Blogs, Tweets, and Protests: Learning Movement Theory through Online Case Studies

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This article takes the practical inquiry model as an approach to designing a course on social movements that combines self-directed investigation and group discussion as an avenue for deep learning. For the purpose of developing a case study, a guided approach is provided that allows the students to explore theory on their own and make connections to the case material they discover online. In the process of developing the case study, students are required to journal about their experience and what they discover as they comb through their selected sites. The data can include several elements (e.g., blogs, chat rooms, Facebook, twitter, publications, photos, links to other groups, history, etc.).

In his paper "A Film-Augmented Course on International Social Movements" James DeFronzo describes how his course was designed to survey samples of revolutionary movements through the use of film (1982). Although the experience was positive, one of four major concerns students had was the apparent bias of many films. DeFronzo notes that it is difficult to locate "balanced" treatments of the subject matter (p. 174). Of course, what we seek is not a value free orientation, or even the illusion of one. Sociology is inherently political (Marcuse, 1964), and scholars do not become interested in movements because they are indifferent about them. When they pass on to students the theoretical insights they have about how social movements work and how movements may succeed or fail, they do not do so objectively.

Social movements as "critical communities" are immensely important engines for cultural and social change (Rochon, 1998). From these critical communities arise ideas that move culture (Rochon, 1998). But when we are faced with teaching students how movements work, we sociologists should impart in them a sense of the value of movements in modern complex societies. This is no easy task. Though it is tempting to treat movement theory as another chapter in a text to be covered, Schwartz and Smith (2010) proclaim that we have to move beyond the "transmission of information" goal of textbook driven courses.

On the Path to Deep Learning

The lecture and discussion methods most often used by instructors fail to dispel the "disconnect that students feel from sociological theory" (Pedersen, 2010, p. 197). Furthermore, the anxiety that students feel at the prospect of having to learn theory is well documented (Ahlkvist 2001; Campbell, 1997; Hickson & Stacks, 1993; Lowney, 1998; Ormrod 2011; Pedersen, 2010; Pelton 2012). In part, the resistance we face from students is related to a greater sentiment of anti-intellectualism. Forsey, Low, and Glance (2013) write that "We can no longer assume that university students are automatically interested in taking up a life of the mind" (p. 482).

James Ormrod (2011) proposes a "case study group" method that allows students to become actively engaged in theory rather than learning passively (or not at all). Ormrod contrasts his approach to teaching social movement theory from those executed by Lofland (1996) and Reger and Dugan (2001), studies he considers to be either too loose or rigid in terms of structure. John Lofland's approach involved having students "select a specific social movement/social change organization," "collect data on it, and write a 20-page sociological analysis" (p. 389). Not surprisingly, even to Lofland interestingly, students overwhelmingly produced sub-par work characterized as "simple history or encyclopedia account(s)" of movements (p. 392). Lofland warns that "if sociological analysis is the result, one must provide a considerable degree of guiding structure" (p. 394).

We concur with Ormrod, that the other end of the spectrum, too much structure, can also be a detriment. Reger and Dugan's 2001 article proscribes a rather intricate exercise where most students are given cards that represent a "resource, an organizational title, or a goal that identifies a group." (p. 335). Though the authors report improved quiz grades for students in courses where the exercise was executed, Ormrod (2011) correctly surmises that "it does not sound like they [students] were engaged in much theorizing of their own" (p. 194). Ormrod writes, "The teacher therefore seems to have retained a central role in relating theory to what students had done in the exercise, rather than students making the connections *through* the exercise" (p. 194).

Ormrod's own recommendation is the use of case study groups, a method which he developed by asking

students to choose a social movement group to focus on for the duration of the semester. He then proceeded to teach the course "so that a different theory was covered each week" (p. 194). Students were then asked to complete a task each week that involved relating their chosen movement to some aspect of the lesson in theory for that week. Ormrod mentions, for example, asking students to find examples of "framing" in their chosen movements following a reading of Snow and Benford (1988), and the subsequent findings were then shared in a group setting (Ormrod 2011, p. 195). Ormrod (2011, p. 198) summarizes that "tighter guidance with the tasks is desirable but that group discussions should be structured more loosely," thereby situating his pedagogical recommendation somewhere between the previously discussed extremes.

What is problematic here is Ormrod's own admission that this was "not an ideal test case" as his students were "all halfway through completing their dissertations" and "had all taken courses in both classical and contemporary theory previously" (p. 194). Indeed, our undergraduates would have a very difficult time making heads or tails out of Snow and Benford's (1998) work for example. The exercise we propose then, retains the exploratory element of choosing one's own favorite movement so to speak, while offering sufficient guidance with the understanding that most of our students "have limited experience with and often superficial understandings of social movements" (Rohlinger & Stamm, 2013, p. 22) when they arrive in class. The activity in this article involves studying online content for the purpose of developing a research paper on social movements. The students find their own social movement website to track during the period of the course.

