

PERCEPTION IS REALITY: SHARING FRAMES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors first present the theoretical grounding for the social construction of reality. They then share two tools for framing reality: one is an actual frame that students take out of the classroom to frame a scene in different ways; the other requires students to frame two different segments of a photographic advertisement. In both exercises students tell (either orally or in writing) the two different stories (perceptions of reality) they discovered. The paper ends with a discussion of student reaction to the activities.

INTRODUCTION

The first class in my Ph.D. program was Organization Theory, taught by a newly-minted Ph.D. At the start of the class, he went to the board and wrote, "perception is reality." He then asked, "What does that mean?" Well, I felt overwhelmed, insecure, and out of my element--I had no *idea* what it meant. Help! Maybe I shouldn't be in a doctoral program at all. Apparently my peers hadn't the foggiest idea either, so I felt better, and, through this unfreezing, disconfirming shock, opened my mind to the new concepts I would encounter throughout the doctoral program.

The story just told describes one author's first exposure to the idea that "perception is reality." Luckily, because of her life experience, she quickly understood the concept when it was explained. However, the typical undergraduate has not had the experience of viewing situations from a variety of perspectives; therefore, we have designed experiential activities that help students learn that "perception is reality." The authors provide a theoretical grounding for the concept, describe the experiential tools they have created and used, present student responses, and lead participants in experiencing one of the activities.

We have used these activities in undergraduate courses on Problem-Solving and Decision-Making, Introduction to Management, and Organizational Behavior as well as in graduate Organizational Behavior classes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We drew from a variety of authors to provide a targeted theoretical grounding for these framing activities. Foremost are the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality* and Karl Weick's books, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995) and *Social Psychology of Organizing* (1979). They all stress that "reality is selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively, and negotiated interpersonally" (Weick, 1979, p. 164). To put it simply, people "see" so-called "objective reality" through the lens of their own background, attitudes, values, beliefs, biases, heuristics, and stereotypes. The social context for organizational perception includes all our past organizational experience (Ritti, 1998, p. 16).

In these exercises, we use the tool of "storytelling" for students to share what they "see," or their "reality." Storytelling as a tool for understanding workplace behavior is used by leaders (Morgan & Dennehy, 1997), trainers (Bell, 1992), bosses, and others who socialize new employees (Ritti, 1998). Stories help students retain concepts learned in class (Morgan & Dennehy, 1995). Tying stories to the perception of reality, Weick says, "Stories that exemplify frames, and frames that imply stories, are two basic forms in which the substance of sensemaking becomes meaningful" (1995, p. 131). In other words, for students to "make sense" out of what they observe, stories and frames are ideal vehicles. Schon has specifically proposed the term "problem framing" to help individuals cope with "complex, uncertain, and unique social situations" (Klabbers, 1996, p. 85). Finally, using stories in a class makes learning more meaningful and even fun for both students and instructors. According to Zemke (1990), stories entertain, evoke emotion, trigger visual memories and strengthen recall of the points illustrated. Students who can tell and retell others' stories are likely to become better leaders and managers (Dennehy, 1999).

RELATED LITERATURE

In a review of the Bernie Keys Library (a compilation of the *ABSEL Proceedings* from 1974 through 2001), we found a variety of papers related to the process and value of experiential learning (Hoover, 1974; Burns & Gentry, 1977;

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Graham, 1985). Many *Simulation and Gaming* articles have also focused on the value of experiential learning and gaming. For example, Sims and Dennehy (1992) review the topic of debriefing and support the value of experiential activities. Klabbers (1996) argues that gaming provides an historicist approach to knowledge transfer in which multiple realities are recognized, therefore validating our framing approach. Only four exercises reported in the *ABSEL Proceedings* over the years touch on the issue of "perception is reality" (King, 1981; Mills, 1988; Sims & Dennehy, 1992; Oppenheimer, 2001). Reflection and sense-making were both topics of ABSEL sessions in 2001 (Oppenheimer, 2001; Markulis & Strang, 2001); however, neither dealt with individual sense-making or the power of stories in reflective learning as this paper does. McClure et al.'s article in *Simulation and Gaming* (1994) on perceptual simulation talks about using guiding pictures (metaphors) as a means to establishing a larger perception of the world, but the article primarily focuses on Gestalt therapy, not on experiential activities. Gundry and Kickul (1996) claim that experiential learning integrates "real business issues into the classroom" (p. 336) and present several creativity techniques that might help students "see" problems from different perspectives. The *Journal of Management Education* has also presented several activities that help students understand the social construction of reality and framing and reframing. Specifically, Lease, McConnell & Nord (1999) offer two frameworks that allow individuals to question, negotiate, and make sense of their actions and others' actions and to define acceptable new action. Bowen's "Team Frames" (1998) deals directly with the concepts of framing and reframing. This exercise is designed to introduce students to the problem-solving skill of reframing by applying the concept to class teams.

Using these theoretical and practical approaches and our classroom experience, we have created two linked exercises focused on "perception is reality." While the main focus in these exercises is helping students to discover that "perception is reality" through the use of both stories and

"frame," we base these interrelated activities on the experiential learning cycle (Dennehy & Sims, 1993), which begins with observing data, moves to reflection on the data and interpretation, then proceeds to seeing patterns or generalizations, and ends in active experimentation, i.e., trying out what was learned. In each of these activities students

- gather data
- reflect on it
- share it and look for patterns
- act on it (i.e., tell a story)

After the story is told, there is debriefing and expanded discussion of what the students experienced and learned. [See Dennehy, Sims, & Collins (1998) for a theoretical and practical guide for successful debriefing.] We suggest using the activities sequentially, starting with "framing reality" (Exercise 1) in one class session and doing the "reflection paper" (Exercise 2) as homework. In the following class, the students would discuss both activities and develop a deeper understanding of the social construction of reality.

