An Applied Learning Approach to Teaching Crime Theories: Evidence of its Successful Impact Using the Students' Own Words

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Abstract

This paper is primarily a best practices article that introduces an applied learning approach that is used in the Introduction to Crime Theories class at Missouri Western State University to help the students learn criminological theories better. The approach consists of having students investigate real crime stories in order for them to make connections with the crime theories they are studying in the class. The impact of this applied learning approach on student writing assignments and the evidence that students have a greater understanding of and the ability to clearly articulate the key points of these theories using examples of their writing over the past few semesters is presented. A comparison of aggregate scores on exams and written assignments shows that these students performed better on both written assignment scores and exam scores than the students in traditional crime theories courses.

An ancient Chinese proverb tells us, "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand" (Duley & Permaul, 1984, p. 18). Having taught undergraduate criminal justice students for almost 30 years, I can relate to students hearing me teaching on crime theories and then forgetting what I have said. As technology advanced over the past few decades, we as teachers become more proficient in the use of visual aids and began using lecture aids such as PowerPoint so that students could better remember what we were teaching as they could "see" pictures, videos, and lecture notes. The goal then, as we follow this proverb, is that we want students to not only remember, but to understand what we are teaching. Particularly, in the area of teaching crime theories we want our students to not only remember for the final exam, but to understand these theories as they continue their criminal justice studies and ultimate career. Thus, we need to help them "do" something in order to better understand what we are teaching them. The "do" is better understood as some form of applied or experiential learning. Using a case-study applied learning approach, we have found that students better understand crime theories and their implications by having them connect the crime theories to well-known crimes and/or criminals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kolb (1984) is largely credited with introducing or at least reintroducing experiential or applied learning to higher education. He drew upon the work of earlier learning theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, William James, and others to explain the experiential learning process. During this same decade that Kolb published his book, another researcher (Crew, 1987) lamented the state of education in the 1980s. Crew argued that the social upheavals of the 1960's led to a worsened learning environment and a focus by teachers to teaching to the test. Crew argued that an experiential or applied learning approach could improve student learning, stating that, "the best teaching-learning situation is the proper blend of actual and vicarious experiences, of theory and practice, each enriching the other" (Crew, 1987, p. 147). He further stated, "when knowledge is learned in relation to use in actual simulations, that knowledge becomes more permanent, functional, and transferable" (Crew, 1987, p. 147). Other researchers writing about applied or experiential learning in the 1980s stated that, "students involved in experience-based learning also have improved attitudes towards learning in general" and that students involved in applied learning participate more in, "class discussion rather than passively absorbing information from the instructors and textbooks" (Duley & Permaul, 1984, p. 20). Experiential learning assumes that one learns best when one gains knowledge through a process of discovery (Crew, 1987). Another researcher stated that, "an essential element of experiential education is the bridging of academic and applied learning settings whereby the connections between theory and practice are investigated in some detail" (DeMartini, 1983). In more recent years Trolian and Jach (2020), found that applied learning in higher education were correlated with increased motivation in academics.

An applied learning or experiential approach to teaching criminal justice or criminology concepts has been successfully done by college or university instructors. Specific to the area of teaching crime, deviance, and criminal justice, Greenberg (1989) explained his approach to helping students better learn about the criminal justice system by having his students interview the local population of incarcerated juveniles and adults. Another researcher found that student learning is enhanced when students employ the discovery process in a more active educational experience (Taub, 1991). Taub also had students involved in visiting and interviewing inmates in correctional centers, residents of abuse shelters, and participants of self-help groups. Taub focused on having students in these settings observe social psychological phenomena directly and to apply social psychological concepts and theories in actual situations. More recent researchers have used virtual reality technology to teach students various aspects of criminal investigation (Meenaghan & van Sintemaartensdijk, 2024).

