

# Action Teaching

SCOTT PLOUS

Education should be directed with reference to two objects – the good of the individual, and the good of the world.

Willbur Fisk, President of  
Wesleyan University, 1831

Action teaching refers to a style of instruction that contributes to peace, social justice, and sustainable living at the same time as it educates students. For example, a peace educator who practices action teaching might follow a course unit on mediation techniques by inviting students to mediate actual conflicts between friends, family members, or co-workers, thereby reducing existing conflicts even while students learn about conflict resolution. Likewise, an instructor teaching about negotiation might challenge students to analyze an unresolved conflict that they or others are having, devise an integrative solution to break the impasse, and make an effort to implement the proposed solution. Or an instructor teaching about persuasion and marketing strategies might ask students to develop a social marketing campaign that reduces interpersonal violence on campus, protects the local environment, promotes human rights abroad, or serves the greater good in some other way.

Regardless of the details, a hallmark of action teaching is that it simultaneously embraces the twin goals of benefiting society as well as individual students (Azar, 2008; Plous, 2009). Such an approach differs from traditional classroom practices that may (or may not) contribute to society at a later time. Rather than deferring these contributions or addressing social issues obliquely, action teaching contributes directly to the

social good while students learn, and this contribution in turn provides students with a richer and more memorable educational experience than they would otherwise have had. In other words, a tenet of action teaching is that social engagement need not wait or should not be treated as extracurricular. On the contrary, action teaching is predicated on the idea that valuable educational opportunities exist outside the corridors of traditional academia, and that students benefit from working on issues that matter to them and to society.

## BACKGROUND

The term “action teaching” was first used roughly ten years ago in an article that I published in *Teaching of Psychology* (Plous, 2000). In that article, I presented action teaching as the pedagogical counterpart to *action research*, a term coined by Kurt Lewin in the aftermath of World War II (Marrow, 1969). Lewin, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and whose mother perished in an extermination camp in Poland, advocated action research as a way to change the world while also contributing to the advancement of scientific knowledge. “Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice,” Lewin (1948) famously wrote. Instead, he called for research that would lead to effective science-based forms of social activism. “No action without research,” declared Lewin, and “no research without action.” (See PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH, COMMUNITY-BASED; ACTIVISM, PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL.)

Lewin was particularly interested in using action research to understand and address prejudices such as the anti-Semitism that had claimed his mother’s life. To that

end, he established a research group of the American Jewish Congress, known as the Commission on Community Interrelations, which explored how best to counter bigotry (Citron, Chein, & Harding, 1950). In this early program of Lewinian action research, participants watched professional actors stage vignettes in which a prejudiced comment was made by one person and countered by another. After each vignette, participants rated the effectiveness of the response they observed. Although Lewin did not live to see the conclusions of this research, its findings offered just the sort of actionable information that he had sought. For instance, the research team reported that the most effective responses to prejudice were calm, quiet objections based on American values (e.g., fairness, pluralism, teamwork) or the logic of individual differences (e.g., that there are substantial individual differences within most groups). It also found that approximately 80% of participants thought that any type of objection to bigotry was better than none at all.

Inspired by this example of action research, I adapted the experimental paradigm for use as a social psychology classroom exercise to help students explore how to respond effectively when confronted with prejudice. After covering topics such as attitude change, cognitive dissonance, and reactance, I divided students into four-person groups and invited them to try a role-playing exercise in which a Speaker made an unambiguously prejudiced comment to a Responder whose job it was to respond effectively to the remark. The Responder did not know in advance what comment the Speaker would make, and the other two group members watched the interaction and offered a psychological critique of the response afterward. Then students rotated roles, the new Speaker made a different prejudiced remark, and another round commenced. After roughly one hour of role

playing in small groups, the class reconvened for a plenary session to discuss what students had learned about how to handle prejudice.

What emerged from this early foray into action teaching was a twofold benefit. Not only did students come away with a deeper understanding of social psychology, but they reported feeling much better equipped to respond to prejudice in daily life. As one student wrote in an anonymous evaluation of the exercise, "I feel like I learned a huge amount in a short period of time about being on both ends of a prejudice[d] statement" (Plous, 2000). Moreover, this student's sentiment was supported by positive ratings from 34 seminar students who took part in the exercise and later completed an anonymous survey about the experience. On a nine-point scale, the modal rating these students gave the exercise was nine, and all 34 students recommended using the exercise with future classes.

Why do students respond to action teaching? Although more research on this question is needed, preliminary evidence suggests at least four reasons. First, action teaching involves social issues that most students already care about – issues related to peace, social justice, and sustainable living. Second, action teaching tends to be memorable, as one would expect with hands-on learning activities and self-relevant content. Third, action teaching frequently facilitates student bonding and group cohesion through the pursuit of common goals. And, of course, many students are motivated by the prospect of bettering themselves and society as a result of their effort.

