

# Engaging Students in Applied Social Psychology

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with materials, demonstrations, and other activities designed to engage students in an applied social psychology course. Before reviewing these materials, it is important to define what we mean by applied social psychology, particularly in contrast to social psychology, and student engagement. Social psychology is the study of how people think about, evaluate, influence, and respond to others (cf. Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2010; Gilovich, Keltner, & Nisbett, 2010; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006). Applied social psychology is the application of social psychological theories, methods, and research findings to a social problem (cf. Schneider, Gruman, & Coutts, 2005; Schultz & Oskamp, 2000). Given the goals of this chapter, we focused on the materials, demonstrations, and activities that students can readily apply to social problems. We excluded from our review materials, demonstrations, and activities that illustrate social psychological theories, principles, or research findings.

For our purposes, student engagement refers to the learning opportunities provided in an applied social psychology course that lead to a variety of desired outcomes including but not limited to knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, persistence, and mastery. Our definition is derived from Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) who wrote:

Student engagement represents two critical features. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities . . . the second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (p. 44)

Although our definition of student engagement is very broad, encompassing such activities as undergraduate research, practicum, internship, and field experience, we focus on activities that engender student interest in an applied social psychology

course through either in-class demonstrations or class project activities.

Over the past decade, we have conducted exhaustive searches for materials, demonstrations, and activities that could be used in an applied social psychology course; unfortunately, we found relatively few. Because of the paucity of class demonstrations and activities currently available for adoption, we developed several of our own; two of which we describe here. In one of our courses, we had students create and maintain a personal blog; in another course, students participated in a service-learning project where they could apply their knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to a real-world problem in their community. In the following sections, we present two activities we developed and then share the results of our most recent search of the literature, textbook publisher websites, and online teaching resources websites done for this review.

## Personal Blogs

As an example of how blogging might be used, consider that most applied social psychology courses have a unit on social psychology and health that includes depression as a topic. The World Health Organization ([http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/management/depression/definition/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/management/depression/definition/en/)) projects that by the year 2020 depression will become the second leading contributor to the global burden of disease. Martin Seligman, one of the founders of positive psychology, the study of human strengths, described several techniques which have been demonstrated via placebo-controlled, experimental research to increase the positive emotions and behaviors that are antithetical to depression. These behaviors then promote happiness and vitality (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). We incorporated three of these techniques into one of our courses to provide an example of the application of social psychological theory to a social problem. An added benefit is that these techniques illustrate methods that students can readily apply to their own circumstances.

After students received training on creating and maintaining a personal blog using the Penn State

Blog platform, we gave three assignments, due during the first, second, and third segments of the course. (For a more detailed explanation of these techniques, see Seligman et al., 2005.) By distributing the assignments throughout the semester, we ensured that students had ample time to complete each. The first assignment is referred to as Three Good Things; at the end of every day for three weeks, right before sleep, students recalled three good things that happened that day. They considered even the smallest positive event that went well. Each day, students recorded their list on their blog. In the second assignment, Signature Strengths, students took the Signature Strengths Test (available at <http://www.authentichappiness.org>) and posted their results on their blog. We asked students to use one of their top strengths in a new and different way every day for a week. During the week, students posted their activities daily on their blog. For example, they could think of something they disliked doing at their workplace and then use one of their top strengths to make this activity more engaging and meaningful. In the third assignment, Gratitude, we instructed students to write a 300 word testimonial – a letter of gratitude to someone who has been a positive influence in their life, but whom they had not properly thanked. Students posted this letter on their blog.

An important feature of Penn State blogs is that students have the option of making their blogs public or private so that only the course instructor has access. This is important as much of the information in the blogs is of a personal nature. Of course, instructors could assign these techniques in the more traditional written format. However, an advantage of using blogs as the platform for student assignments is that students were required to add entries daily. In this manner, we were able to monitor these updates every day, which made blogging an attractive option. Seligman and his colleagues (2005) found that the three techniques reviewed increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms. Our experience is that most of our students did not continue to maintain their blogs beyond the end of the semester; however, in a follow-up one year after the course was completed, almost all reported that they have continued using the techniques.