In the area of teaching crime theories, a number of researchers have attempted and advocated for various applied learning approaches. Orum (1980) was an early advocate for an applied learning approach to teaching crime theories. His participatory approach involved having the students prepare presentations of specific theories/theorists to teach the class. Rothe and Collins (2013) used film and music to help teach about criminological theories. They argued that using such mediums enhanced the undergraduate students' ability to understand and apply crime theories to their everyday lives. One group of researchers discussed a variety of approaches for teaching crime and deviance theories to undergraduate students using carefully designed visual representations, small-group discussions, and a case-study approach (Williams, Rodeheaver, & Sethuraju, 1995). Norman (1991) also used an approach to teaching crime theories where students were assigned to analyze and apply certain crime theories to specific types of crimes. This approach has been described by researchers as a "case-study" approach to teaching crime theories (Quinn, Holman, & Tobolowsky, 1992). They explained that, "the case study method of explaining crime allows students to see how various factors are involved in a crime when they apply a variety of theories to an actual case" and that "this method is very effective in transforming theory from a mere object of study into an explanatory device that students can use habitually" (p. 67).

CONTEXT OF CURRENT RESEARCH

The Introduction to Crime Theories class (CRJ 305) is a core class requirement for the Bachelors of Science in Criminal Justice (BS-CJ) degree at Missouri Western State University. Students usually take this upper division class during their junior year. As indicated by the course name, it is an introductory class of all the major branches of criminological theory presented in a one semester course schedule. Over the course of the class, students are presented with 45 specific crime theories from these main branches of criminological thought that have been introduced from about 250 years ago to the present day.

I have taught this or similar crime theory courses at three different institutions of higher education going back almost 30 years. Students have typically gotten bogged down with the numerous crime theories and it is a major challenge to simply get them to remember the names and basic information of the theories for the requisite exam. That has changed since I have developed and taught using the case study method.

In 2021 I began developing a particular case-study method to teaching crime theories that employed an applied learning approach for my CRJ 305 course using a two-prong strategy to help them understand the theories from actual crimes and criminals. The first prong involved having all of the students learn about the same crime/criminal in a particular week to make application to that week's crime theories. All of the students would learn about the crime/criminal by watching a documentary film and then engaging in an online discussion forum where each of them were asked to apply certain concepts of the week's crime theories to that crime/criminal. All students were then asked to read the discussion postings of all other students, making at least one comment to one of them, and thus giving each of them an opportunity to learn from the other students in the class as to how they applied the crime theory concepts to the selected crime/criminal.

The second prong of the applied learning strategy involved having students select a specific crime/criminal that they would use throughout the semester to apply to all 45 crime theories in a writing assignment due near the end of the semester. They were first instructed to find a lengthy book or internet sources to learn as much as possible about their chosen criminal. They were instructed to make sure their sources of information included much about the younger years and upbringing of the person and that their chosen criminal had to be someone that had been convicted and sentenced for the crime(s) for which they were widely known. Some of the criminals commonly chosen by students included Ted Bundy, Aileen Wuornos, Charles Manson, and Richard Ramirez.

In this major writing assignment, the students were asked to explain in detail how the specific theory did or did not apply to their chosen criminal. Where they could find some clear connections between a particular crime theory and their criminal, they were asked to explain these connections using concepts from the theory. Similarly, with the crime theories where there was no connection to their criminal, they were asked to provide good explanation as to why the theory did not fit using concepts from that particular crime theory.

METHOD

This paper is mostly a best-practices paper where I have described my experience using a case-study approach to teaching crime theories. However, it goes beyond best practices to present qualitative research showing greater student comprehension of crime theories using the case-study approach. To test the effectiveness of this approach I have compared aggregate exam scores and scores on the theory/policy writing assignment for several "traditional" approach crime theory classes offered prior to 2020 and for all of the "case-study" approach classes taught after 2021. The primary method used to determine student improvement of comprehension of crime theories came from a review of student writing about these theories.