The Online Case Study Approach

There have been numerous types of case studies. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) presented the "practical inquiry model" in which cognitive presence is generated (p. 11). The authors explored higher order thinking that can be evaluated as part of a critical thinking exercise. Lo, Johnson, and Tenorio (2011) studied the effects of online assignments on student satisfaction. Lo et al. state that, "Results confirmed that having students participate in online assignments can promote student satisfaction and foster critical thinking and deep learning" (p. 1). The authors observe that millennial students are "technologically savvy" and "want to stay 'connected'" (p. 2). They then borrow a conceptual model outlined by Garrison and colleagues (2001) that "evaluates online learning environments in terms of their *cognitive presence, social presence*, and *teaching presence*" (p. 2). Others have explored the practical inquiry model for use in K-12 online courses

(Liu & Yang, 2012; Vaughan & Prediger, 2014), for example, in order to assess the quality of online dialogue and cognitive presence among students in an online information ethics course (Liu & Yang, 2012). Informational Ethics is an area of research exploring ethical concerns related to computer, information technology, and internet ethics (Liu & Yang, 2012). Another example comes from analysis of distance learning health courses (Li et al., 2014; Pecka, Kotcherlakota, & Berger 2014). For example, Li and colleagues (2014) explore a continuing professional development program as an online method for health professionals' self-improvement. Health professionals provided feedback on the online activities in which they participated and evaluated how their behavior and knowledge changed given this training they received (Li et al., 2014). The authors provide a conceptual model for how a content analysis methodological approach can be used to evaluate health professional responses (Li et al., 2014).

The four stages of this practical inquiry model as a journey towards higher order critical thinking are said to be the triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution stages (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 9). Though Garrison et al. are concerned with the online learning environment we can apply these insights in our exercise. The triggering event in our case is the marriage of the student to the movement organization. The exploration is included in the individual reflective journals students produce as they collect data on their movement group. The integration stage allows for the group work that includes several elements, one of which is comparing and contrasting the exploratory work of individual students. Lastly, in the resolutions stage the instructor steps in to critique class work and "right the ship," so to speak. The social presence and teaching presence are found in group interactions and instructor-student interactions respectively. When interactions are highly involved, deep learning is said to have been achieved (Lo et al., 2011). Put simply, the practical inquiry model provides a guiding framework for designing coursework that is structured by a high degree of interaction, but loose enough to permit the kind of self-directed exploration that opens the door to deeper learning and critical thought. Others scholars have applied this model with alternative emphasis where collaborative student to student interactions and computer supported collaborative models serve to build skills.

The Exercise

It is a difficult task to provide students with research experiences in the classroom given the time constraints, class size, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements. As stated, the Lofland (1996) article presents library research as one approach to

writing up a case study while avoiding the need to apply for IRB approval. The goal of providing an outlet for writing about social movements while avoiding the IRB process has in part motivated the development of this exercise. Our exercise integrates the use of online content to serve as data for the case study approach we offer and is appropriate for small to medium university classroom sizes.

Our students are technologically savvy in many ways; however, as many instructors discover, those abilities do not always transition well when teaching research skills that can involve tasks such as searching for relevant journal articles for a paper. The exercise presented here involves a guided approach for integrating group work and using social movement webpages for the purposes of completing a case study. Through this exercise the students will be able to engage online with their chosen movement. Through this assignment the students, to some degree, place the concerns of their movement at the center of their work (Bevington & Dixon, 2005).

The scholarship on social movement utilization of the internet, communication technology, and other media sources (Bevington & Dixon, 2005) encourages more research into the significance of this medium in mobilization efforts (Schussman & Earl, 2004). Researchers have explored multiple forms of content, strategies, and frames which social movement organizations produce. One approach for collecting data is assigning research that involves examining social movement website content to model what students should seek. The work of Stein (2009), Della Porta and Mosca (2005), and Postmes and Brunsting (2002) spell out the features, issues, and tactics that exist within U.S.-and European based social movements. For example, Stein's work spells out the forms of content included on social movement webpages.

Triggering Event: Wedding the Student to a Social Movement

The students' first task would be to find a social movement on the net. The instructor can define a social movement for the class or perhaps a definition could emerge through group discussion. A standard definition that could be employed is that a social movement is a group that promotes social change. By using this definition, an open field develops for the types of social movements that can serve as cases. After defining what a social movement is for the purpose of class instruction, then the next step is to instruct the students to research for a social movement online.

