Group Influence via Plastic Toys (e.g. dinosaurs)

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Overview

Student groups use cheap plastic figurines to create dioramas or scenes that illustrate concepts from social psychology. Many concepts can be represented using the figurines (e.g., social facilitation, social loafing, deindividuation, bystander effect, group polarization, groupthink, minority influence, superordinate goals, altruism, hostile and instrumental aggression, ingroup and outgroup bias). Once dioramas or scenes are created, students present to the class and explain how the scenario illustrates the concept. The teacher provides immediate feedback and encourages student revision to address misconceptions, inaccuracies, or incomplete explanations. Students also employ communication skills of collaboration, writing, and speaking.

Alignment with APA's Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major

Goals

Goal 1: Knowledge base
Goal 4: Communication

Outcome

1.1 Describe key concepts, principles, and overarching themes in psychology
4.1 Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes
4.2 Exhibit effective presentation skills for different purposes
4.3 Interact effectively with others

Indicators

1.1a Use basic psychological terminology, concepts, and theories in psychology to explain behavior and mental processes
4.1a Express ideas in written formats that reflect basic psychological concepts and principles
4.1c Use standard English, including generally accepted grammar
4.1d Write using APA style
4.2b Deliver brief presentations within appropriate constraints (e.g., time limit, appropriate to audience)
4.2d Incorporate appropriate visual support
4.3a Identify key message elements in communication through careful listening

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Status
Evidence-Informed Practice

Alignment with APA's National Standards for High School Psychology

Domain
Sociocultural Context

Content Standard Area
Social Interactions

Anticipated Time (*estimate of time needed)*
35-50 minutes: Explaining assessment and assigning terms for students to look up (10-15 minutes); Student collaboration and product (5-10 minutes); Presentations (20 minutes)

Purpose

Formative Student *(teacher provides feedback to students for the purpose of revision)*
After students arrange their collection of toys, they present the model to the class. Students get immediate feedback on the accuracy of their explanation. If students have misconceptions or incompletely explain the concept, the teacher should take the time to refer to the definition again. The teacher can ask students to revise the explanation to be more accurate or complete.

Formative Teacher *(teacher uses assessment data to make a teaching decision, e.g. reteaching)*
As students present, the teacher gauges the level of understanding presented by the team. The teacher can correct misunderstandings and misconceptions for the class. The teacher may want to spend more time on terms that confused students.

During class/outside of class
During class

Timing *(when should this assessment be used during the unit)*
Teachers can use this at the start of the unit to go over terms related to group dynamics. One could potentially include other terms as well (for example, ingroup bias) to examine factors that lead to prejudice and discrimination. Particularly for concepts that might otherwise be threatening or uncomfortable, this activity allows students to address sensitive topics in the abstract and in a much less threatening manner, at least initially.

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Instructions

Explanation of Procedure

1. Divide students into groups. The number may be contingent on your supplies, but I like to have them work in groups of 2, if possible. Provide each student with a handout for recording their work (and the work of others). Each group should select a handful or two of the plastic figurines to work with.
2. I assign each group a different concept to depict using their collection of toys (social loafing or group polarization, for example). I tell them they will be explaining/sharing their creation with the class when finished. [They usually only need 5-10 minutes to make their scene.]
3. Because I use this to supplement in-class notes/lecture on these topics, I ask each group to share their work in the order I have information presented in slides. For each concept, the group explains what the concept is and how their scene illustrates it. I also have a definition on a slide for students to reference (especially those not in the group doing the sharing at the moment). We proceed until each concept has been addressed. Students can take notes throughout presentations on sample handout provided.

This is a **formative assessment** in that it is not graded and students get immediate feedback on the accuracy of their explanation. If students have misconceptions or incompletely explain the concept, the teacher should take the time to refer to the definition again. The teacher can ask students to revise the explanation to be more accurate or complete. See model student answers below for more examples.

Materials

1. Requires only small investment in the (cheap) materials for this lesson, which can then be used again year after year.
    a. A bucket or two of cheap plastic figurines (available at most big box retailers for $5 or less). Each group of 2-3 students should have at least 4-5 “toys” to work with. Think: plastic army figures, dinosaurs, farm animals, etc. But be creative here! Maybe your own household has enough Lego people or My Little Ponies to make this work without you opening your wallet. The only criteria is that the toys should be able to be grouped in various ways (by color, species, style, etc.).
2. A student handout with space for recording details about each concept you wish to introduce.
3. A sample slide show with definitions for each concept you wish students to present

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Scoring Criteria

No scoring guide. This is a formative assessment that is not graded. See model student answers below for more examples.

Model Student Answers

Picture 1



Picture 1 Model answer(s): An accurate explanation of **groupthink**: Many animals in a town believe a jailed "criminal" deserves the death penalty. Though there are a few animals who feel the jailed "criminal" may be innocent, they don't voice their disagreement and just go along with the majority for the sake of harmony. An incomplete explanation of **groupthink**: Many animals in a town believe that a jailed "criminal animal" deserves the death penalty. The teacher should take the time to refer to the definition again and ask students to revise the explanation to be more complete.

Picture 2



Picture 2 Model answer(s): An accurate explanation of **social loafing**: "Toy soldiers" unit must build a wall together but some of them slack off figuring that other members of the group will be responsible.

Inaccurate explanation of **social loafing**: "Toy soldiers" unit must build a wall together and since they are in a group, they can divide the task equally and have less work to accomplish overall. The teacher should take the time to refer to the definition again and ask students to revise the explanation to be more accurate.

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Accommodations/Modifications

Some students with additional needs may require modifications to this assessment as listed below:

Presentation: Provide written, step-by-step instructions.

Response: Allow students the choice whether or not to participate in the oral presentation in front of the group. Some students with learning and attention issues excel at oral presentations while others find them incredibly difficult. If oral presentations are a requirement, allow the student to present to you privately. A student could also take a photo of their work and write an explanation as an alternative to speaking.

Setting: Allow students to work in a quieter area of the classroom, with fewer distractions, if needed.

Timing and Scheduling: If completing in class, allow additional time to complete assignment. Allow brief movement breaks; such as, squatting five times, quietly walking around the classroom, or stretching.

For a more complex task: Other possibilities is a skit showing groupthink and then reusing the figurines to show techniques to prevent groupthink, or have figurines demonstrating ingroup bias and then reduce conflict by cooperating to achieve a superordinate goal.

Why is this Science?

Social psychology researchers have conducted thousands of studies showing that group dynamics have an influence on an individual's behavior. One way to build the foundation of research methods would be to ask students to describe the systematic ways psychological science has shown groups influence individuals' behavior. Students can identify the independent and dependent variables in the original social psychological research. For example, in Norman Triplett's (1898) study on **social facilitation**, subjects either reeled fishing wire alone or in the presence of a second individual completing the same task. Completing the activity in the presence of others caused the subjects to reel the fishing wire faster. Having others present improved performance.

Independent variable: presence of others; **Dependent variable**: performance.

References

Triplett, N. (1898). The dynamogenic factors in pacemaking and competition. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 9(4), 507-533.

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Sample Handout

Group Behavior: *With your group, prepare a scene illustrating one of the following concepts, using the plastic figurines as your "actors." Use your text as a resource. You will be asked to demonstrate one for the class.*

	What is it?	Example(s)
Social Facilitation		
Social Loafing		
Deindividuation		
Bystander Effect		
Group Polarization		
Groupthink		
Minority Influence		

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