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ISSUE REACTION: INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO SOCIAL INQUIRY RESEARCH

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Social inquiry courses provide students with the means necessary to confront significant social issues, typically through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Faculty members who teach these types of courses, however, encounter four basic problems. First, students often resist taking the critical postures necessary to do social research, largely because such postures in some way threaten the stability that students try to impose upon the world. Second, the ambiguity surrounding social issues and approaches to social research frustrates students' desires to maintain the type of order they were accustomed to at the secondary level, leading to further resistance from students to the idea of "doing research." Third, students' differing abilities can work against group cohesion and individual effectiveness, turning an already difficult course into a mechanics nightmare. Finally, students' desires to tackle significant issues, when such desires are manifested, often face the impediment of institutional research boards, which increasingly are becoming hindrances rather than ethical gatekeepers. This "Issue Reaction" offers four suggestions: structuring students into carefully designed teams, using problem-based learning techniques to guide discussion, using public data to train students in the mechanics of research, and having students conduct research within the confines of the classroom.

In the past, institutions reserved social inquiry courses for students who had reached the junior or senior level of study. With the increase of general education requirements at many institutions across the country, a much broader audience populates today's courses. Many incoming students tend to be "socially reticent," that is, unwilling to extend themselves beyond a cohort group that acts, thinks, and even dresses as they do. Forcing these students to confront communal issues intrudes upon the stability with which they seek to surround themselves. These students find that many of the questions they are being trained to pose threaten, or at least necessitate a re-evaluation of, some of their own core beliefs and values. More and more these students retreat from the critical stances they should be taking as educated and contributing members of society.

A related problem involves the ambiguity that surrounds social inquiry courses. To allow students enough latitude to approach the issues creatively, instructors craft assignments in these courses in abstract terms. Many students want the stability offered by more traditional course structures (e.g., a basic textbook, multiple-choice exams, etc.). Consequently, professors are often torn between providing practical experience and avoiding harsh evaluations for not accommodating their students' wishes.

Instructors also face pedagogical impediments above and beyond those associated with methodology (e.g., getting students accustomed to new terminology, using methods correctly, etc.). For example, many students simply do not know how to pose questions. This is not to say that students are simply asking questions that are too general to be useful to the research enterprise. Nor is it to say that students are having the ordinary difficulties associated with survey construction. Rather, there are increasing numbers of students who cannot formulate *questions* in any coherent *grammatical* fashion. Consequently, one further encumbrance an instructor must face in social inquiry courses involves teaching English grammar as well as theory and methodology.

Finally, instructors often need to confront sometimes overly burdensome policies from their institutions' research boards. Regulations regarding research on human subjects keep increasing exponentially. Although these regulations are based on the best of ethical intentions and are meant to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity in the research study, they make teaching social inquiry courses very difficult at times. For example, when it takes three months for a board to approve a student survey on a controversial issue like self-reporting of sexual preference, the board is only succeeding in steering students and faculty away from socially beneficial research avenues. The dictum by which all

researchers stand is "Do no harm," but at the same time instructors of social inquiry courses would like to be able to *do some good.*

Issues Reaction participants suggest the following to circumvent, address, and ameliorate these issues.

Renata Engel of Penn State University suggests structuring the class around teamwork. The instructor constructs the teams based upon demonstrated ability and self-identified desired grade outcomes. Thus, students "working for an A" are grouped with like students, students "happy with a C" are grouped with like students, and so on. Students quickly find that refusing to "adjust attitudes" and that working with "like-minded" individuals may not always be appropriate strategies.

Use more problem-based learning strategies in the classroom. For example, Jeff Lewis of the University of Illinois at Chicago presents students with the problem of analyzing the lives of immigrants who own grocery stores in the neighborhood. The students then conduct research on what kinds of data they would need to collect, a discovery that naturally leads into discussions of survey design.

Both Lewis and the author suggest having students examine data published in appendices of recent articles or books. It provides students with an opportunity to practice and develop needed research mechanics and offers models of good research for them to reference.

The author suggests conducting in-class research, using the other students in class as focus groups. In my organizational communication course, for example, when we discuss time and motion studies, I have students actually run a time and motion study using backpacks, books, and a flight of stairs. The student researchers think beforehand that, as you increase the number of books, the student subjects will slow down. But when they run the tests, they consistently find students hitting a peak speed with three or four books in their backpacks. Their reaction is always this: "If I didn't see it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it." The sample size may be small, but the students can still feel, as Whitney Garcia of Towson University put it, "some of the excitement of actually doing research with human subjects."

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alfred G. Mueller II (Ph.D., University of Iowa) is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at the Pennsylvania State University, Mont Alto campus. His research centers upon rhetorics of identity, with his most recent theoretical statements focused upon performative rhetoric, politics, and identity formation in the former Soviet Union.