My Sociology: Transforming Classroom Culture from a Focus on Grades to a Focus on Learning

David L. Strickland
Associate Professor of Sociology
East Georgia College
Abstract

This presentation documents a pedagogical remodeling of the Introduction to Sociology course to one that transforms the culture of higher education from a focus on grades to a focus on learning. The transformation is accomplished through a series of learning activities embodied in the My Sociology textbook which has been designed to be not merely learner-centered but ego-centered. In fifteen years of teaching I have observed that students perk up when the lesson is about them. Taking advantage of this energy, the discussion of sociology starts with a treatment of the self, and then branches out systematically to the global perspective. Experimental model research comparing this teaching strategy to the traditional model has shown this strategy to be statistically significantly more effective (p < .001).
Presentation Outline

• CHALLENGE
  – Demands of the job, insights from teaching, and implications for the idealized redesign of the course have informed this model.

• DESIGN (and EXECUTION of the Model)
  – Topics for the book and course have been organized in a way that meets the students where they are and leads them to where they should be. Other features include an emphatic step by step goal centered approach, quizzes for formative assessment, embedded Regents reading style assessments, built-in graded study guide tools.

• EVALUATION
  – Statistical analysis comparing the traditional model with the my sociology model show significant improvement for students using My Sociology.
The Challenge

There exist a disconnect between the acquisition of the credential and the learning, critical thinking, and understanding that the credential is supposed to represent.

Some evidence of the disconnect:

– Students do not read syllabi or textbooks.
– The primary study tool employed by students is cramming for exams.
– Students have been socialized to focus on grades and to view the credential as the paramount reason for college.
How do we change the culture?

Denise R. Boyd facetiously writes,

Somewhere there is a college where psychology professors motivate students to use their textbooks simply by putting statements such as "this text is required" and "exam 1 will cover the first three chapters" in their syllabi. Upon being dismissed from the first class meeting, the students at this college go immediately to the college bookstore, where they gladly spend the money they had allotted for concert tickets on the required text, and begin reading chapters 1 through 3 as they are walking from the bookstore back to their dormitories, the bus stop, or to their cars.

For those of us who do not have the good fortune to teach in such an institution, creative strategies are required to motivate students to obtain and use their textbooks effectively.

Why Students Don’t Read the Textbook

“In the frenzy of deadline after deadline (assignments due, quizzes, tests, labs, lab reports, etc.), it’s all they can do to put out the next fire. As a result, they are very inefficient; they can’t take the time to do a good job of learning the material, which would involve reading the textbook, working through the examples, and doing many practice exercises. Instead, they devote far more time to completing the assignments than would be necessary if they had done many practice exercises, because they attempt the assignments before they really understand the material. But they don’t see an alternative, because the assignments are worth marks, and so they are (unfortunately) a higher priority than actually learning the material. By the end of the course, they understand very little, even if they have managed to score a decent grade.”

Also to blame are “bloated, dense textbooks that are so common at the first-year university level.”

Santo D'Agostino
A former mathematics and physics professor and textbook writer/editor
http://qedinsight.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/students-dont-read-textbooks/
A Change of Culture is Needed.

The Charge
- Our charge as professors is to produce the most learning possible in the short time we have with our students.

The Challenge
- Students have been socialized lifelong to focus on grades instead of learning and to attempt to achieve those grades with the least investment possible.
Insights from Teaching

• Students more motivated at beginning and end of the semester.
• Students respond most to ego-centric content, are sometimes temporarily attracted by novel content, but often tune out other topics.
• Students are interested in grades; not in learning.
• Students have been socialized to be passive learners.
• Increasing numbers of students enter college ill prepared.
• Students do not read syllabi or textbooks.
• Students are electronically connected.
Implications for the Idealized Redesign of the Course

1. Meet students where they are and lead them to where they need to be.
2. Tell the students exactly how to study.
3. Employ goal based teaching and assessment.
4. Provide a text that is realistically readable and use all of it.
5. Develop and assign graded exercises that will require both advance preparation and review.
6. Cover abstract topics throughout and specifically when students are paying the most attention.
Traditional Model for Teaching Sociology

1. Sociological Imagination
2. Theory/Paradigms
3. Research
4. Culture
5. Socialization/Interaction
6. Groups/Organizations
7. Deviance
8. Stratification
   - Class
   - Race
   - Gender
   - Age
9. Institutions
   - Family
   - Religion
   - Education
   - Medicine
   - Government
   - Economy
10. Global Perspective/Change
    - Demography
    - Urbanization
    - Environment
    - Social Movements
    - Social Change
1. Meet students where they are and lead them to where they need to be.