Having access to the required records, I have been able to review student scores and writing artifacts and have selected a few of them to highlight how much these students have learned about the crime theories by applying them to real crime/criminals. I will first introduce and discuss a particular crime theory and then using exact quotes detail what the students prior to 2021 said about the theory (referred to as "traditional students"). I will then introduce some exact quotes from student assignments since 2021 where they explain in much greater detail about their understanding of the particular crime theory using the information about the chosen crime/criminal. It has been very gratifying to see that most students in my classes since 2021 are able to articulate much more information and understanding about these crime theories using this case-study method of teaching crime theories.

RESULTS

A comparison of exam scores between the traditional and case-study students showed that the case-study students did better on exams testing their comprehension of crime theories. The average exam score for the traditional students (total of 182 students) was 80/100. The average exam score for the case-study students (total of 92 students) was 83/100. There was a greater disparity between the two groups of students on the average scores on the theory/policy written assignment(s). The traditional students averaged a score of 69/100 on these papers. The case-study students averaged a score of 82 on these writing assignments. This much higher score on an assignment where the students had to articulate their understanding of these crime theories by the case-study students is impressive and demonstrates the value of using this applied learning approach to teaching crime theories. The more impactful evidence of the superiority of using the case-study approach is in the following examples of student writing as they explain their understanding and application of these crime theories.

The first crime theory that is usually introduced in an introduction to crime theories class is rational choice theory. This theory comes from the pioneering writings of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham (among others) from the mid to late 1700's. They asserted that criminal behavior is ultimately a choice, made in the context of personal and situational constraints and opportunities and that law-violating behavior is the product of careful thought and planning.
One of the traditional students wrote this about Rational Choice Theory, "With the rational choice theory, informal factors have a much larger influence on juveniles than formal factors like law enforcement officials do. If a young individual has no regard for formal factors in their lives, it enables them to be able to commit crimes of all levels with no fear of punishment from law enforcement."

One of the case-study students wrote the following detailed explanation regarding how Rational Choice Theory connected to Melvin Ignatow who murdered his girlfriend Brenda Sue Shaefer in Kentucky in 1988.

Ignatow officially formalized a rational decision of harming Brenda when he consciously formulated the idea of killing her (before), which he successfully did (during), and knowingly concealed the crime (after). This can be viewed as a rational, calculated step, each with their own intended outcomes and perceived benefits, thus aligning with the principles of Rational Choice Theory.

- **Motive for the Crime:** Ignatow committed the crime largely due to his proclivity to abuse and control, which when he became aware of Brenda's plan to end their relationship, triggered the anger to commit the crime.
- **Non-Criminal Options:** Ignatow could have sought counseling or therapy to deal with his anger and control issues or could have simply accepted the end of the relationship and moved on. One can infer that the reason he did not choose these options is likely related to his abusive nature and lack of regard for Brenda's life and well-being.
- **Skills that Helped in Committing the Crime:** Ignatow displayed a certain level of cunning and manipulation, which certainly helped him in planning and committing the crime without immediately being caught.
- **Resources/Materials:** Ignatow needed a secluded location and means to restrain and harm Brenda. He had the assistance of a former girlfriend, Mary Ann Shore, who helped him prepare a location and execute the crime. Shore's involvement and their joint planning were crucial to carrying out the crime.
- **Planning for the Crime:** He meticulously planned the crime with the help of Mary Ann Shore, who assisted in preparing a location, which included digging a grave for Brenda prior to her murder. They also planned the restraint and abuse of Brenda.
- **Before the Crime to Reduce Risk of Capture:** Ignatow used manipulation and deceit to maintain a semblance of a normal relationship with Brenda to lure her into a false sense of security. The secluded location and the pre-dug grave were also efforts to avoid detection, completely.
- **After the Crime to Avoid Capture:** After the crime, he and Shore concealed evidence, and Ignatow maintained his innocence, misleading the investigators. He managed to hide the photographic evidence (which later helped induce his confession) of the crime effectively, leading to his initial acquittal.

