Active Learning Classroom Research Profile

Psychology 445: Theories of Social Psychology

Instructor: Dr. Nicole McNichols

- 30 undergraduate students enrolled, mostly Juniors and Seniors
- Class met twice a week for 1 hour 50 minutes in ALC 136

Active Learning in Theories of Social Psychology

Students in Nicole McNichols’ seminar on Theories of Social Psychology greet classmates and settle in at their regular tables during the first few minutes of class, orienting themselves for learning. By now they are familiar with the routine: students will spend the bulk of the two-hour class discussing assigned readings for the day and responding to written questions from the instructor. McNichols provides a brief overview of the plan for the class session, referencing the students’ readings and prior work and briefly touching on how these sources relate to today’s topic, conscious and unconscious thought. She then sets the groups free to work independently.

The student groups dive into the activity. Students pull up the readings on laptops or tablets or begin to review the discussion questions McNichols has provided on a Word document displayed on the monitor at each table. One or two students at each table assume the role of group leader, initiating discussion by reading the first question aloud, also often taking on the responsibility of recording the response. Tables are quiet at first, but as students begin exploring the questions, they become more animated and collaborative. Conversations are relaxed and respectful, with students asking questions, restating each other’s answers, and referencing sections of the readings. At one table, a student ends a comment with “Does that make sense?” Another rephrases the response and the first confirms, “Yes, yes!” Another notes the relevance of the concept, “That’s why diets don’t work…” “Yeah, there’s a ton of relevance in this article…”

McNichols begins circulating among the five student groups about ten minutes after the activity begins. She casually joins each table in turn, asking warmly, “How are you guys doing?” before sitting down with students, assessing where they are in their responses and ensuring that they grasp key concepts. She spends about 10-20 minutes at each table and makes a point to discuss with each group a key graph and the findings it illustrates in the assigned article. She also encourages students to relate personal experiences to concepts from the reading, affirming their connections with “Yes, yes, exactly,” and “That’s a good example.” Students initiate questions, rephrase McNichols’ answers in their own words, and check their understanding with her present at the table. She validates students when they are on the right track and checks understanding (“Does that all make sense?”) before moving on from a table. During this time, the other groups continue to work together independently.
Students take their time working through the assigned questions, occasionally veering off task to discuss an unrelated topic until someone in the group says, “Ok, let’s get back to this question.” McNichols asks each student group to illustrate examples from their discussion on a writeable surface. Students are at home in the classroom, and get up and roll the whiteboards to their tables when needed or move to a nearby wall. An audible conversational buzz in the room signals when most groups are done answering the set of questions.

After visiting each table, McNichols uses the last 20 minutes of class to bring the class together and review key concepts. She refers again to the graph from the assigned reading during the whole class discussion. Students reflect on their understanding of the concept behind the graph and share drawings that illustrate additional examples generated by their group. McNichols focuses the video camera in the room on each group’s whiteboard drawing and displays it on the shared monitors so all can see. She asks students to think about the commonalities in their illustrations before providing a few last thoughts, including reminders about upcoming deadlines. She closes, “Well done, you guys! See you Monday,” as students pack up their belongings, still chatting about examples that illustrate the research discussed in class.

**Pedagogical Goals and Challenges**

**Teaching and learning goals:**
- Encourage students to approach and process course content in more meaningful and creative ways that facilitate a sense of ownership of one’s own learning.
- Create a learning environment in which all students felt comfortable sharing ideas and perspectives
- Build cooperation and trust among students
- Utilize features of the ALC to enhance student learning

**Pedagogical challenges:**
- Connecting with other faculty and resources to increase knowledge and improve use of active learning strategies

For Nicole McNichols, it was reading research on the effectiveness of active learning strategies that inspired her to test them in her Psychology courses. New to active learning teaching, McNichols was drawn to the idea that particular teaching practices as well as physical features of the classroom could encourage students to take control of their own learning. For Theories of Social Psychology, a new course for her, McNichols was particularly interested in creating a learning environment that would address the reticence of some students to speak up in a large seminar. She found the round tables in the ALC to be an important catalyst for group discussions.

