THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN STUDENT MOTIVATION IN UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract- The study chronicles the development of student motivation in two semesters of an undergraduate psychology course involving Participatory Action Research projects. Student self ratings of progress and engagement were used as a way to guide discussion and reflection about the projects, described and analyzed, and the outcomes interpreted based on demographic differences (level of schooling and academic major) are offered. The implications for guidelines for teaching in undergraduate psychology are drawn out.

Keywords- Participatory Action Research, Psychology, Student motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate classes in psychology in the United States are typically reflective of a belief in the field as a science, addressing specializations that are largely recognized as central to student knowledge. Depending on the orientation of the program, there is often coursework in the following areas: developmental, cognitive, neuropsychology, personality, social, learning, abnormal, perception, history and systems, experimental, statistics and research. Up until a decade ago, most of these courses covered topics that are driven by textbooks in a lecture format, sometimes supplemented by small-group discussions, recitations or labs. Pointing to the advent of the internet and increasing diversity of the student population, the American Psychological Association (APA) developed guidelines for undergraduate psychology coursework in majors [1] that were intended to change the paradigm of how we understand the learning process itself and related pedagogy. These guidelines include five goals: knowledge base in psychology; scientific inquiry and critical thinking; ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world; communication; and professional development. Areas that were featured separately in the 2007 document such as sociocultural awareness, real-life applications and technological and informational literacy are integrated throughout the five goals. The guidelines lay out the parts of each goal that are foundational versus more advanced ("baccalaureate"). There have been attempts to establish external standards for undergraduate psychology programs such as these around the world—particularly as the discipline becomes more popular—with varying degrees of success [2] [3].

While the breakdown of the goals appears to follow theories of cognitive development and learning, there are questions about the role that student motivation plays across the undergraduate psychology curriculum [4]. Reference [5] acknowledges, for example, that psychology education is no longer just about imparting static knowledge and passive student regurgitation; the curriculum must be dynamic, responsive and relevant in diverse contexts [6]. Research addresses new formats in psychology coursework such as interactive platforms, co-teaching, and problem-centered approaches. However, the overwhelming majority of courses remain in the same structure and with similar content, updated by research. While students may find the topics of interest, the motivation is typically structured by the academic demands for progress in the program. Research measures that are assessments of motivation result in implications for psychology teaching that are rarely implemented. Significant research has been undertaken in recent years on how to engage undergraduate students in more intrinsic and personally meaningful study [4]. Yet the APA guidelines are silent about the importance of such motivational concerns in the undergraduate curriculum. The 2013 document, for example, addresses areas for the future that include student awareness of the field, knowledge and ways to assess that knowledge; nothing is said about motivation.

While motivation has been the subject of a great deal of theoretical progress and empirical research in the field of educational psychology, very little has been done with regard to educational practice [7]. Studies involving observations and correlates of motivation in classrooms have been undertaken, for example, with implications described for teaching but with very little change occurring. References [4] sought to change this shortcoming with a review of motivational studies from the perspective of "interventionist" research in which the researcher/educator changes the classroom environment intentionally to change student cognitions, emotions and/or behaviors [8]. Arguing that most research-methods courses in undergraduate psychology programs in the U.S. are biased toward experimental models, [4] argue that quasi-experimental methods such as the interventionist approach can be more appropriate for looking at such

areas as motivation in action. While quasi-experimental work may compromise the internal validity of what is being measured (in this case, motivation of students), there may be greater generalizability with a field-based study as proposed here, thereby having a greater impact on the pedagogical practice.

The current study seeks to look at an innovative approach to an undergraduate course and ways in which students helped shape the learning process within it, i.e. becoming personally engaged, using a "multicomponent" intervention alongside specific content and pedagogy in the course. With this approach, several components may be changed at once (in this case, a major assignment) in order to assess motivation in the course [9]. The intervention in the course involved a "participatory action research" (PAR) project, a philosophy that combines collaboration and action as essential to the research process [10]. Drawing on multiple methods and measures that can be quantitative or qualitative, PAR is based on a research model first articulated by [11] that supports design and implementation by both researcher and participants to effect and investigate social change. The philosophy is central to the curriculum in the course, described in the following section. The question that the study sought to address, therefore, was if and how the use of a PAR assignment in a course might serve as an intervention to illuminate the impact of teaching on the motivation of enrolled students.

II. DETAILS EXPERIMENTAL

2.1 Materials and Procedures

The course serving as the context of this research study was created as a pilot course in an undergraduate psychology program in a moderately sized (8,000 students) private liberal-arts university in New York. Drawing from multiple specializations in the field, the course utilized a case study and action research approach to the presentation of the material, framed as "psychology and social change." Intended for undergraduate majors, it served as an elective for two years. Table 1 offers the course description and goals that were intentionally aligned with APA guidelines for psychology-major programs, including the knowledge base in psychology, scientific inquiry and critical thinking, ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world, communication and professional development.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1. "Psychology and Social Change" Syllabus Course Description and Goals

The course has several areas of focus, all related to how the field can (or cannot) be a force for change in society, both locally and globally. The relationship of psychology as a discipline (with a scientific foundation) and its application (oftentimes considered an art) in society are worth exploring; its dynamics and its tensions. Ultimately, the course is an opportunity to think about how study and reflection have resulted in a better understanding of ourselves as human beings.

