock Institute Press, 1953. Bion distinguishes between groups organized around tasks, "work groups," and groups who meet to satisfy emotional needs of the participants, "basic assumption groups." The important point is that the needs of the various members of the group, students and staff alike, do not naturally focus on the task of the learning cycle, but tend towards other kinds of organization that increase their dependency, their needs to feel part of a group that is special enough to either be attacked or to attack, or engage in pair formation in class.

Such other kinds of organization pull away from the learning task and the tenacity of individuals who have to have emotional needs met in trying to obtain or maintain non-task groups should not be underestimated. One student

interrupted my class when I gave an assignment:

"I won't do that!," jumping to his feet, looking around the room for support. "That's too hard. I need someone to help me do that." The assignment was to find the rules of smiling at strangers.

Now, on the face of it, the outburst was absurd, but it threatened to grab the focus of the class, turning the discussion away from the task at hand (how you go about collecting data) to the emotional danger of interacting with strangers (let's discuss how scary it is to me to risk a smile, try something new, and take responsibility for my own behavior.). Of the various ways of handling this sort of situation, the most dangerous is to meet the emotional needs of the student at the cost of losing the task focus of the group.

Betty Carpenter points out that cooperation in a task is not usually part of the practiced package of college students and neither is verbally expressing hypotheses and explicating their implications for self-regulation. Neither, do I think, is it part of the package of college instructors. Without skills and training, the instructor may not be prepared to deal with the dynamics of the class. The pressure, then, is to regain control by retreating from the learning cycle mode, not interacting with the class as a functioning group, giving lectures and reading instead and demanding memorization as proof of learning.

SUMMARY

The learning cycle approach to teaching of the patterns of non-verbal social interaction in anthropology is robust and successful. The problems that accompany it stem from the qualitative nature of the data, the distinction between digital and analogic ways of thinking among the students, and the difficult nature of working in a task group.