A small group project for undergraduate social psychology students: Demonstrating the identifiable victim effect

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There is considerable evidence that 'active learning' strategies are more efficacious than traditional 'passive learning' methods (e.g. lecture). Presented here is a small group active learning project developed for undergraduate social psychology students. The activity involves carrying out and reporting the results of a structured demonstration of the identifiable victim effect. The project provides students with the opportunity to write a research proposal, collect data, perform a basic analysis and interpretation of the data, and report their findings in written form. Student feedback on the project has been positive overall. The project seems to be particularly beneficial in helping students to understand and appreciate the research process.
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THE belief that engaging university students in 'active learning' (AL) can add significantly to students' educational experience, over more traditional 'passive' learning techniques (e.g. typical classroom lectures), is widely accepted among educators (Freeman et al., 2014; Michael, 2006). Although AL is not easily defined, most parties seem to agree that it possesses several key characteristics. Some of those characteristics are: (a) AL requires students to do more than simply listen; (b) the focus of instruction in the AL paradigm is more on developing skills than simply learning facts; (c) it requires students to engage in higher-level thinking; and (d) AL involves engaging in various activities (such as discussion and hands-on experiences) (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Cerbin, 2018). Small group activities generally fall under the purview of AL, and have been used successfully to supplement lecture in teaching a variety of topics in psychology including symptoms of psychological disorders (Tomcho et al., 2006) and statistics (Perkins & Saris, 2001).

The identifiable victim effect

The small group project presented here employs a social psychological phenomenon-the identifiable victim effect (IVE) (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997) to provide students with a structured research experience. The IVE '… refers to individuals' tendency to offer greater help to specific, identifiable victims than to anonymous, statistical victims' (Lee & Feeley, 2016, p.199).

Thomas Scheeling (1968) is credited with identifying this effect while examining the economic value we place on human lives. He recognised '…that in almost all cases an individual life described in detail elicits more emotional reactions and aid than an equivalent life described as a statistic' (cited in Lee & Feeley, 2016, p.199).

Perhaps some of the best examples of the effect are associated with efforts by charities to solicit funds from individual donors (Small et al., 2007). Eliciting an emotional response from potential donors tends to increase the likelihood they will take action (i.e. make a donation). Slovic (2007) notes charities that raise funds for needy children (e.g. the Child Fund) have recognised and applied this principle for many years. Many such organisations have found that offering potential donors the opportunity to provide financial support to a single, identifiable, child is more productive than soliciting funds to be distributed to numerous 'anonymous' children.

Description of the project

What follows is a description of the project, which was developed to be used in undergraduate social psychology classes. Prior to the detailed discussion of the project in class students are randomly assigned to groups of three to five.

Introduction to the project

Typically, an entire class session is spent introducing the project. The students are seated with their group members, and a guide to the project is distributed. The Instructor discusses the project and the IVE. As the project is designed to demonstrate the IVE it is, of course, essential that students understand the effect, once that is evident the 'mechanics' of the study are discussed (i.e. the general hypothesis, independent and dependent variables, and operationalised hypothesis). Time permitting, it will likely be most beneficial to have each group work on identifying these elements, with periodic consultation from the instructor.

The independent variable (IV) is the nature of the stimuli presented; captioned photos of 'identifiable victims' or written accounts of 'statistical victims' of natural disasters. The dependent variable (DV) is the proportion of hypothetical donations participants allocate to 'identifiable' versus 'statistical' victims. The hypothesis provided to all groups is that exposure to stimuli depicting identifiable (versus statistical) victims of a natural disaster will result in participants allocating a larger proportion of hypothetical donations to the identifiable victims.

Each group's proposal must include a brief literature review. Several references to articles on the IVE may be provided to cut down on time required for literature searches, as the project is intended to span only a few weeks. In addition to the literature review, hypothesis, and data collection procedure, proposals will include copies of the stimulus materials (see description below).

An appendix to the proposal is also required, in which member assignments to the forthcoming tasks are specified (e.g. data analysis, interpretation of results) including which members will be responsible for writing which section(s) of the final report of the project. Regarding data collection (a very important part of the student experience), each student is required to collect data from four to seven participants (depending on size of their group). Upon written approval of their proposal, groups may proceed to data collection.

Finally, groups will perform a basic analysis of their data (limited to descriptive statistics and graphs), interpret their results, and submit a written report on their project. (Depending on the students' average statistical knowledge, Instructors may want to require a higher level of analysis.) At the conclusion of the session, the timeline for the project is reviewed, including due dates for: The research proposal; completion of data collection; and the final report of the project.

Stimulus materials

Groups identify two fairly recent major natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, floods, landslides, wildfires) in the same general geographic area outside of their home country (e.g. Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America). Next, they are to locate both a photo and a brief written news account (one each) for the disasters they have selected. The photo must include a person (or up to three family members) who have survived the disaster. The photo also must include a caption identifying the person(s) by name, and as having survived the disaster. Additionally, the nature of the disaster must be evident from the photo. The news account of the other disaster must be relatively brief (e.g. a paragraph), but must include information on the human toll of the disaster (e.g. number of lives lost and people displaced). The articles and captions may require editing, by the groups, for length and clarity.