1) Students will explore the origins, assumptions and interests of several of the specializations in psychology that emphasize social change, focusing on their views of human nature: social psychology, community psychology, media psychology, positive psychology, radical/critical psychology, clinical psychology and educational psychology
2) Students will become more aware of how these specializations are applied to real world problems in the United States and other nations
3) Students will gain understanding and skill in the use of an action research paradigm, comparing its tenets and methods to other forms of research in psychology
4) Students will understand the more political debates about the endeavors and roles of psychology in society

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In Fall 2015, the course was scheduled and offered as an elective within the psychology program with no prerequisites, resulting in an enrollment of 16 students. All but three of the students were psychology majors; two were social-work majors and one was in political science. All but three of the students were juniors and seniors. Twelve of the students were women and four were men. In Spring 2017, 23 students were enrolled in the course, given for the second time as an open elective with no prerequisites. In that class, five of the students were psychology majors and the other 18 were in majors ranging from biology to business management. There were five freshmen, five sophomores, six juniors and seven seniors; 20 were women and three were men.

The course topics, addressed in Table 1, remained the same for the two semesters that the course was given, but some of the examples drawn from current news differed. The same pedagogical format was used during both semesters and involved introduction of a topic with video work illustrating key concepts, a worksheet related to a problem or case study, to be done in small groups from reading on the topic. During both semesters, two short papers were due involving topics drawn from the course material. Both required summarizing, applying and critiquing the topic that was chosen. In these respects, the course remained the same over the two semesters.

2.2. Participatory Action Research Project

The PAR project, introduced in the fourth week of both semesters, was related to the topic of social

change in the discipline of psychology and featured a reading by [11]. Students had been given a reading on a psychological understanding of everyday life prior to the introduction of the project [12], but because of the variability of the class knowledge in the discipline, the PAR model was presented as a way to research "an area of interest or concern in your current life that is a problem or challenge for you, your friends or peers, or others that you believe has the potential for improving or being solved." Students were instructed that they would be undertaking research with others to address the problem, once defined, to come up with an intervention and to research its impact on the group who participated. The PAR project involved key processes or phases over the next two months of the course that are depicted and defined in Table 2 [13].

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2. Participatory Action Research Processes or Phases (from Kagan, 2012)

Most importantly, in PAR, the knowledge belongs to the people and they are the primary beneficiaries of the knowledge creation. Decisions about what to do with the knowledge created have to be negotiated and ultimately control should lie with the participants. As with all progressive forms of action research, research and action in PAR are inseparable, leading to a praxis where, through action-reflection, knowledge creation supports action.

The key processes of Participatory Research

The promotion of participatory research is basically an exercise in stimulating the people to:

- Identify the issue or concern
- Collect information
- Reflect on and analyse it
- Use the results as a knowledge base for life improvement, and whenever possible to document the results for wider dissemination ie for the creation of a people's literature

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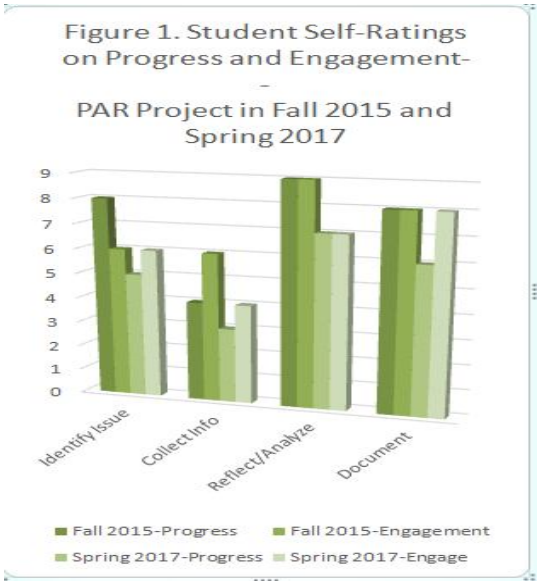
In both semesters, students were given examples of action research topics involving the campus life of another class of students, such as problems with student parking, food services and financial support of international students. They were also given readings on the PAR model [13] and in-class activities to develop an action research agenda with a social issue (gender violence). Students could work alone or with others in the class on the project. However, they were expected to invite others in a "community" who agreed to participate as co-researchers.

