Theories of Learning and the Real World: An Integrated Teaching Technique Using Empirical Research and Film

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As instructors of an educational psychology course focusing on theories of learning, we are aware of the trepidation our students may experience on the first day of class and beyond. Theories of learning sound a bit daunting and, unfortunately, disconnected from the real world. Of course, our students' conceptualizations of learning theories are quite different from our own; that they are interesting, informative, and relevant to understanding how individuals learn in a variety of contexts as well as how best to instruct others (Schneider, 2008).

We examine learning from a variety of perspectives in our course (e.g., classical and operant conditioning; social cognitive theory; cognitive developmental and social historical approaches; information-processing theory) as well as discuss several issues that may influence learning (e.g., motivation and self-efficacy). Thus, we discuss and synthesize several views of learning, and, importantly, illustrate how one's knowledge of research and theory is critical to effective learning and instruction. Our goals as instructors are to explain theories and research in an organized and comprehensible way; make applications of learning theories and research more transparent; and increase our students' interest and involvement in our course through active learning (Stark-Wroblewski, Kreiner, Boeding, Lopata, Ryan, & Church, 2008).

To meet our course objectives we developed and describe here an exploratory project requiring small groups of students to film interviews and/or observations of one or two learners in the real world. The assignment is to produce an audio-visual film, later presented to the rest of the class, as an example or examples of one of the learning theories we study. Although a list of all topics explored is beyond the scope of this paper, our students have interviewed expert and novice musicians to illustrate the development of procedural knowledge; six-year-old twins discussing the first day of kindergarten to illustrate construction in memory; a brother, sister and father discussing the effectiveness and consistency of punishment in their home; and an elderly woman reflecting on salient autobiographical events in her life. While the use of ready-made films to supplement and elucidate lectures or text materials is common practice, researchers have recently investigated the effectiveness of using student-constructed films in class as teaching strategies. Multiple benefits to students include promoting critical and creative thinking; fostering independent and authentic learning; and allowing students to construct their own understanding (Dockter, Haug, & Lewis, 2010; Keaerney & Schuck, 2005; Pereira, Barros, Filho, & Fauth, 2012).

In addition to making a film to illustrate a learning theory, groups are required to present an introduction to their film in which they explain the theory, and related empirical research findings, illustrated through their film. Thus, students' presentations integrate research from the literature with examples from the real world. Students in each group come to a collaborative decision on the

theory they will explore through research and film, whether they will observe and/or interview participants, who they will interview and/or observe, and how they will each contribute to the many tasks involved in the project. We encourage students to effectively integrate research and film components of the project through detailed instruction on searching library databases as well as steps necessary to effectively interview or observe others. Students are also encouraged to use technology offices available to them on campus.

Through their comments and questions after project presentations, participation, and instructor evaluation forms, students report that the project is meaningful and helps them better understand applications of learning theories. They also report that they find researching and filming a novel and interesting way to see the relevance of theories of learning to everyday life. Additionally our project lends itself to use in many classes and many types of student feedback.

Although exploratory, we have found our project quite helpful in demonstrating that learning theories really are "all around us". Further, as instructors we have learned that illustrations of learning in the real world come to life and are better understood as a function of the personalities and stories of the individuals filmed. We have come to believe that there is a great benefit for learning and instruction when students are required to show others how real world examples are related to research and theory.

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