Procedure

The procedure for data collection is the same for all groups; two group members

will approach individuals in public areas of campus and ask them to participate in a class project. The Experimenters will tell those who agree to participate that they will be presented with information on two natural disasters that resulted in loss of lives and the displacement of survivors. Each participant will be asked to imagine that they have $20 (or £15) that they must donate to aid the survivors of one or both disasters. They will be instructed further that they may designate the entire amount toward aid for one of the disasters, or may divide the designated funds up any way they want between the two disasters. (One experimenter will present the stimuli, while the other records the participant's responses.)

Participants will then be presented with the photo and news story (on separate sheets of paper) simultaneously. After an adequate amount of time has passed to read the text on each of the stimuli, participants will indicate their allocation decision. Participants will also be asked to indicate their age and gender. The Experimenter will then record the data and thank the participant. Groups must collect data from a minimum of 20 participants.

Ethical considerations

The project, as described here, does not involve any obvious risk to participants. Under the ethical principles and code of conduct of the APA (American Psychological Association, 2017), the project would not require formal review by an Institutional Review Board. According to the BPS code of human research ethics (Oates et al., 2021), such a class project would be subject to 'fast-track' review. In any case, it would be undoubtedly be 'educational' to discuss the normal process for review of research projects with the groups prior to data collection. It should also be useful to provide (or have students construct) a consent form for the project; doing so would help reinforce the principle of informed consent.

Advantages and disadvantages of the project

Advantages

Probably the major advantage of the project is that it is, of course, an exercise in AL. As such the project should have an advantage over reading and lecture in helping solidify students' understanding of a number of aspects of controlled experiments (e.g. standardising the presentation of the stimuli). Some of the specific advantages of conducting the project in the way described here are: (a) it provides students with the opportunity to gain experience working in a group; (b) students are provided with experience collecting, organising, and analysing actual data; and (c) students obtain the experience of writing a research report. Additionally, students learn about the IVE (which may not be discussed in their textbook), which is relevant to the course. (An informal review of five popular social psychology textbooks revealed that the IVE was discussed in only one of them.)

A major advantage of the project is that elements of it align with some of the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2012) goals for undergraduate education in psychology (e.g. scientific inquiry, using scientific reasoning, communication, enhancing teamwork), as well as the British Psychological Society's (BPS) programme standards (2019) (e.g., subject knowledge, knowledge of research paradigms, research skills, communicating ideas).

An advantage for the Instructor is that requirements of the project can be easily altered to fit the capabilities of their class. For instance, classes of advanced undergraduates could be required, given a description of the IVE, to start from 'scratch' and develop their own design, method, and procedure to test for the effect. Classes where students are somewhat 'statistically advanced' could be required to perform a more sophisticated analysis of the data than that proposed here. Another advantage of the project is that, as it is outlined here, it may be completed in several weeks, instead of months; leaving

time for other AL activities/projects. Alternately, for more advanced classes, who could benefit from a less structured experience, the project could be conducted over the majority of the semester.

Disadvantages

A potential disadvantage of the project may be that students are provided with a rather structured task: That structure allows them to avoid some of the 'heavy lifting' (i.e. coming up with their own design and procedure, formulating their hypothesis) for the project. However, providing this degree of structure seems to be a reasonable trade-off in terms of enabling the project to be completed in a relatively short period. Of course, Instructors are free to reduce the amount of structure if they feel it will benefit their students.

Conclusions

I have had considerable success using this assignment in my social psychology classes, and have received generally good feedback from students about it. I believe the assignment has provided substantial benefits to my students because it aligns with a number of both the APA and BPS goals/standards for undergraduate education in psychology, and that it truly incorporates all of the elements of AL. First, and foremost, the assignment indeed requires that students take an active role in their learning; it requires much more of them than simply attending lectures and reading a textbook (Freeman et al., 2014). Second, the project involves skill development in at least several important areas, including group skills (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) (e.g. cooperative planning, division of work, co-ordination of individual efforts) and library research skills. The project incorporates the AL criterion of writing (i.e. the project proposal, final report, as well as materials for various aspects of the project). Another criterion of AL, higher level thinking (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), is addressed by various aspects of the project including composing the literature review to provide a logical foundation for what follows, and the analysis and interpretation of data. In terms of the AL criterion of 'various activities,' a few examples (in addition to those above) are locating appropriate stimuli and collection of data.

In closing, I believe a major advantage of the assignment is that it allows Instructors a great deal of flexibility, in terms of the amount of structure provided, which can make it appropriate for either lower-level or advanced undergraduate social psychology classes. Another advantage is that, with some adjustments, the project can be made to fit various time frames for instruction (i.e. traditional semesters or four- or eight-week sessions).

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