In general, student response to both activities is extremely positive. We feel this can be explained by two factors: first, it is fun to get out of the classroom into the "real" world and second, each activity led to some surprise or "ah-ha" experience. In Figure 1 below, we present a number of student responses to the outdoors framing activity done in the Fall of 2001. We also show the most common student surprises and learning from using the two framing exercises. Students who fail to understand that reality varies depending on its perceivers will struggle in the workplace because they tend to believe their own view is the only one and the correct one. Indeed, student comments indicate that they realize that managers must understand multiple employee perspectives in order to succeed.

FIGURE 1: STUDENT COMMENTS, SURPRISES, AND LEARNING

STUDENT COMMENTS	STUDENT SURPRISES AND LEARNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [I learned ...] "to consider what others think about a situation or picture" • [I learned about] "perspectives, placing yourself in someone else's shoes" • "We were able to look at an object in our own way and then reflect upon it." • "Different people have different views/perspectives on one person, place, thing." • "You have to look at the whole picture instead of narrowing in on one small thing and prejudging." • "I learn better from stories and lessons rather than lectures." • "It's nice to be able to do exercises in real settings." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That people tell different stories about the same image • How one's perspective determines what one sees • That students continued to think about different "frames" throughout the course • Students looked at "objective data" differently • Even one individual can approach or "see" a scene in more than one way • Combining several views of a situation or person creates a fuller picture

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THE FRAMING ACTIVITIES

I. Framing Reality

- Learning goals:** To help students discover that there is more than one way to look at "objective" data.
- Approximate timing:** Between 45-50 minutes.
- Group size:** As it focuses on pairs or trios, the activity can be used with any size group.
- Materials needed:** Enough 8 1/2 x 11 frames* so each person has one. Paper and pen (provided by student) for taking notes. (*Colored paper works well--fold an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet so it is 8 1/2 x 5 1/2; cut out the middle, leaving approximately a 1" frame. Actual wooden or plastic frames could be used if available.)
- Preparation by students:** Read text section on perception and/or social construction of reality.
- Preparation by instructor:** Prepare frames. Prepare questions for the debrief. Prepare assignment handout. (A simple slip of paper with instructions is sufficient. Students want a portable assignment, as opposed to having it on an overhead or the board, so they can refer to it outdoors.)

5-10 minutes Ask one reporter from each group to share the differences they found when they shared their observations. Collect on board or easel.

10 minutes Lead students in a discussion of their data--point out the instances where different members "saw" different scenes. Ask what could account for the differences in perception (expect to get the following: location, interest, culture, my attention to detail/big picture, artistic background, color, whether or not scene had people in it).

Close the debrief by observing that even in this simple activity, people looking at the same scene saw a different reality. Then remind them "perception is reality" and ask where else in their lives (and/or the workplace) might perceptions differ and what would be the impact of this. What are the implications for managers?

Steps and Timing of Exercise

- 5 minutes Introduce concept of "perception is reality" through connection to reading assignment, personal story, and/or student examples.
- 2 minutes Divide students into trios (pairs also work, or larger groups if students have been working in teams during the semester).
- 2 minutes Give each student a frame and an assignment sheet. Ask them to get paper and pen.
- 4 minutes Go over assignment and respond to questions.

Assignment: Take your frame, paper, and trio members outside (can be outdoors or just outside the classroom--depends on the group and time constraints). Decide among yourselves what picture/scene to look at through your frame. Move around so each of you has a different view of the scene (e.g., one close-up, one far away, one framing only a small piece of the scene). Take notes on the objective data you see through your frame; try not to include any of the background outside the frame. After 10 minutes, return to the classroom where you will receive further instructions.

- 15 minutes Send students out of the classroom.
- 5 minutes When students return, have them sit as trios (pairs, teams). Ask them to share what they

saw with trio members to tell the story of the picture they viewed through their frame.

II. Reflection paper on "seeing different stories"

- Learning goals:** Allow student to reflect on the concept of "perception is reality" through a concrete activity.
- Timing:** Part I (alone): Student writes paper to be turned in by the deadline, usually the following class.

Reflection Paper

Find a full-page (at least 8.5x11") picture/advertisement in a magazine or newspaper. Using a 4x6" or 3x5" frame, pick out 2 segments of the picture to frame. Outline them and label them A and B. They may partially overlap or be totally different. Write a one-paragraph story/explanation about each of your framed choices. Then discuss how 2 people can view the same picture/problem but "see" something different. What factors might influence the frame choice and interpretation? Be sure to attach the ad to your reflection paper.

- Group size:** When students share their reflection papers, it should be in their regular teams or in trios set up for the purpose.
- Materials needed:** Students need to find photos in magazines and use a 4x6 or 3x5 file card.
- Preparation by student:** Write reflection paper.
- Preparation by instructor:** Plan debrief.

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Option: The entire activity could be done during a 50-minute class period. If this approach is used, the instructor would need to provide magazines and file cards.

Steps and Timing of Exercise

Assume students have completed and brought in their papers.

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| 2 minutes | 1. Have students sit with their team or set up discussion trios. |
| 15 minutes | 2. Each student in turn shows his/her ad to the group and tells the two stories he/she wrote for frame A and frame B. |
| | 3. Instructor leads a debrief with the following questions: |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What did you/your trio share?• What surprised you?• What did you learn about differing views of reality in writing the paper and in sharing it?• How was this experience similar to/different from the "Framing Reality" exercise?• How can you use what you have learned in the "real world?" |

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