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Becky Wauson

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Becky Wauson

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A Proposed Workshop for Christian Youth Groups

Communication Studies Culminating Project

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Supervised by Jeff Kerssen-Griep, Ph.D.

Communication Studies and the Gospel:

A Proposed Workshop for Christian Youth Groups

A core tenant of the Christian faith is love. The famous verse John 3:16 starts, "For God so loved the world…" Coming from a Christian worldview, the Gospel of Jesus is one of God's love for mankind. According to the Bible, God created people out of love, and through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God calls people away from sin and back into the fullness of life in Him. It is because of God's love for people that by his grace, He works to make them into a closer likeness of his Son. Jesus set the ultimate example for loving other people, and God calls us to go and do the same. The verse Micah 6:8 instructs the reader, "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God".

Despite the fact that Christianity is a worldview whose foundation is love, the church sometimes struggles with putting love for all people into practice. Westboro Baptist Church immediately comes to mind, as group of professing Christians who espouse hate speech and picket funerals of members of the LGBT+ community. Surely these actions are not loving one's neighbor. Neither is it loving to dismiss one's convictions about how to live because another person disagrees. Christians believe that God has a standard of right and wrong, and while God extends grace to forgives sin, followers of Jesus are encouraged to live in such a way that brings glory to God. Rules for how to live are healthy for us as a society, and in the same way, Christians ascribe to a set of rules for how God would have them live. Within the evangelical Christian tradition, tensions arise from dissenting views on how to love people who do not hold these same beliefs. Common phrases like "love the sinner, hate the sin" fall short when it comes time to put the platitude into action. Life is full

of complexity, yet some Christians go the route of oversimplifying and dismissing people who may not believe the same things or have the same worldview.

In this paper, I argue for another way forward. I am compelled to believe that doing the hard work of entering into relationships and engaging in dialogue with others is love in action. There is a way to engage in honest dialog with someone while remaining differentiated in what one believes. Rather than giving into a threat response of "fight or flight" when confronted with complicated social issues, how might we better manage our emotions and take another's perspective so that we can engage fully with people and build connections?

Interpersonal Communication theory and research on communicating across social barriers has the power to equip people to put love into action. The following paper is not an apologetics piece for a Christian worldview, but an application of Communication Studies scholarship in a conservative evangelical Christian context.

It is both my experience of being raised within an evangelical Christian tradition and value of Social Science that has driven this project. As a person of faith who grew up attending church youth groups, I am aware of several ways to respond to "outsiders" – people who live or believe differently. In the shifting landscape of our cultural and social climate, Communication Studies scholarship has much to contribute. It is a personal conviction of mine and burden of responsibility to steward what I have learned about Communication and apply it in the Christian tradition to which I am connected.

Students in a youth group I plan to serve in next year would benefit from learning about concepts of power and privilege, perspective taking, and emotion work. In this paper I present a theoretical foundation from communication theory and research for a proposed

curriculum of trainable skills to help middle school and high school students more competently and more lovingly engage with people across social barriers.

This paper is organized in the following way. First I will present an overview of the literature on the histories of youth ministry, perspective taking, and emotion work. I will then propose learning activities geared toward the Middle School and High School students in a conservative evangelical Christian youth group. I will end with conclusions, limitations, and proposed next steps.

Literature Review

History of Youth Ministry

Because of tension in the history of youth ministry between the theology and social science, interpersonal communication research and best practices in evangelical Christian youth groups are lacking. In the following section I will present an overview of the history of youth ministry.

Christian based work with young people emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Senter, 2014). Youth organizations typically rely heavily on the service of volunteers and has always been a transaction between young people themselves or caring adults and young people (Erickson, 1983; Senter, 2014). As far as training for those who work or volunteer in youth ministry, there are two forms of education: non-formal youth ministry education, and formal youth ministry education. Formal youth ministry education arose in the nineteenth century with the realized need for well-trained professional workers. After World War II Christian Colleges and seminaries formed Youth Ministry programs and in the 1970s and 1980s churches began hiring professional youth ministers (Senter, 2014).

Senter (2014) identifies three educational theories based in a Judeo-Christian worldview that shaped early youth ministry innovations. First is the rabbinic tradition of rote memory of the Torah for young people to pass on their religious tradition. This influenced the common practice of memorization and recitation and of scripture in Sunday school classes for kids. A second theory of doing youth ministry is one of Christian revival. This stems from the "Christian Endeavor Movement," which Senter (2014) argues reduced the Gospel to calls of conversion. The third early theory of youth ministry is one of "Christian nurture" – the mindset that children and youth should be raised knowing they are Christians and to never think anything otherwise.

Twentieth century liberal theology and progressive education departed from these theories of nineteenth century evangelicalism and piety (Senter, 2014). Senter (2014) suggests that academics offered a new theoretical base for youth ministry completely disconnected from the supernatural. This theoretical shift was met with dissention, and many youth ministries rejected twentieth century liberal theology and remained grounded in nineteenth century assumptions with a negative attitude toward academia (Black, 2009).

