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GIFT: Great Idea for Teaching Speech

Unspoken Rules: Using the Game of Mao to Teach Sensemaking and Cultural Approaches to Communication**Nina O'Brien**

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Abstract

This interactive classroom activity invites students to interrogate their common sense and taken-for-granted communication practices and assumptions. In the course of playing a “concealed rules” game, students enact the ritual view of communication and the process of sensemaking. The activity provides an experiential model for clarifying complex themes as well as for actively constructing student understanding of the theories. The activity directly challenges norms of classroom communication and interaction and promotes thoughtful and engaged classroom discussion and reflection. Instructors are provided clear instructions, recommended student readings and sample discussion questions. The activity and debrief usually require about one hour of instructional time. Recommendations for ways the activity can be tailored to suit instructor needs allow this dynamic and engaging activity to be effectively adapted.

Courses

Communication Theory, Organizational Communication, Introduction to Human Communication, Small Group Communication, Critical/Cultural Studies

Objectives

- Students will experience the same cognitive and communicative practices described by Weick’s concept of sensemaking and Carey’s ritual view of communication through actively constructing rather than receiving an understanding of these concepts.
- Students will be able to link the ways they made sense of the class activity to the practices of sensemaking in organizational and other communication situations.
- Students will be able to identify the ways in which ritualistic cultural practices communicate social norms through the unconventional rules of this card game.

Introduction and Rationale

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A growing body of research suggests that students who are able to apply complex concepts to everyday activities and interactions are better able to remember and recall those concepts (Cherney, 2008), and apply them to novel situations and contexts (Hamer, 2000). This is especially important when concepts challenge basic common sense or habitual modes of communicating and interacting. Two such concepts are James Carey's (1989) cultural approach to communication which posits that cultural norms are communicated through rituals and participatory acts rather than direct transmission, and Karl Weick's Sensemaking (1979, 1988, 1995). Each of these frameworks asks students to reconsider the taken-for-granted ways in which communication norms and practices shape human interaction. By participating in an activity which directly challenges expectations of classroom communication, students engage all four of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning modes: Reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and concrete experience.

Materials

It is recommended that the class begin with the activity, and that lecture is used to reinforce, rather than to introduce it. This activity presumes that students have had the opportunity to engage with the texts prior to the day of the activity.

- One deck of standard playing cards for every 3-4 students in the class.
- (Optional) A short lecture which supplements the activity and highlights specific terminology from the text.

Description of the Activity

For graduate and advanced undergraduate students, the activity may follow an assigned primary reading on Sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995), Cultural Approaches to Communication (Carey, 1989, 2008), or the coverage of these theories in texts like Mumby (2012). For students in introductory undergraduate classes, it can be helpful to place this activity in the context of more general explorations of cognitive communication processes of perception and understanding like that covered in Wood (2013). Execution of the activity and debrief generally takes about 1 hour but can easily be extended to fill a longer class period. If less time is available, the in-class debrief may be shortened and combined with a take-home reflection assignment.

Mao (sometimes spelled Mau) is a card shedding game similar in structure to Uno or Crazy 8s. The goal of the game is to be the first player to rid themselves of all their cards. It is also a "concealed rules" game, in which the precise mechanisms of the game are deliberately withheld from players. The discovery of the rules through the process of penalization is itself one of the prominent features of the game.

It is recommended that one deck is used for every three to four people playing the game. Each player is dealt an initial hand of between four and seven cards. The fewer the cards dealt, the quicker the game will move, which can leave time for multiple rounds. For the initial rounds, the instructor generally takes on the role of the dealer, or "Mao," who turns over a card to initiate play. Players discard from their hand one card per turn which matches either the suit (hearts, spades, clubs or diamonds) or the face value (A, 2, 3, 4, etc.) of the last card played. If player does not have an appropriate card to play, they must draw a card from the deck. Other rules vary

by group, and additional rules may be added by the instructor to increase the complexity of the game. Common rules include: no talking, no changing direction of play, no playing out of turn, no delaying, no complaining, no asking questions, and the use of wild cards.

Players must work through the game with no instruction and are penalized by “Mao” with additional cards for playing incorrectly or violating rules. A player wins the round when they discard their final card. All variations of the activity described below require approximately 20 to 30 minutes of class time to complete.

