

# Enhancing Attitude Change In The Classroom: Active–Learning In An Industrial–Organizational Psychology Class

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## **Abstract**

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Active learning strategies have been found to have many benefits. These include allowing more student autonomy (Rosenthal, 1990), encouraging a broader and deeper processing of information (Jackson and Prosser, 1989), engaging higher–order thinking (Ellis and Whalen, 1990), and enhancing a sense of personalization in larger classes (Kennett, Stedwill, Berrill, and Young, 1996). It is the contention of this study that another benefit can be added to this list: encouraging students to take different perspectives.

A role–playing exercise was utilized whereby students in an industrial–organizational psychology class were assigned to play the role of either company or union representative in a labor dispute. They played the role with which they initially had the greatest lack of sympathy. Pre– and post–test data were collected regarding students’ attitudes toward union and management positions. Findings suggest some support for the use of active–learning strategies in the form of role–playing to bring about a modest degree of attitude change.

## **Attitude Change**

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Active learning strategies are believed to have many benefits. The benefits typically discussed in the developing literature include allowing more student autonomy (Rosenthal, 1990), encouraging a broader and deeper processing of information (Jackson and Prosser, 1989), engaging in higher–order thinking (Ellis and Whalen, 1990), and enhancing a sense of personalization in larger classes (Kennett, Stedwill, Berrill, and Young,

1996). These are all worthy goals. One of the issues in the social sciences, however, involves getting students to think seriously about perspectives on an issue other than their own. As any good social psychologist will acknowledge, changing attitudes is a formidable task. Attitudes are deep-seated ways of thinking that once established are very difficult to change (Baron and Byrne, 2000). Nonetheless, in order for students to really understand certain materials that are being presented in the social sciences, the ability to empathize with an alternative point of view is helpful. This study was designed to examine whether active-learning strategies could be used to change student attitudes and aid their ability to take different perspectives.

Active-learning was operationalized in this study with a role-playing exercise. The specific issue which this study investigates is the seeking of greater empathy on the part of my students for the role of unions and management in the life of a company. It had been my experience in this class that students identify with either pro-union or pro-management position; i.e., there are rarely students who claim to see both sides. My attempts to make them more empathic towards the side with which they are initially unsympathetic using balanced lecture materials had little impact on these opinions. Thus a role-playing exercise was instituted and the effects assessed to measure what, if any, change was possible.

The idea of using role-playing to bring about attitude-change is consistent with research on attitudes which suggests that attitudes based on direct experience are often stronger than those based on more indirect sources such as hearsay. It was my view that most of the students in my class had little direct experience with union and management relations, and thus their initial attitudes were formed from more indirect sources (parents, the media, etc.). Playing the role of a union or management negotiator, then, was intended to give students the closest thing to direct experience with union/management relations that they were likely to have had to that point in their lives.

## Methods

Twenty-six students were enrolled in an industrial-organizational psychology course, a junior-level course at Kent State University. The section on union-management relations comes at the end of the semester.

Prior to presenting any lecture material on the subject, I presented subjects with a brief 6-item questionnaire that I had developed assessing their attitudes towards unions and management. The questions were as follows:

1. I feel that unions have a positive impact on the lives of workers.
2. Unions are necessary to protect workers' rights.
3. Unions cause unnecessary problems for management.
4. Workers' rights are protected by management.
5. I would characterize myself as pro-union.
6. I would characterize myself as pro-management.

All questions utilized a Likert-scale format with a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) through 10 (strongly agree).

Following the questionnaire, I lectured on union-management relationships. While it is impossible to assess whether the lecture materials are perfectly balanced, I make a concerted effort to present both perspectives in an evenhanded way. Following the lecture (the next day of classes), I presented students with the same questionnaire. The next class period, I began by asking students to indicate with a show of hands whether they would consider themselves to be more union-oriented or more management-oriented. Those that indicated a pro-union stance were instructed to play the role of a management representative, while those taking a pro-management stance were instructed to play the role of a union representative. Students then played their parts in an exercise simulating union/management negotiations.

### **Role-Playing Exercise**

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The exercise used was adapted from Marchese and Wanberg's (1997, pp. 301-306) *Student Exercise Book for Muchinsky's Psychology Applied to Work* (5<sup>th</sup> ed). Students were instructed to bargain over four issues that are typically part of a collective bargaining agreement: wages, medical benefits, holidays and sick days, and retirement fund contributions. Negotiations operated under two restrictions. First, students were told that they had a duty of "good faith bargaining" (as required by law).

Thus, they were not allowed to lie, cheat, or refuse to negotiate with the other party. In addition, students were told that the company had been unionized for quite some time and was likely to remain unionized in the future. Thus, they needed to come up with an agreement that would both satisfy their constituents as well as allow the two sides to maintain some sort of working relationship with the other party.

Background information regarding the company was provided. Basically, the company had always been very profitable. However, recent competition in the field had steadily cut profits. Management's perspective was that belt-tightening needed to be done immediately to forestall serious financial trouble. From the union's perspective, workers at this company were not being compensated adequately when compared to unionized workers at other comparable plants. Revenue and expense information for the past five years was provided to the students.

Included in the assignment were specifics of the current collective bargaining agreement, such as information regarding the averages in wages, benefits, holidays and sick days, and retirement funds for a) local unionized workers in the same industry, and b) unionized workers nationally in the industry, as well as c) the rate of inflation over the past year, and d) the cost to the company of increases in each of the collective bargaining categories. Neither union nor management disputed these numbers. Students were instructed to approach this matter as a disagreement regarding how much more compensation should be provided to workers without causing the company to lose its financial stability.