This longstanding tension between academia and youth ministry can be felt today, even within the rise of youth ministry education. Some youth ministry education programs anchor their training exclusively within a biblical or theological framework, omitting any methods developed in the social sciences. Other programs contend that all methods are useful for shaping theological discourse, a notion that Senter (2014) argues diminishes the importance of Scripture. It is once again time for youth ministry educators to determine how the social sciences and theology relate to each other.

Perspective Taking

Perspective taking is defined as laying down one's own point of view to consider the world from another's perspective (Epley & Caruso, 2008). Research suggests that engaging in perspective taking has numerous benefits – perspective taking may increase social coordination, cooperation between people, and psychological altruism (Batson, 1994). Human beings have the capacity to put themselves in another's shoes, yet many people do not do so successfully or with accuracy.

Epley and Caruso (2008) identify three barriers that keep people from utilizing their perspective taking abilities to their full potential. The first barrier is failing to activate the necessary effortful thinking in order to understand another's perspective. Some situations automatically elicit empathy, for example, when a person sees another in pain (Decety & Sommerville, 2003), but many other situations do not require explicit attempts to understand another's perspective when it would be beneficial to do so. To overcome this barrier, individuals must actively think about the way another person understands the world.

Epley and Caruso (2008) refer to their second barrier as "miscalibrated adjustment" (p. 302). It is not only necessary to activate one's perspective-taking capabilities – he or she must also let go of his or her own perspective. One's own perspective is immediate, automatic, and easy. Choosing to forego one's own world view to understand another's is a slow, deliberate, and difficult process (Epley & Caruso, 2008).

A third barrier to perspective taking is using stereotypes or idiosyncratic information about the other person to form judgments. In a multidisciplinary review of the literature on tolerance/intolerance, Baldwin (1998) writes about the concept of homophily – people tend to associate with others who are similar to themselves. People have an easier

time understanding similar others, and when it comes to difference, people may infer about the others' beliefs, attitudes, and motivations based on stereotypes. When a person recognizes another as different, he or she may rely on stored knowledge about the other person and think under the influence of his or her unconscious biases. One's own point of view often serves as a default perspective for interpreting others' thoughts, even among full-grown adults (Krueger, 1998).

Emotion Work

"Emotion work" was conceptualized by Arlie Hochschild in 1979 as the unpaid emotional work that a person undertakes in their relationships with friends and family. Hochschild contends that social situations have various feeling rules – social factor that affect what people feel and the social rules for expressing and managing one's emotions.

Goffman (1961) suggests that people enter encounters in a particular psychological state. The mood of an encounter between people dictates the present feeling rules. Individuals are socialized to follow the feeling rules called for in each situation. Goffman (1961) and Hochschild (1979) write about the cognitive dissonance that comes as a result from one's felt emotions and desired emotional expression not aligning with the situation's feeling rules.

Proposed Learning Activities

Instructional communication scholarship informs the choices I made for these learning activities. When developing a curriculum, it is important to identify the topic(s) that will be covered, the number of participants, and the specific objectives of the learning activities.

In this particular youth group, meetings are Wednesday evenings 7:00-9:00 P.M., and approximately 10-20 middle school and high school students attend on any given week. Learning activities in this curriculum will take several formats, based on scholarship that suggests students' learning styles vary from one another. Smith & MacGregor (1998) describe five particular aspects of cooperative learning:

- Learning is an active, constructive process

- Learning depends on rich contexts

- Learners are diverse

- Learning is inherently social

- Learning has affective and subjective dimensions (p. 586)

Within this curriculum, the learning activities will take the following formats: the facilitator "giving a message," small group discussions, large group discussions, time for personal reflection, and group activities including a "Privilege Exercise," Role Playing, and writing a hypothetical letter as a group called, "What I would want other people to know about Christians."

The objectives of these learning activities are an engagement of deep dialogue and personal processing, a willingness to be appropriately vulnerable, developed understandings of students' own privilege, and increasingly open attitudes toward people who are different.

Before diving into the learning activities, the facilitator would first set ground rules for the evening. These particular ground rules have been borrowed and adapted from Paul C. Gorski on the EdChange website Multicultural Pavilion:

- Listen actively – respect others when they are talking

- Speak from your own experience instead of generalizing about others

- Do not be afraid to respectfully challenge one another by asking questions, but refrain from personal attacks – focus on ideas

- Participate to the fullest of your ability – community growth depends on the inclusion of every individual voice

After presenting her/his own suggestions for ground rules, the facilitator would open the conversation up for suggestions of other rules. If a majority of the students agree on the proposed rule, it will be added to the list.

Please see the Appendix A for the learning activity materials.

Conclusion

These learning activities are designed to acknowledge the complexity of social barriers in our interpersonal communication. The objective is to help students recognize this complexity and still move forward as a faithful person. Open dialogue and engagement with others about the messy parts of life is a way to extend love to others and bring glory to God. This paper lays out a theoretical foundation of communication theory and research to support a proposed curriculum of interpersonal skills to help middle school and high school students more competently and more lovingly engage with people across social barriers.

The next step for this project is the implementation of these learning activities. It will be important to assess these activities for effectiveness in meeting the objectives as well as their effectiveness in engaging the students.