### **Service-learning Projects**

In another course, we used service-learning to engage students in a community problem. Although universities are often involved in their communities, many volunteer opportunities lack the structure for students to reflect on the activity so that they gain a more complete understanding of course content

(Howard, 2003). Service-learning, on the other hand, directs students to reflect on the nature of the outside classroom activity and integrate it with elements of traditional course curriculum. What follows is a description of a variety of class projects we designed to immerse students in applied social psychology.

**The projects.** Students enrolled in one of our applied social psychology courses have worked with six communities that are adjacent to the campus as well as for the campus chancellor's office. External projects included: collecting and analyzing data for two cities' comprehensive plans that addressed transportation, utilities, land use, recreation and housing needs (for a detailed review of one of these projects, see Harnish & Bridges, 2004); assessing stakeholder needs for a community redevelopment project; evaluating the feasibility of building a minor league baseball park in a nearby city; performing regional economic development planning which brought together all of the campus' surrounding community partners; and measuring member and non-member perceptions of a senior center. The internal chancellor's office project assessed interest among students for new four-year majors at our campus.

**Pedagogy.** In our senior-level applied social psychology course, we employed the experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984) as a framework for the course. First, we exposed students to abstract conceptualization (i.e., learning the course curriculum), followed by reflective observation (i.e., formal writing assignments), active experimentation (i.e., how the course information can be used to solve a social problem), and finally, the concrete experience (i.e., the service-learning project). Students achieved abstract conceptualization by critically reading the assigned texts that provided training for the specific technique used during that semester. Reflective observation centered on student-led class discussions during which an assigned student discussion leader asked fellow students to explain and illustrate concepts from the readings (for details on the student-led seminar method, see Casteel & Bridges, 2007; Casteel, Bridges, & Harnish, 2009). We found this to be an effective engagement technique in a variety of upper-division psychology courses. Active experimentation involved creating a research proposal, research materials, and a written report for the community partner. Upon agreement between the class and the community, students began the project (i.e., the concrete experience in Kolb's model).

**Procedure.** Because of the complexity of the projects, normally the entire class worked on one project during the semester. We used all 15 weeks of class time to complete the project. In Table 1 below,

we present a typical schedule which describes the class topics and corresponding class activities. The classes met twice a week for 75 minutes during a 15 week semester.

**Table 1. Schedule for Service-Learning Project**

Week	Activity
1	Definitions, theory and methods of applied social psychology are reviewed
2	Community partner presents overview of the service-learning project
3	Readings and discussions on methodologies that could be applied to the social problem
4	Students write a research proposal that details how the social problem will be addressed
5	Proposal is submitted to Penn State's Office for Research Protections (IRB) for review
6	Develop the sampling frame and sample for the project
7	Create the dependent measures
8	Community partner presented with the research proposal and supporting materials
9	Comments from the community partner are received and changes, if any, are made
9	Approval for the use of human participants is obtained
10	Preparation for the project (e.g., copying, assembly, etc.) and data collection begins
11	Data collection ends
12	Data coding, and data entry begins and ends
13	Data analysis begins and ends
14	Students write a report to be delivered to community partner
15	("Buffer" week for any slippage in schedule)
16	Presentation is scheduled with the community partner during the final examination period for the course

*Note.* Because the projects we have undertaken fall within the "expedited" category for IRB review at our university, IRB approval of the project is granted within two to three weeks. Other institutions may have different turn-around times.

**Course evaluation.** Near the end of each semester, students evaluated the course. Since we began using this approach in 2004, students have rated the course very positively in terms of our key measures. Our scores were above University-wide mean ratings for "quality of course" and for "quality of instructor." In addition, students commented that the projects were helpful in connecting social

psychological theories, principles, methods, and findings to real-world problems.