The second crime theory that we are going to discuss and introduce student writings is Routine Activities Theory that was authored by Cohen and Felson in 1979. The basic concepts of this theory are that crime victimization is a function of the interrelationship between the following three variables: the availability of suitable targets, the absence of capable guardians, and the presence of motivated offenders.

One traditional student wrote, "Routine activities theory refers to the idea that most crime occurs in the daily routine of individuals that commit crime. The theory must also include motivated offenders, suitable targets, and a lack of guardianship which statistically can be backed up." Another traditional student wrote, "A crime event can only happen when a likely offender, and a suitable target come together in a particular place and time, and there is no capable guardian there to prevent an interaction between the offender and the target."

A case-study student explained this theory using the case of Charles Cullen who worked as a nurse and used his position to kill dozens if not hundreds of patients.

- **Motivated Offender:** Charles Cullen, who had the intent and capability to harm patients fits the criteria for a motivated offender due to his position and access to medical substances that could be used lethally.
- **Suitable Target:** The patients under his care were suitable targets because they were vulnerable due to their health conditions and their dependency on medical staff. Making them defenseless against his actions
- **Lack of Capable Guardianship:** The hospitals where he worked lacked adequate oversight and monitoring, this absence allowed him to administer lethal doses of medication without immediate detection or intervention.

Another case-study student wrote the following in applying Routine Activities Theory to the serial killer John Wayne Gacy:

Routine Activities Theory describes crime as the convergence of three factors: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian.

In John Wayne Gacy's case, these elements aligned repeatedly, facilitating his crimes. Gacy acted as a highly motivated offender, driven by deep psychological needs and a willingness to deceive others.

He selected victims who often matched his criteria of suitable targets, usually young men alone or seeking work, which made them vulnerable to his manipulation. Many of these individuals were in transitional or isolated settings, such as bus stations or bars, where Gacy could approach them under the false pretense of offering help, friendship, or employment. This setting allowed him to identify and select individuals who were both accessible and unsuspecting.

The absence of capable guardians added another crucial factor in enabling Gacy's actions. Many of his victims lacked strong family support or lived unstable lives, which left them without consistent protective figures. Even those with families or stable connections were often led to trust Gacy due to his outward appearance as a reputable business owner and community volunteer. For instance, his offer of a job to 15-year-old Robert Piest provided a false sense of security, allowing Gacy to isolate him without drawing suspicion. Gacy's home also eliminated any chance of intervention, giving him the level of control needed to carry out his crimes.

A key crime theory developed mostly during the twentieth century was Social Learning Theory. This theory explains that criminals learn criminal attitudes, traits, and techniques by observing others and that criminal behavior increases when it is reinforced either positively or negatively and that it decreases when punishment is either positively or negatively applied.

A traditional student wrote the following regarding Social Learning Theory. "If a behavior produces positive reinforcers and increases occurrence, it is called positive reinforcement. When a behavior removes or possibly avoids negative reinforcers and then increases an occurrence it is called negative reinforcement. If a behavior produces aversive stimuli which then decreases the occurrence this behavioral process is called positive punishment. When a behavior removes or avoids positive reinforcers which then decreases the occurrence it is called negative reinforcement. A behavior can either create or take away a neutral stimulus which does not affect its occurrence. When a behavior no longer produces a neutral stimulus which decrease the occurrence it is called extinction."

The following case-study student gave a more detailed explanation of Social Learning Theory using Aaron Hernandez, a professional football player who was convicted of murder as an example:

Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and modeling, as well as through direct reinforcement and punishment.

Hernandez grew up in an environment where he was exposed to violence and criminal behavior.

Hernandez observed peers and family members engaging in illegal activities, which may have normalized these types of behaviors for him.

Social Learning Theory emphasizes the role of reinforcement (positive or negative) and punishment in shaping behavior.

