Published on *University of Colorado* (https://www.cu.edu)

Native Theory [1]

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Students enter our classes with many taken-for-granted “native” theories. These implicit theories guide how they attend to, talk about, and respond to, life events, and can limit their consideration and internalization of alternative research-based conceptions. Since implicit theories are socially and historically formed, they serve some people and some interests better than others; and in times of fundamental and/or rapid change, implicit theories can become increasingly dysfunctional. University courses, especially those in the social sciences, have the capacity to provide students with new implicit theories. These theories can become part of a student’s life if they provide new and compelling ways to engage the world. In an increasingly diverse and changing world, providing students with new, more powerful analytic tools may be the most lasting impact of our courses.

For several years my students and I have been studying collaborative decision making processes concerning social/economic/environmental sustainability, and diverse stakeholder interests in various community and organizational sites. We have found that native theories of communication often interfere with positive forms of deliberation and creative decision making (for a summary, see Deetz, 2007; Deetz & Irvin, 2008). These native theories are fairly powerful and difficult to engage since they are tied up with theories of experience, personage, and democracy. These native theories are sustained by external communities and practices that compete with research-based conceptions and in many ways skew student learning as well as the discussion and decision process.

This project would, first, identify students’ implicit theories regarding communication by development an instrument to detail their conceptions. Second, I would work with graduate students to develop structured activities providing complex decision making tasks. Students would be asked to provide narrative descriptions of how they thought through their choices in the exercise. These would be analyzed to see where and how native and classroom conceptions were used. The study would add to our understanding of the development of, and resistance to, critical thinking demonstrating circumstances facilitating the internalization of new theories and giving guidance to interventions.

Deetz, S. (2007). Corporate governance, corporate social responsibility, and communication. In S. May, G. Cheney, and J. Roper (eds.), The debate over corporate social responsibility (pp. 267-278). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Deetz, S. & Irvin, L. (2008). Governance, stakeholder involvement and new communication models. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (eds.) Governance reform under real world conditions: Communication challenges (pp. 163-180). Washington DC: The World Bank.

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