10. My Whole World
9. My Research: How We Know About Society
8. My Theories: Sociological Paradigms
7. My Whole Society: Stratification
6. My Whole Society: Institutions
5. My Groups: Deviance
4. My Groups: Conformity
3. My Self: How Did I Get To Be Me?
2. My Self: Who Am I?
1. My Sociology: What is Sociology
Status Set

- Status set: The combination of all the statuses any individual holds at a given time.
- Master status: A particular status in your status set that is of far greater importance than any of the others in shaping both how you see yourself and how others view you.
- Achieved status: Acquired.
- Ascribed status: Given to you involuntarily by society.
Role Strain

Role strain results from a role overload or from contradictory demands and expectations built into a given status.
Role Conflict

Role conflict occurs when the demands or expectations associated with two or more statuses are incompatible.

More than one Status

Student
Study for exam tomorrow

Brother
Attend birthday party of sibling
Chapter Roadmap

3. Employ goal based teaching and assessment.

The Chapter Learning Goals appear in the Roadmap and also in the Study Guide at the end of the chapter.

2. Tell the students exactly how to study.

The Study Plan Checklist provides step by step instructions to guide the student.
5. Develop and assign graded exercises that will require both advance preparation and review.
4. Provide a text that is realistically readable and use all of it.

Reading Comprehension Questions are embedded throughout the text. These follow the style used on the Georgia Regents’ Reading Exam.
Each chapter contains Study Guide pages where the student converts the learning goals into questions and records answers for them. These notes are then used for study.

3. Employ goal based teaching and assessment.

5. Develop and assign graded exercises that will require both advance preparation and review.
Evaluation

I. Student Perceptions and Use of Tools
   - Purchased Book
   - Conversational Style Text
   - Study Guide
   - Embedded Regents’ Reading Exam Style Questions
   - Practice Exam Questions
   - Practice Essay Questions

II. Student Performance
   - Comparison of Models
     Traditional Model vs. My Sociology Model
A Learner Centered Approach

Maryellen Weimer, author of the book Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practices (2011) has explained the value of the learner-centered approach.

If teachers focus their attention on the learning experiences of students and make changes based on what we know about teaching that promotes learning:

1. Students will understand more of what they are learning
2. Students will retain what they learn longer
3. Students will learn more than just the content
4. Chances are good students will be changed by what they learn
5. Students will love learning more.
Student Reactions to Book

- Data from questionnaires shows students have had a very positive reaction to book
- Students think book is different from traditional textbooks they have used in the past
- Students think book is easier to read and understand
- Students think study guide and study aides are helpful
Student Evaluation of Textbook
(percent; n = 91)

- Purchased: 95.5% (YES), 4.5% (NO)
- Book is Different: 70.8% (YES), 22.5% (NO)
- Easy to Read: 92.1% (YES), 6.7% (NO)
Helpfulness of Study Guide Components

(Percent; n = 91)

- Study Guide: 58.4% Very helpful, 32.6% Somewhat helpful, 2.2% Not at all Helpful, 2.2% Did not use
- Comp Questions: 37.1% Very helpful, 37.1% Somewhat helpful, 10% Not at all Helpful, 5.6% Did not use
- Exam Questions: 44.9% Very helpful, 29.2% Somewhat helpful, 5.6% Not at all Helpful, 2.2% Did not use
- Essay Questions: 38.2% Very helpful, 31.5% Somewhat helpful, 5.6% Not at all Helpful, 19.1% Did not use
Preliminary Data

• Preliminary Data show that students who take quizzes prior to class do not do better on the Final Exam than those who have not taken quizzes prior to class.

• Preliminary Data show that students who use My Sociology pedagogy score statistically significantly higher on their first examination than those who use traditional approaches.
(Ch 2 Goal 4) Sociologist William E. B. Du bois (1868–1963) observed that white people can simply be “Americans” but black people (African Americans) have a “double consciousness” and have an identity tied to the color of their skin. In sociological terms this illustrates the fact that ___.

a. African Americans are second class Americans  
b. African Americans experience role ambiguity  
c. Black is a master status for African Americans  
d. The double consciousness of black people results in role strain  
e. None of these are correct.
Example Exam Question

(Ch 2 Goal 8) Mead and Cooley explained how others influence the development of the self while Goffman explained ____.

a. that our identity comes from the statuses that we occupy and the roles connected to them.
b. how sociological insights can help the individual to understand his or her place in society
c. how we use social interaction to attempt to control the impressions that others have of us and to maintain our preferred self image.
d. how the self is developed, and how the self is linked to society.
e. None of these are correct.
No Significant Difference Between Final Exam Scores in Groups with vs. without Quizzes

\( (p = 0.934) \)
Significant Difference in First Exam Scores in Classes using My Sociology vs. Traditional Classes

(p < 0.001)

My Sociology (n=115) - 72.12
Traditional (n = 193) - 65.02
The End

The Beginning

OF A NEW CULTURE OF LEARNING

Thanks for listening.

davidlstrickland@gmail.com

Facebook Page:
http://www.facebook.com/#!/MySociology

Textbook Site:
www.mysociology.net