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Appendix A: Privilege Exercise

I. You will need a room that is large enough for all students who are participating in this workshop to stand in a single file line, shoulder to shoulder.

   a. The facilitator should lay masking tape in middle of the room so there is equal distance to the front and to the back. The students should stand behind the line, so when the sentences are read aloud, the students will walk forward to go over the line for the privilege walk, or stay behind the line and take steps back on the privilege walk. Each step depends on the participants' responses to the sentences that are read aloud by the facilitator.

   b. The total estimated time of this exercise is 1 ½ hours.

II. Exercise

   a. All participants should begin this exercise silently without speaking, hand in hand, in a single file line, shoulder to shoulder.

   b. The participants should be instructed to listen carefully to each sentence and, take the step required if it applies to them.

   c. The participants should be told there will be prizes at the front of the room/end of the walk that everyone is competing for.

   d. This workshop is not a competition. It is about learning what privileges some people had while growing up.

   e. Notify the participants that if they do not feel comfortable moving forward during the exercise, they have the right to stay back. Remind them that this is an experience based on trust and mutual experience. This exercise and the

room it is being held in is considered a safe environment, and that all

participants should remain silent throughout the process.

    f. Start this workshop with a few easy sentences to ask the group.

        i. If you are right-handed, please move one-step forward.

        ii. If you are a female under 5-feet tall, please move one-step forward.

        iii. If you are a male with a mustache, please move one-step forward.

    g. You can now begin the Privilege Walk Workshop with some more in-depth

sentences.

        i. You can share statistics and statements about each sentence if you

wish to enrich the conversation.

        ii. Ask the participants who have moved forward or backward to wait

until you are done sharing the statistics if they are being included.

        iii. Ask the participants that have moved forward during the privilege

walk to look side to side and see who is standing with them. It is

important to be sensitive to the participants who did not necessarily

move forward, as they may be embarrassed or upset.

        iv. Ask the participants to move back to the middle of the room and stand

along the line.

III. Sentences to speak:

1. Please take one-step back: If your ancestors were forced to come to the USA

not by choice.

2. Please take one-step forward: If your primary ethnic identity is American.

3. Please take one-step back: If you were ever called names because of your race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

4. Please take one-step forward: If there were people of color who worked in your household as servants, gardeners, etc.

5. Please take one-step back: If you were ever ashamed or embarrassed of your clothes, house, car, etc.

6. Please take one-step forward: If one or both of your parents has a college degree.

7. Please take one-step back: If you were raised in an area, where there was prostitution, drug activity, etc.

8. Please take one-step back: If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed.

9. Please take one-step forward: If you studied the culture of your ancestors in elementary school.

10. Please take one-step back: If you went to school speaking a language other than English.

11. Please take one-step forward: if there were more than 50 books in your house when you grew up.

12. Please take one-step back: If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy food when you were growing up.

13. Please take one-step back: If one of your parents was unemployed or laid off, not by choice.

14. Please take one-step forward: If you attended private school or summer

     camp.

15. Please take one-step back: If your family ever had to move because they

     could not afford the rent.

16. Please take one-step back: If you were ever discouraged from academics or

     jobs because of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

17. Please take one-step forward: If you were encouraged to attend college by

     your parents.

18. Please take one-step back: If you were raised in a single parent household.

19. Please take one-step forward: If your family owned the house, where you

     grew up.

20. Please take one-step forward: If you were ever offered a good job because of

     your association with a friend or family member.

21. Please take one-step back: If you were ever denied employment because of

     your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

22. Please take one-step back: If you were paid less, treated fairly because of

     race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

23. Please take one-step back: If you were ever accused of cheating or lying

     because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

24. Please take one-step forward: If you ever inherited money or property.

25. Please take one-step back: If you had to rely primarily on public

     transportation.

26. Please take one-step back: If you were ever stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

27. Please take one-step back: If you were ever afraid of violence because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

28. Please take one-step back: If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke related to your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation.

29. Please take one-step back: If you were ever the victim of violence related to your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

30. Please take one-step back: If your parents did not grow up in the United States.

31. Please take one-step forward: If your parents told you could be anything, you wanted to be.

IV. Processing

    a. Ask participants to remain in their positions and to look at their position in relation to the line and the positions of the other participants.

    b. Ask participants to consider who among them would probably win the prize.

    c. Suggested questions for processing are:

        i. What happened?

        ii. How did this exercise make you feel?

        iii. What were your thoughts as you did this exercise?

        iv. What have you learned from this experience?

        v. What can you do with this information in the future?

V. Questions

    a. Start the question, answer session by going around the room, and have each student share one word that capture how they are feeling right now. If they do not want to share, have them say, "pass".

    b. Would anyone like to share more about their feelings?

    c. How did it feel to be one of the students on the "back" side of the line?

    d. How did it feel to be one of the students on the "front" side of the line?

    e. If anyone was alone on one side, how did that feel?

    f. Was anyone always on one side of the line? If yes, how did that feel?

    g. Were there certain sentences that were more impactful than others?