After each of the four processes or phases depicted in Table 2, the students were asked to evaluate their progress and their personal engagement in the project. They used a 1-to-10 Likert scale to rate each of these dimensions, along with a reflective narrative to explain their ratings. During both semesters, the PAR project descriptions and the ratings/narratives by the students were collected and shared with the class during the two-month period of the PAR project development, and students would make decisions during class time about adjustments as warranted by the collective findings. These decisions are shared in the results section below.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Fall 2015, the enrolled students discussed several possible PAR projects during the fourth and fifth week of class and began the process of identifying the issue/concern, as outlined above, as well as the participants in their research. All the concerns involved social issues in the community, including gendered violence, race relations on campus, and the difficulties of being integrated into campus life as a commuter student. Figure 1 depicts the modal responses on the self-reported ratings of the students during the Fall 2015 semester on the PAR project, addressing their progress and engagement at each phase.

Place Figure 1 about here



The modal response of their progress on the identification of the issue was 8, but the modal response of their engagement was 6. Discussions and written reflections generally demonstrated that the students were maintaining engagement during the information-collection phase (modal response of 6), but their progress had been reduced to 4. In inquiring about this in class, several students noted that they liked the idea of the PAR project but felt isolated in their work on it, finding it difficult to get participants to commit and to collect the information for their identified issue. More than half the class expressed a desire to work together as a single group on the

project rather than in smaller groups or as individuals. One of the students noted that she was working at an after-school program supported by a nonprofit organization in a high-needs community as part of her field requirements for her major. She proposed that the class might work with the youth in the program to come up with a PAR project that would address violence among youth in the community, particularly among gangs.

Written reflections by the class expressed interest, enthusiasm and curiosity about the project after this discussion. After the meetings with the youth in the after-school program, the class decided that they would create a community mural on a wall at the nonprofit facing the street that would address the violence, recording people's responses to it. The third phase, on reflecting and analyzing in the modal self-ratings in Fall 2015 (see Figure 1), shows both progress and engagement going up to a 9 after the students had worked with the youth on the mural and collected responses to it by those in the community. The students then decided to write up their results for three audiences: the professor, the university community (for a research presentation during an annual conference to be held the following semester) and for the community served by a newsletter to be published by the nonprofit (which was subsequently reported on by the local newspaper).

The students in Spring 2017 got to see what the Fall 2015 students had done as a PAR project, along with readings and video work presented in the first semester of the course. They identified issues that were similar to those from the previous semester, ranging from supporting the rights of transgendered students on campus to the improvement of race relations on campus to food services (more vegetarian choices, for instance). Only five of the 23 students sought to work with someone in the class on the identified issues, and the modal response of class progress and engagement in Spring 2017 to the PAR project during this phase was 5 and 6, respectively. These ratings diminished during the information-collection process or phase to 3 on progress and 4 on engagement. Written comments largely reflected confusion over the process and the PAR project overall, with 16 out of 23 students indicating that they had difficulty moving forward on their projects. In class, the discussion about the project and their work on it revolved around their struggles in the class and other classes, a sense of being overwhelmed.

Because the course material was then covering self-identity and change in social media (week 7 of the syllabus), it was suggested that the class write about their own experiences in social-media environments as an in-class exercise. This led into a lengthy discussion on how the sense of self in social media and writing about it would be much more meaningful to the students than undertaking a project to create social change through action. The class agreed to switch the PAR project to one where they would use the social-media platforms of choice (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) to address ways they could use social media and the "community" it provided to improve themselves in some realm of their lives. This would address such areas as seeking help in their academic studies, addressing online harassment or exclusionary comments, and taking more initiative in suggesting solutions to members of the online community. After this, the collection of information—using social media—went quickly and the reflection/analysis phase of the PAR project resulted in self-ratings of 7 in both progress and engagement. The engagement of students increased to 8 for the final phase, which included dissemination through social media of their findings. However, the progress was a bit lower, with a modal rating of 6.

The differences between the two classes were important to consider in their self-ratings as well as the outcomes of the PAR project work. The Fall 2015 class came together to undertake a community-based project addressing violence among youth using art, and reported both progress and engagement through the final two phases of the work. The Spring 2017 class faltered in their project work but showed significant improvement in progress and engagement after the shift to the "self in social media" focus, continuing projects that were individual but with online participation with those they considered part of their community. In looking at the differences, the backgrounds of the students would seem particularly important to consider. The Fall 2015 students were largely upper-level psychology majors with extensive knowledge backgrounds and a strong sense of direction in their academic development. There was less common ground in either the college experience or chosen majors in the Spring 2017 class and students were more engaged by their individual interests within social media rather than the face-to-face communities.

CONCLUSIONS

In many respects, the PAR project allowed for a tracing of the motivation of the students in both semesters as well as opportunities to modify the intervention and assess the impact. It also showed how differences in the development of the students might warrant different types of assignments that went beyond foundation vs. baccalaureate differences in knowledge to emotional and motivational strengths and needs among students in the psychology class. These differences were prominent in the PAR project work offered here and suggest that guidelines for psychology programs include such considerations.

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