Lewin's 3-Step Model for Social Change as a Framework for Assessing Equity in Course Design

and Technology Integration

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Abstract

This paper discusses the application of Lewin's 3-step model for social change to digitally enhanced course design. It argues that to maintain the social purpose with which it was conceived, Lewin's model should be applied to the teacher's reflective practice and to integrating technologies to deliberately address educational inequities. This paper also suggests the relative value this model offers to guide educational change in larger institutional contexts during the covid era.

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While the covid pandemic uprooted traditional modes of education, already existent

systemic inequities became ever more amplified. The adult education classroom at community

college and universities, as we are already seeing, will continue at a larger scale than its younger

counterparts to provide ample distance education access to learners, even as the world winds

down from its covid restrictions. This phenomenon makes it ever more important for institutions

and teachers to place equity at the forefront of their efforts in providing ample access to distance

education. Kurt Lewin's three-step model can be helpful in this regard; it provides a three-step

process for social change, which can be applied to a variety of contexts within and outside of

education. The three steps or stages Lewin describes are (1) the "unfreezing" step, or the process

of shedding beliefs, values, and knowledge that prevent change from occurring; (2) the "moving"

step in which the learner grapples with new experiences and knowledge in order for change to

occur; and the "freezing" step, which solidifies the changes that were initiated, the learner

coming away with new knowledge and perspectives. Lewin's three-step theory for change can be

leveraged as a model for learning design. However, given the broad categories that can easily

oversimplify the social purpose upon which it was initially conceived, teachers should be

deliberate in maintaining the model's intent to uproot social injustice through changing culture.

Approaching instruction and course design as a reflective practice and leveraging and

implementing technology in ways that address inequities are key in applying this model.

When we apply Lewin's model as a means for teachers or professors to reflect on student

learning, we must address the notion of deficit and call attention to Lewin's social purpose. The

model functions under an assumption that a student has knowledge, beliefs, and values that need

to be done away with before learning can occur; it approaches that student with a deficit or negative mindset, and while it very well may be true that such knowledge is preventative to learning it is also true that change builds on existing knowledge. To earnestly apply this model one must first realize that Lewin never conceived of it as applying to the classroom. According to Organizational Psychology scholar Bernard Burnes (2020), Lewen developed his model as a strategy to resolve "social conflict, such as racism" more so than anything else (p. 33). Conceiving of this framework as a means to initiate and follow through with a cultural shift in society provides significant context and validates the deficit starting point of the model; after all, such things like racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism, and other learned social phenomenon are rightfully identified as problems to root out. As a social psychologist, first and foremost, Lewin's model, while applicable in a variety of contexts, functions at its core to uproot social injustice. It seeks to eradicate systemic inequities as its starting point, and it should be used through this lens if any practitioner seeks to apply it as Lewin intended.

In order to teach within the context of social change, Lewen's model must be applied, at the same time, to the teacher. True, every teacher does facilitate culture in the process of facilitating lesson plans and should be mindful to not privilege certain ways of thinking over others. Also true is that the teacher could conceive of their craft as a vessel for social change and this could guide how they design their curriculum. But what can we, as teachers, assume about our students? About the deficit they bring to class? Or more specifically, the deficit of our shared cultural heritage? What deficit do teachers bring to the classroom? And what wealth do they bring as well? If we look at our students in this context too, then we can craft our lessons with the understanding that we, as teachers, do not hold all the keys to the change desired, so to speak; we may have some, but we also are missing some, ones that perhaps our students hold. Thus,

Lewin's model in the classroom can be conceived, or best conceived, both in the context of the reciprocal unfreezing, moving, refreezing stages of both student and teacher, and it requires both to be open to this, and perhaps being opened up to this.

Lewin's model is also useful in addressing the intersections of technology integration and equity. Technology itself is continuously changing, and the generational resistance to change and learning new technologies is not a novel concept or phenomenon. It is also not novel with our students, as we can take for granted the exposure they have had with technology simply because they are of (and I generalize) a younger generation, meaning the assumption that smartphones, ipads, internet and such were integrated into the fabric of their upbringing and thus, we may assume, they are more equipped skill-wise to pick up technologies. And perhaps we are right to assume this, but we should also be careful to qualify our assumptions. We can point to economic factors, as this diversity in our students can obviously influence their exposure to technology (Vogels, 2021), but we also cannot assume that knowing any technologies is transferable to knowing how to navigate others. We must look not only at technology integration in terms of its relative use in obtaining the learning objectives at hand, but also how intuitive the platform is for users to navigate as well as its functionality with mobile devices. I mention mobile devices here in reference to the greater dependence low-income students have on them in completing daily tasks, school included (Vogels, 2021). It is imperative that we leverage technology to address inequities, and effective access to materials and activities is an important and strategic step, and it should be thought of not as merely supplementary (or good enough for some things) but fully functional and comprehensive.