For action teaching to work well, however, there are two caveats that previous reports have identified. First, instructors should not use action teaching as a tool to simply advance a partisan political agenda. Even the appearance of partisanship can have adverse effects, so instructors are advised to consult colleagues or

administrators if the line between pedagogy and politicking is unclear. Second, action teaching should not be forced on students. Instead, a more educationally sound approach is to offer an “opt out” provision that permits students to complete an alternative assignment or activity if they prefer. Relatively few students tend to opt out of action teaching opportunities, but many students appreciate the freedom to make this decision for themselves.

### AWARD-WINNING EXAMPLES

Five years after the first article on action teaching was published, Social Psychology Network ([www.socialpsychology.org](http://www.socialpsychology.org)) established an annual award to honor outstanding examples of action teaching. The award, known as the SPN Action Teaching Award, relies on a blind review by expert panelists and comes with a \$1,000 cash prize. Eligible entries include classroom activities, student assignments, field experiences, and web resources, and all entries that win the top prize or receive honorable mention are posted in an open-access web archive for other instructors to freely use or adapt.

Since the web archive was publicly released in 2006, its pages have been visited over 150,000 times. The following examples of action teaching represent some of the award-winning entries related to peace psychology and conflict resolution (see [ActionTeaching.org](http://ActionTeaching.org) for further information and other archived examples).

#### **The Forced Migration Project: A Refugee Shelter Display**

In 2008 David Hoffman of the University of California at Santa Cruz won the award for an activity he developed as part of his undergraduate course “Children and War.” In the first phase of the activity, students spent several weeks learning about the life of war

refugees, including public health issues, psychosocial aspects of displacement, and the type of refugee shelter used in various countries. Next, students created educational exhibits with posters, art, videos, and handouts covering topics such as crime and rape in refugee camps, Red Cross operations, and the schooling of displaced children. Finally, students were assigned the task of pitching a rapid-deployment refugee tent and building a camp shelter using only the tools and supplies typically available to refugees. Once these structures were publicly erected in an approved area of the school campus, students then displayed their educational exhibits at the site for a week, inviting over 700 exhibit visitors to enter the shelters and learn more about the effects of war.

#### **Using Lessons from the Holocaust to Reduce Bullying**

In 2007 Ruth Hannon of Bridgewater State College received honorable mention for an action teaching unit that she developed as part of an interdisciplinary course on the Holocaust. In the course, students began by learning about research on conformity, obedience, diffusion of responsibility, and other psychological dynamics involved in the Holocaust. After that, local middle-school teachers visited the class and described some of the factors that make children vulnerable to peer pressure and bullying. Based on this information, the college students then prepared anti-bullying presentations using lessons from the Holocaust, and they gave these presentations to children at the middle school. Not only did the children learn valuable lessons about how to reduce bullying, but when the college students later evaluated the experience, they reported that it increased their understanding of the Holocaust, strengthened their commitment to social action, and instilled a belief that education can reduce hate speech and hate acts.

### Students Reducing Youth Violence

In 2009 Steven Meyers of Roosevelt University won the action teaching award for a two-part field experience that took place in Chicago. In the first part, students spent 25 hours learning about the psychology of urban violence by interviewing neighborhood residents, community leaders, and government officials; meeting with prosecutors and detention facility officers; and listening to parents whose children had been murdered. After examining youth violence from as many perspectives as possible, students then asked legislators to fund antiviolence initiatives, wrote letters to newspapers, developed Internet resources on youth violence, and organized a campus symposium with speakers they had met during their field work. As a result of this action-oriented experience, students effected positive social change in their community while learning about the causes and consequences of youth violence.

### Reducing Conflict by Avoiding Attribution Errors

In 2009 Daniel Stalder of the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater received honorable mention for an assignment designed to help students understand and avoid one of the most common sources of social conflict: attributional errors in which people blame others for actions that were actually caused by situational factors (i.e., instances of the “fundamental attribution error”). For roughly ten days, students kept a journal in which they (1) recorded five cases in which someone treated them poorly, and (2) listed three possible causes for the person’s negative behavior – two situational explanations and one personality explanation. After getting into the habit of considering situational explanations for behavior, students reported becoming less judgmental of others and less upset when others behaved badly. As one student put it, the assignment

“helped me to become more compassionate and self-aware.”

### CONCLUSION

As these examples and others in the archive illustrate, action teaching can take many different forms. Some activities last for weeks, whereas others last only a few minutes. Some take place in the classroom, whereas others take place in the field or on the Web. Some are designed for grade-schoolers, others for high-school or university students, and still others for workshop participants, parties in conflict, or even fellow teachers. In all of these cases, the common assumption is that action-oriented education can do more than teach individuals about peace and social justice – it can help make them, their community, and society more peaceful and socially just during the learning process.

SEE ALSO: Activism, Psychology of Social; Participatory Action Research, Community-Based.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.ActionTeaching.org/>

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/activity/segdyn.htm>