If Hernandez engaged in violent or unlawful behaviors and received social approval or admiration from peers or gang members, this could be seen as a positive reinforcement. Gaining respect, status, or a sense of belonging within a group that values toughness and criminality could encourage him to continue such behaviors.

If engaging in criminal behavior allowed Hernandez to avoid negative outcomes this could reinforce his actions. Using violence might have provided him with a means to control or defend himself in a hostile environment. The lack of immediate punishment for earlier offenses and delinquent behavior may have led to a belief that such behaviors were acceptable. If he did not experience strong penalties for prior criminal actions, it could have diminished the deterrent effect of punishment.

Another case-study student wrote the following explanation of the connections between Social Learning Theory and Richard Ramirez, a serial killer in California in the 1980's:

Differential Association: Upbringing and early exposure to criminal influences, such as his older cousin Mike, may have played a role in his criminal development. Mike was a war veteran. He showed Richard pictures of victims he killed overseas. Richard was aroused by these photos. Mike also taught him tactics such as not being seen and how to hide in the dark.

Differential Reinforcement: For Ramirez, the excitement and thrill he felt during his criminal acts could be a form of positive reinforcement, which could have motivated him to continue engaging in criminal behavior.

Imitation: Ramirez might have observed and imitated criminal behaviors from the criminals he associated. When Ramirez was younger, he watched his cousin Mike shoot his wife. Blood splattered on his face from the shooting.

Definitions: It's possible that Ramirez had developed definitions and justifications for his criminal actions, through rationalizations or distorted moral perspectives.

Positive Reinforcement: Ramirez may have experienced positive reinforcement from pleasure, excitement, or satisfaction from committing his crimes. This positive experience could have motivated him to continue criminal behavior.

Negative Reinforcement: Ramirez was not caught initially he was reinforced to continue his crimes since he was not suffering negative consequences

Another social crime theory is Social Bond Theory authored by Travis Hirschi in 1969. This theory explains that individual with a strong moral bond to society are "controlled" by prosocial attachments, commitments, involvement, and belief and thus do not typically engage in criminality.

A traditional student wrote the following about Social Bond Theory. "Hirschi's Social Bond Theory explains and provides a framework of what would need to occur in order to stop juveniles from becoming delinquent. This particular theory starts with the premise that at birth you have no conscience and develop a sense of right and wrong from the influence of your parents, school, and community. According to Travis Hirschi's Social Bond Theory, there are four elements and types of bonds that juveniles develop in order to determine whether or not they are likely to commit crimes and become delinquent." Another traditional student wrote, "This theory is made up of four elements. The attachment, commitment, involvement and belief are the four different sections."

A case-study student showed how these four elements or lack thereof contributed to the criminal conduct by the California serial killer, Richard Ramirez:

- Attachment: In his early life he had a troubled upbringing. He lacked attachment to his parents. His father was an alcoholic and abusive and he would beat Richard and the rest of the family. The absence of positive attachments may have contributed to his criminal behavior.
- Commitment: Commitment refers to the individual's investment in conventional, noncriminal pursuits such as education, career, or family.

Richard always performed poorly in school. Ramirez dropped out of Jefferson High School in the ninth grade. He pursued a life of crime and violence.

- Involvement: Involvement in sports or community engagement can deter individuals from criminal behavior. At a younger age Richard was not involved in any extracurricular activities. As an adult he was not involved in any community groups or churches. Richard was involved in heavy criminal activity, such as rape, murder, burglary, and kidnapping.
- Belief: The belief element suggests that individuals who share common values and beliefs with society are less likely to commit crimes. Richard's crimes were brutal, he lacked regard for human life. His crimes were marked with violence and Satanism. His crimes were significant deviation from societal norms and beliefs.

In 1990, Travis Hirschi, with colleague Michael Gottfredson, moved from explaining crime and delinquency in terms of social control toward explaining it in terms of self-control. Their "General Theory of Crime" (also known as low self-control theory) posits that crime is committed by those who have low self-control due primarily to poor or incompetent parenting during their early childhood.