There are diverse numbers of online communities across the political spectrum from which students could select. From Stormfront (Caren, Jowers, & Gaby, 2012) to Occupy Everywhere movements (Juris, 2012) students will find groups that can serve to fill any interest they have in online communities. There are several sources of social movement content that are housed on university webpages such as Notre Dame's Center for the Study of Social Movements and social movement sites such as *Critical Mass*, *Mobilizing Ideas Blog, Interface Journal*, or *Heathwood Press*. Some other examples include the Hunter College Libraries page, which has useful resources and many links to social movement groups, as well as Pamela Oliver's university page, which has several links to social movements or movement relevant themes. We also suggest other sources for identifying social movement groups such as the webpages for US Social Forum, the Direct Action Network, and, for more international journalistic coverage, indymedia.org. The webpage sources can serve as examples in adopting a potential case study site.

Exploration: Examining Social Movements

Here the students will begin to journal about their experience and what they discover as they comb through their selected sites. Their data can include several elements such as blogs, chat rooms, Facebook, twitter, publications, photos, links to other groups, history, etc. Some additional guidance can be provided through Stein's (2009) content analysis of social movement websites. The analysis includes a series of content elements such as information, action and mobilization, interaction and dialog, lateral linkages, creative expression, and fundraising and resource generation. The Stein article is essentially a guide on what to look for and why these themes matter for social movement research. Students should also include any journalistic sources on their chosen movement.

Integration and Resolution: Group Work and Resolution

In this phase the students assess the "applicability of ideas in terms of how well they connect and describe the issue or event under consideration" (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 4). Garrison et al. suggest that instructors monitor extensively the discussion and evidence that the students integrate the ideas through the group work. Here the student discusses what he or she found in his or her own investigation and compares this to the investigations of fellow group members. As Ormrod (2011) instructs, the students use class time to share their respective research tasks in their assigned groups, and the students address how the theories they have read apply to their cases.

The instructor can provide prompts to move the discussion within groups. Questions could include, "What have you learned about your social movement organization at this point your research?," "What social movement theory best applies to your research at this point?," "What similarities or differences do you see within the social movements groups you have focused on?," and "What source of website data was the most useful in building your case?" This stage ends as the instructor pulls together the groups' discussions into one involving the entire class as Ormrod (2011) suggests. Here the instructor critiques class discussion work and provides additional guidance in applying theoretical concepts. There are a range of questions that could be explored at this stage such as the relationship between online political campaigns and marginalized populations (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005; Red, 2013), the exploration of the dark side of online social movement communities (Garrett, 2006), or perhaps issues of information quality control (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005).

Potential Pitfalls

Sociologists typically find it interesting that, when first exposed to the range of movements, students might note that their own political affinities are not represented. As previously noted, the inherently political nature of our discipline is one of the reasons why it is important to study social movements in the first place. Many of these movements will be progressive in nature. But conservative movements, though not often supported by sociologists, are relevant sites of study. A rather extreme possibility in the triggering phase is a student who chooses to explore the Aryan Nations or other Neo-Nazi movements. Such an instance will have to be handled carefully by the instructor who must not alienate the student. There may also be cases where some students choose to explore movements promoting gun ownership while other students explore gun control related groups. Again, the instructor will have to mitigate potential conflicts. We recommend a return to the data content and theoretical guideposts whenever possible. The instructor can explain that sociologists do not always agree with the groups we study, but we can still investigate with fairness with the goal of deep understanding.

We also expect that students will have some difficulties in the exploratory phase, most notably pinpointing what counts as relevant data. This is an issue for seasoned researchers who can be overwhelmed by mountains of data and faced with the daunting task of organizing and finding relevant themes. For this reason we suggest students have taken a prerequisite methods course before attempting this exercise. If this is not possible, set aside some class time for a relevant lesson. Students might also assign too much weight to media reports of movements. Such reports are useful, especially when we consider how movement actors may respond to media coverage, but the instructor will have to provide some limitations and guidelines to help students make their way through what could be an immense forest of information.

Some students might request that the instructor provide a ready-made case study example in order to demonstrate the ideal project. We do not recommend this, however, because of the likelihood that such a blueprint would impinge upon students' own exploratory journey.

Conclusion

This article takes the practical inquiry model as an approach to designing a course on social movements that combines self-directed investigation followed by group discussion as avenues for deep learning. The paper provides a guided approach that allows students to explore theory independently and make connections to the case material they find online. Apart from engaging students in theory, our approach also becomes an effective vehicle for demonstrating the work necessary to conduct historical, unobtrusive, and online ethnographic studies without spending much time on the nuts and bolts aspect of research methods. This article presents a guide for developing a case study by using social movement website data. This data not only serves to aid students in completing a case study, but also allows students to explore social movement theory concepts.

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