Blue Sky Thinking:
Using Projective Techniques to Stimulate Discussion, Reflection and Insight

Jon Billsberry
*Coventry University*

Stephen C. Godrich
*The Open University*

Abstract

The prime purpose of this session is to share a new use of projective techniques to stimulate discussion, reflection and insight with students. The session will provide an introduction to the nature and use of projective techniques and an explanation why images of the sky were chosen as the stimuli. Then, the majority of the session will consist of an opportunity to experience this new technique in a simulated session. The session will end with a plenary discussion and a review of the effectiveness and applicability of the technique.

Planning Details

The proposed audience is faculty seeking innovative techniques for sparking discussion in class. This session is relevant for all levels of students and also for professional development and consultancy engagements. The session includes an initial introduction to the topic via a short presentation followed by a replica of the activity. The session would naturally fill 90 minutes, but could be accommodated in 60 if required.

The ideal audience size would be twelve or sixteen that could be divided into groups of four. They would need tables and chairs to work on in their groups. Ideally, these would be in separate rooms, but there would be no problem doing this in one reasonably large room set out with a standard table and chair layout. The session could run with an audience as small as three or as large as twenty. More than this would cause a problem with having sufficient images for the groups to work with. The room would ideally come with a computer with PowerPoint, a projector and screen so that some background can be given.

Session Description

Running the session should be relatively straightforward as we have run it multiple times before with doctoral students. By and large, the session will be a course replica with an introductory section where we explain some background to projective techniques and talk about why we chose to use images of the sky. The main section of the session will involve the participants working in small groups using sample images to stimulate discussion on a suitable matter. We will decide closer to the event what
the focus of the discussions will be, but a natural fallback would be thinking about the current state and desired future of OBTS or OBTC, or, more simply, on people’s own careers.

**Introduction to the Session and Takeaways**

The prime purpose of this session is to share a new use of projective techniques to stimulate discussion, reflection and insight with doctoral students. This is also a technique that is equally likely to work with undergraduate, masters and professional development audiences when the task is compatible. Basically, the goal was to stimulate personal reflection and then share this in small groups without overly exposing the participants to too much personal risk. To do this, the students were asked to choose images of the sky (from a choice of about 50) that captured various points on a journey (either looking back or projecting forwards). In groups of three or four, the participants explained their choice to their fellow group members as a way of voicing their insights for further reflection and discussion.

To explain the rationale for the choices, during the session we will briefly explain why we used a projective technique for this task and why images of the sky were chosen. We will then take participants through a simulated session before a discussion of the operational issues associated with the session. Our hope is that participants will leave the session knowing whether or not it is a technique they might be interested in running and, if it is, knowing how to organize and run such a session.

**Theoretical Grounding**

**Background to Projective Techniques**

Projective techniques were developed, primarily, for use in clinical psychology. The technique involves presenting respondents with ambiguous verbal or visual stimuli before the respondents ‘project’ their own deeply held feelings, experiences, and interpretation onto those stimuli. The tests vary from, for example, the well-known visual Rorschach Inkblot Test (RIT) and Draw-A-Person test through to sentence completion test. And there are many others as well. Colleagues seeking an in-depth discussion of the technique are directed to Klopfer and Taulbee (1976), Molish (1972) and Rabin (2001).

The use of projective techniques peaked in the 1950s (Howes, 1981), but they continue to be subject to scrutiny regarding their validity and reliability. Hunsley and Bailey (1999, p. 267), for example, suggest that continued use of the RIT in clinical utility is unfounded ‘because it ignores the rational, scientific, and ethical requirements inherent in professional standards for psychological measures’. However, Weiner (1997) argues that the RIT can be useful in identifying what he calls ‘personality structure’ (personality states and traits), particularly with regard to measuring elements of anxiety and depression.

Watkins (1991, 1994) notes that despite predictions of the decline in projective techniques for clinical and personality assessment work, they remain some of the
most popular and commonly used techniques for this type of work (Lubin, Larsen and Matarazzo, 1984). Undeniably, there is a tension between the subjective nature of projective techniques, their validity and reliability and their persistence in practice. In some frustration, Watkins (1994) argues that projective techniques get a ‘Bum Rap’ even though they have kept their value in clinical settings.