A traditional student wrote the following about this this theory. "An opposing theoretical perspective proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi is an antidevelopment theory, and it takes aim as the primary cause of all crime and deviance. They believe that all individuals are born with predisposed selfish tendencies, and only children that have had an adequate upbringing with parents who have made a connection or attachment to the child, can eliminate the behavior of the anti-social individual with no self-control. These theorists believe that the individual must have established self-control by the age of ten or the individual won't establish self-control at all. Studies have shown that individuals having no self-control tendencies have a tendency to engage in risky behavior including criminal behavior." Another traditional student wrote, "Gottfredson's and Hirschi's general theory of crime specifies that self-control is defined as the tendency to refrain from antisocial behavior due to recognition of the long-term costs associated with such behavior."

A case-study student wrote the following using Aaron Hernandez as the case study example for this theory:

Low Self-Control Theory suggests that individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in criminal behavior. Aaron Hernandez's actions, particularly the violent and impulsive nature of the crimes he committed, align with the characteristics associated with low self-control. His involvement in activities such as fights, gun possession, and murder suggests a tendency to act without considering the long-term consequences of his actions. Impulsive behaviors, such as those exhibited during his criminal acts, are central to the concept of low self-control.

Low self-control is a product of inadequate parenting. Hernandez's upbringing included challenges such as familial issues and exposure to violence, which could have contributed to the development of low self-control. His father's absence and a loud family environment could have negatively impacted his ability to develop self-regulation and impulse control during formative years. Low self-control theory also emphasizes the role of peer influence. Hernandez's associations with individuals involved in criminal activities reinforced his own impulsive behaviors. Being part of a social group, that values aggression and criminality may have further diminished his self-control and increased the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors.

In 1957 Sociologists David Matza and Gresham Sykes introduced Neutralization Theory which suggests that delinquents and criminals know their behavior is wrong, but they justify it on a number of grounds. Doing so allows offenders to "drift" into and out of criminal conduct without buying into criminal definitions or identifying as a criminal. Matza and Sykes explained that 5 techniques of Neutralization facilitated this drift into criminal behavior. The 5 techniques are denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalty.

A traditional student wrote the following about Neutralization theory. "The theory claims that offenders rationalize their criminal behavior in four ways. 1. Denial of responsibility: Individuals may claim they were influenced by forces outside themselves and that they are not responsible or accountable for their behavior. 2. Denial of injure: This is the rationalization that no one was actually hurt by the offender's behavior. 3. Denial of the victim: Offenders see themselves as avengers and the victims as the wrongdoers. 4. Condemnation of the condemners: Offenders claim that the condemners (usually the authorities who catch them) are the hypocrites. Appeal to higher loyalty: Offenders often overlook the norms of conventional society favor of the rules of a belief they have or of a group they belong to."

In contrast, a couple of case-study students went into great detail regarding the use of neutralization techniques used by their chosen criminals. The first wrote the following regarding the connections between Gary Ridgeway, the Green River Killer, and Neutralization Theory:

Denial of Responsibility: Ridgway blamed his upbringing with his controlling and abusive mother and his troubled childhood for shaping him into the person he became.

Denial of Injury: He justified his murders by telling himself that no one would miss or care about these women. By dehumanizing his victims and considering them as people whose lives didn't matter.

Denial of the Victim: Ridgway neutralized any feelings of empathy or guilt. His belief that sex workers were "bad" people who brought harm upon themselves through their lifestyle choices allowed him to rationalize their murder as justified.

Condemnation of the Condemners: He rationalized his murders by arguing that law enforcement and society at large were doing nothing to stop the issues that led to his victims being vulnerable in the first place.

Another case-study student wrote the following connecting the serial killer John Wayne Gacy and neutralization theory:

Denial of Responsibility: Gacy denied responsibility by blaming external factors like mental illness. His defense during the trial claimed he had multiple personality disorders, which distanced him from his actions. This technique lets Gacy shift the blame, avoiding full accountability for the murders.

