

Mysteries of Communication: Students as Theory Detectives

Goal

This project integrates conceptual material about communication theory with a private detective film (*The Zero Effect*) to help students enact—and appreciate—the *process* of theorizing.

Rationale

This project is used in a Communication Theory course (although it could also be used in a more formal, detailed manner in a Research Methods course) to demonstrate that theories (as products) are the result of systematic processes (theorizing). As students learn about theories over the course of the academic term, they also engage in a parallel team project in which they investigate a mystery of communication, collect clues, and attempt to “solve” the mystery by the end of the term. Their solutions are mini-theories of communication. In working as communication theory detectives, students also reflect upon their own meta-theoretical assumptions as well as their ontological and epistemological preferences.

Directions

1. On the first day or two of class, introduce the idea of “communication mysteries”—also known as questions that make us wonder how communication works in particular scenarios (e.g., Why do we say “how are you?” after someone says “hi”? How are nonverbal signals used to indicate attraction to another?). Ask students to return to the next class period with a list of mysteries/questions.
2. On the next day of class, use group and whole class discussion to guide the students toward selecting (and refining the wording of) a question to investigate. Introduce the notion of research questions as a means of differentiating between “everyday inquiry” (i.e., the questions we ask ourselves about our interactions with others) and “academic inquiry” (i.e., the systematic investigation of research questions and hypotheses). Meanwhile, also introduce the students to notions of ontology, epistemology, and meta-theory.
3. Then, soon after step 2 occurs, have students view the film, *The Zero Effect*, and be prepared to discuss (a) the questions that the main character, private detective Daryl Zero, asked as he investigated mysteries and (b) what ontology, epistemology, and meta-theory he embraced. (I ask students to write a 2-page paper, but a classroom discussion would work as well.) Use this discussion to help students reflect upon their own research questions as well as their assumptions about theorizing.
4. As the term progresses, students work independently on gathering evidence (collecting clues) relevant to the mystery (research question) they are investigating. Students can be asked to formally or informally check in with the instructor for guidance along the way.
5. With 2-3 weeks remaining in the term, students should offer an outline or case report of their mystery. It should essentially function as a full-sentence outline of their final paper/report (I provide a template that they complete). These case reports should be evaluated, primarily in a prospective manner, in order to help

- students draft a final paper/report. As part of the case and final reports, students are required to identify: (a) their ontological, epistemological, and meta-theoretical assumptions; (b) the insights/themes/patterns they identified after analyzing their evidence/clues; (c) connections from their insights to at least two of the theories covered in the course.
6. Final papers/reports are turned in and evaluated at the end of the term. These reports read almost as research papers (absent a literature review; a literature review could certainly be required for upper-level courses and/or those on semester systems).

Connection to Concepts, Theory, or Skills

Through the use of the detective/mystery theme, students learn the rudiments of research, develop an understanding of the process of inquiry, and come to appreciate how theories are developed. They are much better able to identify and comprehend the abstract concepts of ontology, epistemology, and meta-theory. They are also more cognizant of the relationships and connections among theories because they are required to identify connections between established theories and those that they created.

Typical Results

The most dedicated and thoughtful students produce excellent work (i.e., their papers have been accepted for presentation at conferences such as NCA). Even those students who don't quite "get it" tend to have a stronger understanding of the course material than they would otherwise (students who struggle in the class tend to earn higher grades on the final papers/reports than on their exams). The key is to provide significant encouragement and mentoring of the students as they work throughout the quarter.

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