

Structure Versus Agency

We developed this activity as a tool for breaking down social issues using a theoretical lens. It is a graph that poses two questions of social behaviours: What causes the behaviour and what can we do about it? These two questions are broken down via two key debates in sociology:

Structure versus Agency and Regulation versus Revolution

The first axis considers the debate surrounding what causes human behaviour. The question is whether we behave in certain ways because of individual choice, desire and motivation (agency) or whether human behaviour and choices are not truly our own but are influenced by structural/societal influences such as rules & regulations, the mass media, societal pressure or factors such as intergenerational poverty and the economy (structure). The second axis poses the question what should be done to address the human behaviour. Should the behaviour be addressed by enforcing/creating new rules (regulation) or does there need to be a fundamental change to the system (revolution). The activity helps us to think critically to examine our own beliefs, to problem pose and to explore cultural stereotypes.



“This activity always engages my students, even the quiet ones. It has facilitated many passionate discussions and helped us consider issues from more than one perspective” - Donna

Instructions

- This activity should be conducted in an embodied manner where students are able to stand and place themselves along the different axis to state their individual opinions about the behaviour/issue being explored.
- Have students place themselves along the first axis (agency versus structure) in the first instance. Explain to the participants that where they position themselves along the axis is related to whether they believe that the behaviour is completely the responsibility/in the control of the individual or whether they believe that all of the behaviour is directed by/ or in response to society. If a person is in the middle of the axis they are indicating that they believe it is a 50/50 split between agency and structure.

Example 1:

Students at Yule Brook College are responding along the structure versus agency axis (behind one another in a line) to the posed question “who/what is most responsible for bullying” – i.e. the individual or society.

- Ask a number of the participants to explain their position along the axis.

Example 2:

Students at Yule Brook College explaining their position along the axis to one another.



- Inform the students that they will need to change their position (forwards or backwards) on the second axis depending on what they believe is the solution to a problem. Inform the participants that if they move as far forward as possible towards revolution on the axis then they are advocating for violent revolution that could include death. If they move all the way backwards to the end of the regulation axis, then they are advocating for a totalitarian state.

HEAD ♥ HEART ✋ HAND

- Ask the participants to explain their position on the axis.
- As a student discusses/defends their positions inform along the axis encourage the others to shift positions if they have been persuaded to change their mind.

Example 3:

Adults participating in a workshop reposition themselves on the second axis and explain their movement.

- At times we isolate two students who are at polar opposites of the axis to discuss their positions. This technique often encourages deeper thinking as the students are very committed to their positions and are usually keen to explain them.

Example 4:

Students at polar opposites of an axis explain their positions.

- Make sure that you also participate in the activity and explain your choices.

Suggestions

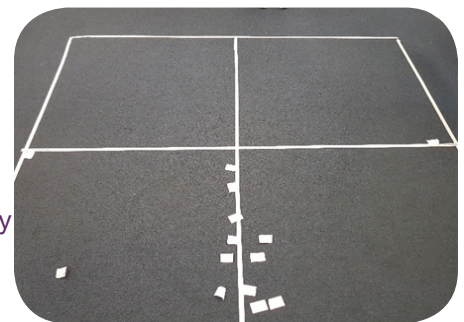
- We suggest that you create the axis using masking tape or by creating a permanent mat - we used materials we sourced from REMIDA.
- We've run this activity in classrooms and in outdoor playground/sports areas. All you need is some masking tape or a mat and you can conduct the activity in any environment.
- When we have a large number of students participating in this activity we get them to use post-it-notes to mark their positions on the graph or else we won't all fit in.
- Have students record their results on the worksheet we've provided.

Example 5:

Post it notes can be used to mark students position on the axis and moved to represent changed opinions.

Some questions we've explored using the structure versus agency activity:

- What do you believe causes disengagement in schools? And what should we do to address it?
- Who's more responsible for deforestation, individual companies or a society that does nothing to stop it?
- Is narcissism the fault/responsibility of the individual or is it driven by society's hero worshipping of the individual (e.g. social media, reality TV, mass media, advertising etc.)
- Why are women viewed as sexual objects?
- Whose responsible for bullying and what do we do about it?



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