**Developing the Use of Projective Techniques**

Despite the mixed data on the validity and reliability of projective techniques in clinical settings, there is no doubt that they do encourage people to talk and by doing so in an unconventional manner they can trigger new and unconsciously-held thoughts to emerge. There is also a degree of safety with projective techniques because the participants are not being quizzed directly about their innermost thoughts and instead they are able to offset feelings and emotions on to the stimulus. Given these strengths, the use of projective techniques has been extended beyond personality assessment and clinical settings.

Lally (2001) considered the admissibility of human figure drawings in court. He tested the theory against published criteria for assessing whether a particular psychological test should be used in forensic evaluation. He concluded that the “use of human figure drawings suggests a continued acceptance by the practitioner community, [although] the response from the scientific community is anything but acceptance” (p.145).

Projective techniques have also been applied to education research (Catterall and Ibbotson, 2000). They used a series of techniques (word association, sentence completion, picture sort, bubble cartoon completion etc) to evaluate a computer-based guide to a university library. The success of the project was, “due to their [the projective techniques] unusual and ambiguous nature, they permit respondents to respond from their own frames of reference and can help overcome some of the barriers that deter respondents from expressing imaginative, unusual and negative views, private thoughts and feelings” (p. 255).

The use of projective techniques in marketing is, perhaps, a more obvious application. Shore and Cooper (1999) applied projective techniques to assess how consumers saw the change and development of over 60 brands pre- and post- the Millennium. They used bubble pictures “in which informants projected what a brand might speak aloud about itself as opposed to what it privately thinks in the Millennium” (p. 35). The results informed how trends and dynamics of the new Millennium might assist marketers “anticipate consumers’ hopes, fears, wants, needs and desires…to fuel business growth” (p. 44).

Interestingly, the applications and examples discussed focus on understanding the individual’s responses to projective tests and their implication. Burgi, Jacobs and Roos (2005) investigated the effect of using projective techniques in a group situation. Working with executives from a telecommunications organization, Orange, they asked how the executives saw the strategy and competitive situation and were asked to build models, using Lego, to project their views. The executives, developed not only their own ideas but, through a discursive process, modified and agreed those ideas; eventually representing the strategy as a flotilla of ships. This brings a new
dynamic to the use of projective techniques as a means of sense-making not just for the individual, which is the focus of much of the use of projective techniques, but for a team as well. As Burgi et al., (2005, p. 90) conclude, ‘the effects of individual psychological processes are traced through levels of integration to the highest and most aggregative level, from individual intuition to individual-group interpreting to group-organizational integrating to organizational institutionalization’.

Conclusion

In summary, projective techniques have developed from a clinical practice technique for psychoanalysis through personality assessment to be used for wider applications in marketing, education and management development. They are a burgeoning technique whose effectiveness comes from subjective perceptions of their ability to ‘open up’ people and generate discussion, reflection and insight. When the lead author was asked to develop two reflective sessions for doctoral students (one for new entry students to help them think about the road ahead and the second for finishing students to help them reflect on the path trodden), projective techniques were chosen for their ability to stimulate individual reflection, group discussion and generate insight. This use of projective techniques seems to have been successful as feedback from students is positive and the commissioning university offered repeat business for more than five years. One unexpected positive outcome was that one student was so taken with the technique as a means of stimulating reflection and generating insight that she used it as the data gathering method in her own doctorate.

Application to Conference Theme

One of the reasons that images of the sky was chosen as the projective technique is that they are universal. All cultures have references to the sky and weather in their languages and in most atmospheric metaphors are integrated into everyday speech. This gives skies and the weather a universal appeal and all students are able to identify with the images. They engage difference and deny privileged positions to people. Moreover, as these images are used to surface the students’ own perceptions and thoughts, their own interpretation of the images are given validity.

We would also argue that this session is fully in-tune with the history of OBTC. It is a fully participative session in which the participants have the opportunity to engage, play with, and discuss this new technique. And for participants keen to put method into action, the wonderful desert skyscapes of Albuquerque are a fantastic source of different and vivid images to add to a growing portfolio.

References