McNichols allowed groups to form naturally in her classroom, determined by where students chose to sit on the first day. While she struggled with decisions about whether and how to get students in the
groups to “mix up,” McNichols felt that the consistency in the groups had the effect she wanted. “Many students have trouble speaking up in a traditional classroom when all the focus is on them. They feel that they have to get something completely right before they speak up, so it hinders the sharing of ‘half-baked’ ideas. Having small groups fostered trust and friendship that allowed students to feel comfortable and share more freely. Students could express the half-baked idea and let other group members develop it with them.” McNichols noted that the relationships formed in class appear to be lasting, noting that many members of individual groups from her course have continued to stay in contact and to meet socially, even after the end of the quarter.

The small groups benefited student-instructor interactions as well. McNichols noted that she came to know her students better, not only those who spoke most frequently in class, but also the more quiet students. She even characterized the self-selected student groups as having their own “personalities” (“hardworking,” “social,” etc.) over time. “And it shifts teaching -- I could tailor my examples to the concepts, to the person, to the group, as needed and really get good feedback as to whether it was helping.”

Although McNichols taught Psychology in the ALC in academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15, she still considers herself a beginner in terms of understanding the range of instructional strategies she might employ and how she might effectively utilize the technologies available to support those strategies. She mentioned a previous student who had referred to the ALC as a “learning playground” -- one which McNichols felt awaited her own exploration as well.

She recalled a day when she asked students at the start of class to mix up their groups part way through the class session; they did not, and McNichols realized that she herself hadn’t been clear about why she wanted them to do this, or what instruction she needed to give to make goals more clear. “I am interested in learning different ways to get students moving around to work with others more, however I was also a little reluctant to push too hard,” indicating that students trusted their groups and were hesitant to work across other student groups. McNichols cited the trust built within each individual table as a key reason why she felt the small group discussions improved student experience to the degree they did.

McNichols expressed a desire to read more research on active learning and to connect with more instructors with interest and experience in active learning pedagogy. Reflecting on her experiences teaching in the ALC this quarter, McNichols said “we’re always trying to learn and grow, but I was happy with how [the class] went. If my goal was to have students that mastered the material, then I believe we met that goal successfully.”

**Student Experience**

Students in Psychology 445 indicated that they found it easy to contribute to group work in class, with different opinions on how successful the group work activities were. Said one student: “It was more

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interactive; more like positive group work/activities rather than a classroom setting, which makes the class more enjoyable.” Another student stated that “I learn concepts best when I can verbalize them with my peers.” A few students commented that although the “open-ended” group discussions were “great,” they saw some shortcomings with this model: “there's a lot less instruction from the professor, which makes learning goals unclear.” Yet another student indicated that the mix of working with classmates with input from the instructor “helps me get to the core concepts.”

Students indicated that they felt welcome in class and that McNichols respected all students. One student stated that the course content lent itself well to the “seminar” style of Psychology 445. In contrast to other seminars the student had taken in lecture-style classrooms, the student stated “I prefer seminars [like this] where they're actually seminars and you get to interact.”

Overall, students indicated that it was important to them to come to class prepared. A student discussed class preparation in terms of shared responsibility for learning: “in general when I don’t come prepared to class I don’t participate in discussion as much... I feel like I let my group down.”

**Best Practices from Theories of Social Psychology**

McNichols achieved a positive learning environment that supported a high level of student comfort, engagement, and interaction through the following practices:

- Allowing student groups to form naturally
- Keeping groups consistent, for the most part, across the quarter to build trust and friendship among group members
- Sitting at the table with students when joining a group discussion and getting to know the students
- Through formative assessment, individualizing instruction to student groups and individuals as necessary
- Designing small group assignments that benefited from discussion and collaborative effort
- Encouraging independent use of classroom resources (e.g. whiteboards) and students’ own laptops

**Authors:** Janice Fournier, UW-IT Academic & Collaborative Applications
Amanda Hornby and Louise Richards, UW Odegaard Library

**Thanks to the research team:** Gabbie Barnes, Alaina Bull, Tara Coffin, Tyler Fox and Marisa Petrich

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– PSYCH 445 student