

‘MAGA’: LEARNING THE ART OF INTERVIEWING DIVERSE SOURCES

Explanation of the teaching practice or activity

Inspired by a peer educator’s teaching practice presented at a previous AEJMC conference in which she used the phrase “Make American Great Again” to help students find community story ideas off campus, I created an out-of-the-classroom, and off-campus, activity designed to help students gain experience interviewing and listening to diverse sources. Through this experience, which was graded for three days of class participation, students engaged with learned interviewing techniques as they interacted with people of various ages, races, classes, and religions in the local community.

This activity required about three full class periods (50 minutes each), as well as additional time outside of the class time. Students were required to leave the campus and interview 10 residents who were not associated with the university. The assignment details (handout) provided students with the criteria for the types of people to be interviewed. Students had to interview a teacher, a law enforcement officer, a business owner, a religious leader, a county employee, a city employee, a person over the age of 65, a person under the age of 18, a renter, and a home owner. Of these 10 interviewees, five of them had to be of a different race and gender than the student.

Students were free to open their interviews with situational opening techniques, but the first official question they had to ask was: When you hear ‘Make America Great Again,’ what does that mean to you? It was a tough question to ask because it allowed for a wide range of responses from interviewees. Therefore, the activity required students to think critically about finding interview subjects, formulate opening techniques, understand relational dimensions, recognize verbal and non-verbal cues, apply active listening skills, and generate question sequence designs on the spot.

Because this teaching practice was part of an interviewing and listening class, students were required to record at least two of the interviews for self-evaluation purposes. They then presented, in class, their self-evaluations. Specifically, students self-evaluated the types of questions they used, common pitfalls they might have committed, and overall strengths and weaknesses of the interviews.

Rationale

It is no secret, some college students enrolled in mass communication majors can, and want to, talk to anyone on the street.

But then there are students who are not nearly as confident, and they must be required in their classes to step out of their comfort zones and talk to strangers.

Students are able to learn a lot about interviewing and listening through case studies and in-class exercises with each other, but experiential learning outside of the classroom provides unique opportunities for students that cannot be replicated in the classroom. Therefore, there is no better way to improve students interviewing skills than to simply have them interview people, especially a diverse group of people.

Instructing mass communication students to interview 10 people with diverse backgrounds, classes, races, professions, religions is necessary for multiple reasons. One, it promotes their awareness of diversity, which they will carry into their media fields upon graduation, including journalism and public relations. Secondly, while I would like to think interviewing people of various backgrounds would be an automatic for students, it is not. The

institution where I implemented this learning exercise is 80% homogenous in race, and most of the students in the mass communication majors come from affluent homes. So, I quickly learned that students, unless hard-pressed, simply interview people who look like themselves. Therefore, this assignment was specifically designed to get students out of their comfort zones and experience diversity as it relates to race, gender, class, and religion.

Outcomes

It is easy to romanticize the outcomes of a teaching practice. However, this learning activity produced a wide-range of tangible outcomes for students. Because of the nature of the assignment, students learned about the larger community in which they live during the school year. They traveled unfamiliar roads. They ventured into new neighborhoods. They discovered restaurants and shops. They met people who did not look like themselves.

Through this activity, one student met a source who gave her a school-year job at her local gymnastics studio. Also, because of this activity, several students connected with area religious leaders and participated in international mission trips. Journalistically, several students routinely called upon sources they met through the activity for news stories in their journalism classes and student media organizations.

My students grumbled because of the amount of time the activity took to complete, but most of the students said they appreciated the requirements because they gained confidence. They also said the experience helped them build upon their critical thinking skills by having to find people they did not know, allowed them to hone the interviewing techniques they learned in the classroom, and required them to quickly adapt while asking what could easily be perceived as a partisan question to strangers of various classes, races, educations, religions, and professions.

In terms of interviewing education outcomes, this activity was eye-opening for the students, specifically the recorded interviews. Through the self-evaluations, students identified their strengths and weaknesses in opening/closing interview techniques, question designs, interview schedules, active listening techniques, and common interviewing pitfalls such as making assumptions of interviewees, putting words in interviewees' mouths, and being argumentative with interviewees who provided responses that did not align with the interviewers' viewpoints. Overall, this activity, while extremely challenging for some students, produced tangible learning results for students, and I plan to incorporate it into my other classes that require learning interviewing and listening skills.