Variation 1: Small groups

Arrange a desk or a circle of chairs so that a small group of students (between 4 and 6 is common but may vary depending on class size) can easily play cards together. The remaining students in the class can form a circle around them. Beyond selecting the students who will play or asking for volunteers, the instructor, who serves as the dealer, or “Mao”, provides no additional verbal instruction and penalizes students for rule violations.

Students who play the game must rely on their prior knowledge, instincts, experience, trial and error, and observation to work through the game. Some students will become frustrated or annoyed by the lack of clarity and feedback, and others will be amused or inspired to figure out what is going on. Still others may try to reject the gameplay rules completely, deliberately playing incorrectly even as they are repeatedly penalized and rules of the game become clearer.

Students who are observing the game from the outside circle are not subject to the game’s rules and may discuss and debate the rules of the game as they unfold. However, they may not know or understand this, and assume the rules they observe apply to players and observers alike.

After one round of the game, new players are recruited, and play begins again. As many rounds of the game are played as necessary to give each student an opportunity to play. Game play is fast, usually lasting no more than a few minutes per round, and speeding up in subsequent rounds as students begin to make sense of the game.

Variation 2: Opt-in, Opt-out

The game can also be played to allow students who become frustrated to step out of the game, and students who believe they have cracked the rules to step in. This has the effect of allowing students to test their hypotheses about the rules and change roles between player and observer.

Variation 3: Full Class

Mao can also be played as a large group activity in smaller classes or seminars. While there is no absolute limit on the number of players in a round, game play is less successful for groups larger than 15. This version of the game requires the most time, but usually falls within 30 minutes, depending on group size.

Variation 4: Adding Rules

If time permits, multiple rounds of Mao may be played, wherein the winner of the previous game takes on the mantle of “Mao” and makes up one additional concealed rule in

addition to the previous rules, which is communicated by the “Mao” (and others who pick up on the new rule) through the act of penalty. Each subsequent game retains the rules of all previous games.

Debriefing

As a concealed-rules game, Mao challenges students to participate in active sensemaking, which can be initially frustrating but also produce interesting “aha!” moments as students develop their understanding of the game and its rules. Similarly, Mao’s gameplay demonstrates the process of cultural, ritualistic forms of communication in which societal norms and rules are not explicitly stated, but lived through acts of sharing, association, and participation. Students can be asked to address the following questions in small groups, or as part of a large group discussion:

1. What are the rules of the game we just played?
2. How did you figure them out?
3. What previous knowledge did you rely on?
4. What forms of learning did you rely on?
5. What was it like to play this game?
6. How did the fact that you were not told the rules make you feel?
7. What was it like to observe others playing this game?
8. What forms of communication were you forbidden from using?
9. What forms of communication did you find yourself using instead?
10. What other situations in your lives resemble this activity? (For example, if you are new at a job, how do you learn the rules? If you are new to a place, like an amusement park or a library, how do you know where to go or what behavior is appropriate?)

More in-depth debriefing can take the form of short written responses or reflections completed in class or as a homework assignment. For example, students may be asked to consider how the game illustrated one or more of the specific ways in which Weick (1995) says individuals make sense of situations (retrospectively, with missing and misleading clues, in terms of our roles and positions, through communicating, over time and relying on plausibility rather than accuracy). Students may also reflect on how societal expectations and norms are communicated not through the transmission of messages (Carey, 1989), but through unspoken cultural practices (and the potential consequences when one deviates from cultural norms). As well, students may be prompted to think of a situation in their lives in which they have had to figure out the unspoken rules, rituals, or norms of a new environment or group, and to consider how they have relied on the different forms of sensemaking to do it. Debrief of this activity is generally highly interactive, enthusiastic, and discursive. It is recommended that 30 minutes or more are allowed for a full in-class debrief.

Appraisal

This activity has been well-received in several graduate and undergraduate courses at a large, urban comprehensive public university. Students report that they enjoy the unexpected

nature of the activity and develop a sense of common cause and camaraderie as they collectively get closer and closer to unravelling the game's hidden rules. The activity provokes active engagement, and student feedback suggests that it is helpful in making concrete what are otherwise "hazy" or "abstract" concepts and ideas. More advanced students are especially gratified by the "aha!" moment which accompanies the realization that they have spent the class time "doing" the theory under investigation. The practice of participating in the game will also give instructors the experience of engaging in reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and concrete experience which their students will also enjoy.

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