Denial of Injury: Gacy minimized the harm he caused by dehumanizing his victims. He referred to them as "worthless" or "prostitutes," making it easier for him to rationalize that their deaths were not significant. This technique helped Gacy avoid guilt by convincing himself that the people he killed didn't deserve sympathy.

Denial of the Victim: Gacy justified his crimes by framing his victims as responsible for their fate. He targeted young men hitchhiking or seeking quick work, implying that their risky behavior made them deserve what happened. This denial of victimhood allowed him to distance himself from the immorality of his actions.

Condemnation of the Condemners: Gacy often deflected blame on the authorities, claiming that the police were unfairly targeting him. When he was investigated for Robert Piest's disappearance, he accused the police of harassment. This technique allowed Gacy to shift attention away from his actions and frame himself as the one being wronged.

DISCUSSION

I could have brought in many more student writing examples showing the expanded explanations and connections that the case-study students have made as they have connected key concepts of criminal theories with actual criminals and crime stories. The students in my recent Introduction to Crime Theories classes where I have employed this applied learning approach to teaching have been able to demonstrate through their writing more complete comprehension of these crime theories. Traditional students in the previous classes were not able to demonstrate nearly so comprehensive mastery or accurate articulation of these theories.

The case-study students in these recent classes have expressed that they are more interested in studying crime theories when they are able to study them using actual crimes and criminals, something that Quinn, et al. (1992) stated would be an effect of using the Case-Study method of teaching crime theories. Trolian and Jach (2020) also found that such applied learning approaches were correlated with increased student academic motivation.

There are many benefits to considering a case-study approach to teaching. This is a facet of applied learning that can benefit instructors across many disciplines. Theory courses can be considered dry or boring by some students and adding an element where students relate the theories to real stories or events can turn that "boring" class into an interesting one. The case-study approach could not only benefit other criminal justice instructors teaching crime theories courses, it would also benefit instructors teaching criminology, sociology, or any other theory courses in other disciplines. This case-study approach to teaching crime theories adds to the growing literature of applied learning in criminal justice. Criminal Justice instructors can make use of this approach in addition to making visits to criminal justice facilities (Greenberg, 1989; Taub, 1991), making presentations in class (Orum, 1980), using film or music (Rothe & Collins, 2013), or using virtual reality technology (Meenaghan & van Sintemaartensdijk, 2024).

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This is not a quantitative research study and the results are primarily qualitative observations of student writing artifacts. Thus, there are limitations of this study. One key limitation is potential self-selection bias in the selecting of student writing artifacts, although I tried to reduce this bias by randomly selecting such artifacts. That potential bias is somewhat mitigated by the inclusion of writing assignment and exam score comparisons to highlight the differences between the two teaching approaches. A limitation of this comparison of writing assignment and exam scores is that this simple analysis did not control for outside influences on these scores. Further experimental or quasi-experimental research using control or comparison groups would be helpful.

In my experience, students typically consider a crime theory class as boring and difficult. It is common to require such a class in a bachelor's degree program in Criminal Justice. That was my experience for many years as I taught this class at three different institutions of higher education over the past almost 30 years. Students typically struggled to do well in the class and would complain that they had too many theories to learn. I also found it difficult to repeatedly teach this class when students did not show much interest or mastery of the material. That desire to change how I taught the class and my own interest in crime stories is what led me to developing this applied learning approach to teach crime theories through a case-study of actual crimes and notorious criminals. I have found that not only am I more interested in teaching this class, but the students are much more interested in it when they can relate it to a criminal case that fascinates them. With that increased interest they also do better mastering the material as evidenced by their own writing and the comparison of paper and exam scores. Thus, we come back full circle to the Chinese proverb quoted at the start. As we have students "do" more through applied learning, these students should "understand" better.

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