If we look at Lewin's "unfreezing" phase, the teacher must first approach technology integration with a willingness to learn new technologies, to learn how to make them accessible to

all, and to learn from the process. They must also get students to invest in the technology. In this regard, it would be valuable for teachers to be explicit in communicating the value of the technology to students reaching the learning outcome; to integrate tutorials for students on how to use features of the technologies, which includes those for mobile devices as screens are usually organized in a different manner when accessed through an app; and to consider accessibility concerns (diverse learning styles, time schedules, processing time) when designing the learning activities and their parameters. The selection of digital learning tools themselves can be limiting in this regard. For example, the peer review function in Canvas assignments is not fully functional on the mobile app version, and a common alternative that teachers adapt for their peer review activities to maintain mobile access is the discussion boards. This is just one example of teachers adjusting to the limits of design has placed on equity, and these types of adjustments speak to the progress the technology design field has yet to make in addressing equity concerns.

If one key aspect of the "unfreezing" stage is to mitigate emotional resistances (Lewin & Grapple, 1945), then one central to the "moving" step in the model is the role of experiential learning. Lewin (1945) emphasized the role and need of experiential learning as the primary process for learning new knowledge. The traditional lecture, or lecture-oriented videos, may hold some value to students as one modality of communicating information, but must be decentered as the primary modality of learning in place of the "learning through doing" model, which has long been studied to produce higher impact. Project- and process-oriented tasks, such as multimedia projects that require a "trial and error" type process is one idea, as are projects that allow students to grapple with new knowledge in a familiar framework or a modality that appeals to their creativity and learning style. Students may demonstrate, for example, research through a

video presentation, through a formal paper, or other creative mode of writing or presenting. It should be acknowledged, however, that experiential learning while valuable is not solely sufficient. Lewin (1945) noted that "even extensive first-hand experience does not necessarily create correct concepts (knowledge)" (57). In the context of teaching, this can call attention to the role of the instructor-student relationship and the need to create channels to listen to student experiences, both formally and informally. This could result in flexible design for active learning projects and targeted metacognitive activities; above all, it would serve as a fountain of information to inform the instructor's reflective practice and journey through the "moving" phase from which a new perspective on what success means can be extracted.

Lewin's third step in his model compels us to think deeply about how our assessments are designed and how technology can enhance the creativity of our assessment design. It also compels us to consider just what it means to succeed, and it allows us to reflect on the appropriate scope of our assessments and overall course design. Lewin's 3rd step is called the "freezing" stage, labeled so to capture the idea that new knowledge, values, and perceptions or ways of thinking become permanent only through deliberate action to do so. Lewin and Grabbe (1945) point out that "The individual accepts the new system of values and beliefs by accepting belongingness to a group" (62); and they do so in context with the creation of in-groups to facilitate the permanence of new value systems (Lewin & Grabbe, 1945). While this concept definitely does support the idea of group projects, it also speaks to designing interaction with the campus community and other communities to which the student belongs or wishes to belong. Placed in a digital environment, where so much activism and knowledge-sharing occur, these types of assignments and projects seem apt, whether they are created through careful attention to designing the digital space or whether the digital space is already provided through a community

with a shared value system. As a means for our reflective practice, we can also conceive of this stage in the context of designing an overall learning experience, where the goal is not to "freeze" knowledge or perceptions in discreet units, but an overall broad-based learning outcome crafted into the architecture of the course. Also, if we consider the diverse skill levels and creative abilities that represent our classroom, then it may be valuable to consider what success means to individuals rather than the whole, and to diversify the ways in which students can achieve the learning outcomes.

One can also apply this model to other educational contexts. Lewin's model seems like an apt resource for guiding a process of institutional change, particularly now as colleges and universities are in the process of adapting to the so-called "new normal" of "post-covid" or "living-with-covid" education. For example, a resistance to abandoning pre-covid policies and processes and the resultant attempt to apply them to a fundamentally changed educational context appears to be one aspect of the "unfreezing" stage institutions are grappling with. Students and faculty are experiencing the adverse effects, and it is in these types of transitional phases that inequities become exasperated with the most marginalized and vulnerable impacted. Inquiry into applying Lewin's model for social change as a means to guide the process of our current institutional transition would be a valuable exercise.

Lewin's model is applicable not only to digital course design but to teachers reflecting on their own knowledge and beliefs and to institutions reflecting on the systems, processes, beliefs, and values that inhibit innovative change and maintain or exasperate inequities. In both respects, the unfreezing process starts with sincere interest in listening to those they serve.

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