## Annotated Bibliography

We performed an exhaustive search to include others' work in this review. We conducted a literature search using PsycINFO and Penn State's electronic catalog (The CAT) of material (over 5.3 million entries) held by its libraries for journal articles or texts on teaching applied social psychology. In addition to journal articles and texts, we explored online teaching resources. Specifically, we examined textbook publisher websites for instructor resource manuals, and several online teaching resource websites [i.e., Society for the Teaching of Psychology (<http://teachpsych.org/index.php>), CROW – Course Resources on the Web (<http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/crow>), and Social Psychology Network (<http://www.socialpsychology.org/>)].

Below, we present an annotated bibliography for the results of our searches. We found no other texts, chapters, journal articles or websites that provided materials, demonstrations, or activities designed to apply social psychology theories and methods to social problems.

### Textbooks

**Textbook with class activities on applied psychology.** Despite the abundance of texts, only the Kremer, Sheely, Reilly, Trew, and Muldoon (2003) text provided a framework for understanding how social psychology impacts our everyday lives by presenting applications of social psychological knowledge to the environment, workplace, health, peace and conflict, communication and the media, education, economics and consumerism, crime and law, and sports. Each chapter provided two to five in-class activities that asked students to apply what they have learned in the chapter to a social issue.

- Kremer, J., Sheehy, N., Reilly, J., Trew, K., & Muldoon, O. (2003). *Applying social psychology*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

### Handbook Chapter

**Exit survey for graduating seniors.** In this chapter, Sattler, Back, and Pollitt (2000) presented the method by which students designed and implemented an exit survey of graduating psychology majors for the College of Charleston's psychology department. A week by week schedule provided details on activities undertaken including setting goals for the survey, identifying the population, developing a sampling plan, developing and

implementing the survey, analyzing the data, and reporting the findings.

- Sattler, D. N., Back, S., & Pollitt, H. (2000). An exit survey project for a social psychology laboratory. In M. E. Ware & D. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Handbook of demonstrations and activities in the teaching of psychology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Vol. 3, pp. 172-174). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

### **Journal Articles**

#### **Redesigning public service announcements.**

In this paper, the authors described how students in an introductory social psychology class redesigned a public service announcement so it would be more effective. Although the assignment described did not involve working with an organization on a public service campaign, the procedure described in the article can be readily adapted for use with a variety of community organizations (e.g., local food banks, animal protectors/shelters). Students reported that the exercises helped them understand the concepts involved in attitude change and persuasion, and that they found the activity to be an enjoyable way of learning the course concepts.

- Koch, E. J., & Lomore, C. D. (2009). "This is a public service announcement": Evaluating and redesigning campaigns to teach attitudes and persuasion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36, 270-272.

#### **College students as auxiliary math teachers.**

This article illustrated how students enrolled in "Field Work in Applied Psychology: Teaching Mathematics" applied principles from cognitive, developmental, and educational psychology to supplement fourth, fifth, and sixth grade math instruction. Elementary students' math scores increased and the undergraduates who conducted the tutoring reported the activity was personally satisfying.

- Pezdek, K. (2002). Teaching psychology in the context of a university-community partnership. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29, 157-159.

#### **Service learning for social justice.**

In this activity, students participated in community organizations, such as women's shelters or soup kitchens, or with more large-scale social justice organizations, such as Amnesty International, the ACLU, or Greenpeace. Students spent class time in discussion about their participation and kept a journal describing their service. The activity increased students' understanding of society's influence on poverty and homelessness, and many students continued to volunteer after their required class participation ended.

- Roschelle, A. R., Turpin, J., & Elias, R. (2000). Who learns from service learning? *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 43, 839-847.

### **Websites**

Only the Social Psychology Network presented activities that could be used in an applied social psychology course. Despite the large number of activities on the site ( $n = 20$ ), only seven addressed solving social problems.

**Putting positive psychology into action.** In this project, students actively volunteered for community service. Students assisted nonprofit organizations utilizing theories from positive psychology. Students kept a journal recording how they felt during this assignment; they wrote before and after their service, and completed mood measures before and after their service. At the conclusion of the project, students wrote a paper explaining the terms and theories of positive psychology that they employed during the project. Students reported that their positive emotions increased while negative emotions decreased over the course of the service-learning project. Additionally, students noted that they obtained a deeper learning of the course material because of the project.