Following the negotiations, students responded to five questions in writing:

1. What factors played the biggest role in the negotiations?
2. How would you describe your negotiations? Combative or cooperative?
3. How do you think this style of negotiations will affect future negotiations?
4. How do you think your constituents will react to the agreement you have reached?
5. Has your opinion of union/management negotiations changed as a result of this exercise? How?

Students were then given approximately forty–five minutes to complete their negotiations. I was somewhat surprised to see how seriously they all took their duties and how involved they became in the exercise. While they stopped short of name–calling, their negotiations showed every sign of becoming very heated. Nonetheless, the groups were able to reach a compromise, albeit a hard–fought one.

I hypothesized that this exercise would result in a moderating of initial attitudes. In addition, I hypothesized that their responses to the written questions would also reflect a more moderate view of the issues that both sides face when engaged in negotiations.

## Results

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A scale was computed by averaging the six survey items. This scale proved to have acceptable reliability  $\alpha = .81$ . This scale was then used to examine whether differences in student responses occurred as either a) a result of the lecture material covering union and management relations or b) a result of the in–class negotiations exercise. The mean scores are listed in the table below:

	Mean Score
Prior to lecture	6.12
Following lecture/prior to exercise	5.83
Following exercise	5.72

There was a small shift in attitudes from a slightly more pro–union stance to a fairly neutral stance towards union/management. These mean scores were not found to be significantly different. Individual question means are presented below. Again, none of the differences in mean scores for the individual questions across time were significant:

	Question 1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
Before lecture	6.25	5.75	5.25	7.58	5.92	6.00
After lecture/ before exercise	6.00	6.04	6.04	6.15	5.15	5.62
After exercise	6.22	5.78	5.96	5.96	5.13	5.30

Answers to the written questions are included in Appendix A. Students indicate movement from their initial sympathies towards increased empathy with the side they have been representing in the role-playing exercise.

### Conclusions

Partial support was found for the hypotheses in this study. Attitudes did move in the direction of greater neutrality towards unions and management from the period before union and management issues were introduced to the class through the final in-class exercise. While this difference was nonsignificant, the trend is in the expected direction. Additional data to boost the number of participants from the small number of participants here might show the trend to be a significant one.

Unfortunately, there were no significant differences found with the individual survey questions from the initial survey through the lecture and the in-class exercise. An examination of the mean changes across time shows that questions 4, 5, and 6 appear to show the biggest changes. Again, perhaps a bigger sample size would help to clarify exactly what is occurring with the survey items.

The written responses are supportive of the hypotheses to the degree that individuals who were chosen to negotiate the issues from the side with which they initially disagreed appeared to do a complete turnaround from their initial sympathies. Union negotiators, who were previously supportive of management, ended the assignment by saying that they appreciated the union more because unions deal more with people while management appeared to be more concerned with dollar amounts.

Management negotiators who began the class period by favoring unions ended the assignment by noting that their opinion had changed in that they now viewed unions as not really representing the best interests of the company. The potential downside to these responses is that it isn't clear whether each side has really begun to empathize with a previously unfavorable position or whether they have swung wholeheartedly from being in favor of one side to being wholeheartedly in favor of the other. The responses to the questionnaire seem to indicate that their responses are, in fact, moderate. Perhaps the written responses simply include a bit of hyperbole in the wake of an engaging class exercise.

Thus, does the experience of role-playing bring about attitude-change? A conservative statement, based on the data in this study, would offer a cautious "yes-but" response to that question. Yes, it appears as though exercises such as this one are very involving for students and can give them a feel for another viewpoint. Yes, it appears as though such exercises might be capable of bringing about attitude-change, albeit a very modest one. Given the difficulty of changing attitudes at all, however, this experience might be viewed as a fairly successful moderate attitude-change to be sure but brought about in a very limited amount of time. In the future, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether a bigger sample size might elucidate the trends seen here. Also, a bigger sample size would permit a more definitive test of what survey questions, if any, really reflect significant changes over time. There may even be additional dimensions on which attitude-change can or should be measured. As with much attitude-change research, the additional question of whether such attitude change persists for any length of time is also a question for future research.

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## Appendix A

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Written responses by union and management teams following in-class negotiations.

Question 1: What factors played the biggest role in the negotiations?

Union—“Local and national averages [information].”

Management—“Benefits played the biggest role in negotiations.”

Question 2: How would you describe your negotiations? Combative or cooperative?”

Union—“Started cooperative and went combative.”

Management—“It started out cooperative with the first two issues but turned into a combative negotiation with the last two.”

Question 3: How do you think this style of negotiating will affect future negotiations?

Union—“Future meetings will be defensive and combative. We weren’t sure how to begin but found out soon.”

Management—“Because our negotiations ended on a combative note, it is likely that they will continue this way in our future negotiations.”

Question 4: How do you think your constituents will react to the agreement you have reached?



Union—"Positive, but a few greedy negatives."

Management—"We've only offered average local [numbers], so our constituents should react positively to our agreement."

Question 5: Has your opinion of union/management negotiations changed as a result of this exercise? How?

Union—"Oh yeah! Personal issues become involved. Appreciate union more. We feel union deals more with people's interest and management dealt more with bottom-line dollar figures."

Management—"Our opinion has changed as a result of this exercise. From a management perspective, we feel that the union *does not* look out for the best interest of the company. . . . Management is always right!!"

## Biography

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