- Magyar-Moe, J. L. (2010). Putting positive psychology into action. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2010honor1.htm>

**Financial education for refugees.** This article described an activity in which students assisted refugee families in creating bank accounts and managing finances. Students kept a journal that documented their thoughts about ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice during the course of the project. Students gave positive reviews of the project and noted how meaningful the experience was. In addition, students reported that they gained a heightened awareness of the large number of refugees living within their community, and their needs.

- Norvilitis, J. M. (2010). Financial education for refugees. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2010honor3.htm>

**Reducing youth violence.** Students interviewed community residents, professional leaders, and government officials, helped neighborhood clean-ups, and visited youth centers in order to understand youth violence. Students promoted social change through their efforts. For example, some students wrote letters to officials about what they had learned and asked for help to decrease youth violence. Others wrote to newspapers expressing their opinions and presenting information gleaned from interviews conducted with community, professional leaders, and government officials. Students noted that the activity broadened their perspectives on youth violence, promoted their

analytical skills, and that they became more engaged in their community.

- Meyers, S. A. (2009). Students reducing youth violence. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2009winner.htm>

**Research for community action.** In this example, students participated in a service-learning project. The author discussed a social marketing campaign to change food choices among college students. Results of the student-led campaign improved diets among those eating at a campus dining hall. Students valued the project, so much so that they recommended using the project in future classes because it helped them understand the research methods used to evaluate the social marketing campaign.

Rosenthal, L. (2006). Research for community action. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2006winner.htm>

The following activities addressed specific ethnic conflicts or aftermaths of natural disasters; however, the activities could readily be modified and applied to other interpersonal conflicts (e.g., gangs and gang violence) or natural disasters.

**Reconciliation in Rwanda.** The activity described action teaching (i.e., linking teaching to social issues) to promote reconciliation in Rwanda. Participants in the project taught the public about the psychology of violence, trauma and healing, and how to apply this body of research to create change. Those engaged in the activity used a variety of media (e.g., soap operas and direct instructional programs) to model prosocial behavior. Participants showed fewer trauma symptoms, and increased positive attitudes toward the outgroup.

- Staub, E., & Pearlman, L. A. (2010). Mass violence and reconciliation in Rwanda and its neighbors. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2010honor4.htm>

**International Tsunami museum.** This project was designed to promote mental health after the trauma of the December 26, 2004 tsunami that struck 12 countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Students created educational exhibits for the museum; through their work, they promoted education, mental health, social awareness, and compassion. Students noted improved critical thinking skills, a better appreciation for research, and an increased sense of social responsibility upon completion of the project.

- Sattler, D. (2007). The International Tsunami Museum. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from

<http://www.socialpsychology.org/action/2007winner.htm>

#### **Fundraising for Hurricane Katrina victims.**

Students conducted fundraising for the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the persuasion techniques used in the effort. Students used the foot-in-the-door technique, door-in-the-face technique, reciprocity, and direct order technique to raise donations for Hurricane Katrina victims. Upon completion of the fundraising, students indicated a greater connectedness to the communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

- Mashek, D. (2006). Teaching persuasion through fundraising. *Social Psychology Network*. Retrieved on August 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialpsychology.org/action2006honor2.htm>

## **Conclusions**

The methods we described provide a means for students in applied social psychology courses to increase their knowledge acquisition and skill set. As Edgerton (1977, p. 31), noted, “Understanding is the ability to explain the idea, muster evidence to support it, find examples, apply it to new situations, generalize about it and represent it in new ways. In essence, the kind of learning that leads to understanding is learning by doing.” Using the materials, demonstrations, and activities reviewed in this paper should help teachers of applied social psychology facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge and skills undergraduate students will need in order to be successful not only in their academic careers but in their professional careers as well. Indeed, we have found that this has been our experience. Many of our graduates have received employment opportunities as a result of the skills acquired in our applied social psychology courses. We encourage the readers of this chapter to use the materials, demonstrations, and activities we have reviewed, and to create new ones that allow students to apply their knowledge and skills to social problems.

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