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TEACHING SOCIOLOGY: AN APPROACH TO PEDAGOGY

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The central emphasis in my classroom approach, regardless of the substantive content of a given course, is on "learning to think sociologically." Teaching students to think as sociologists is an uphill struggle in this psychologically-oriented culture. Thinking sociologically involves, for most students, the acquisition of a new point of view to which many students are ideologically hostile. This hostility does not emerge fundamentally (although it often appears overtly the case) from the students' location on the political spectrum (i.e., from conservative to liberal), but derives from deeply held (and often conflicting) convictions about the nature of science and religion, freedom and determinism, responsibility and individualism, and the meaning of democracy.

By demanding that students "think sociologically," my aim is to put students inside the sociological perspective. I train students in my courses to recognize, explicate, apply, extend, and reflexively compare and critique a variety of the theoretical perspectives historically associated under the rubric of "sociology." These intellectual activities comprise my pedagogical goals and are, simultaneously, the objective criteria on which student progress is evaluated. Introductory courses are concerned primarily with the recognition and explication of institutional patterns, whereas more advanced courses emphasize application, extension, and critique.

In order to think like professional sociologists, students must read and learn to comprehend the best and most provocative sociological writing currently available. I require all students, whether in freshman courses or advanced seminars, to confront sophisticated reading materials from the start, and I use a variety of classroom techniques to help/push/pull students through the shock of having to read like adults.

These techniques include Socratic interrogations, calling on students in turn by name to explain (in their own words consistent with an author's intent) specific passages in assigned readings, orally testing fellow students on their ability to listen to and evaluate the adequacy of their classmates' explications, requiring students to devise (and compare) programs of social action -- consistent with a given theorist's perspective -- to remedy a specified social problem, and assigning one-page essays in which students iteratively refine written explications of especially difficult paragraphs or sentences from assigned readings (similar to the foreign language teaching technique of explication de texte).

During the first few weeks of each course, I am typically cast by my students as a "hard" instructor. As the weeks roll by, however, a few students "catch on" and begin to perform admirably. I then typically assign students to study groups, distributing the "better" students evenly among the groups. I next require group projects in which all students receive whatever grade is earned by the group collectively. In this way, the "better" students pull the others along with them, often forming group solidarities that extend beyond the classroom. The group projects are structured (and monitored by the instructor) to insure that the "better" students do not simply "carry" their classmates. Closed book examinations are required in all courses except seminars. Exams focus on content from lectures and reading assignments and include "thought problems" structured to reveal one's ability to think sociologically. By the end of these courses, I am considered "hard but fair," and many students rate my courses as the best in their program. I am especially moved by the response of a woman student who cried through the first half of my intro course and got an "F" on her first exam (her first "F" ever). By the end of the course she earned an "A" and told me, "My father used to put me down, but now I can read things that he'll never understand." This, to me, is success.

My approach is tough and demanding, but sociology is a tough and demanding subject. To my delight, however, I have found that freshmen students can do extremely well if they are confronted with adult performance expectations. I tell students that if they think calculus is hard, they will find sociology

equally so. I require all students to fill out a weekly activities calendar showing all class, work, and other obligations, marking where they have scheduled three hours of study time for each hour spent in my course. This exercise neatly defuses the charge that my courses demand more time than other courses. When students complain about the readings (a few always do), I ask them if they want to complete successfully with students from Harvard and Yale, and point out that their counterparts less than 100 years ago read and mastered equally difficult material in Latin, German, and French. Most students get the point and get to work.

I have adapted the pedagogical system successfully advanced by Jessie Taft (a student of George H. Mead) which works by simply laying on more than many students think they can possibly master, creating a temporary crisis and the "opportunity" to re-assess one's study habits, goals, and ways of thinking about intellectual pursuits. Through this process, students who get an "A" in my courses realize that they have not mastered a subject, but have only begun the long journey. They make the transition from scientism to science, from sophists to thoughtful adults.

This pedagogical sketch builds upon themes initially addressed in my 1987 article on "Novels, Thought Experiments, and Humanist Sociology in the Classroom" (Teaching Sociology 15: 38-44), and course syllabus published in The Humanist Sociology Resource Book, pp. 54-58 (American Sociological Association, 1987). The nature of crisis is explored, with a view to graduate education, in the 1991 article by Mary Jo Deegan and myself on "Doctoral Dissertations as Liminal Journeys of the Self" (Teaching Sociology 19: 322-32). The attached appendix lists the works assigned in a variety of my undergraduate courses during the last five years.

Appendix: Assigned Readings by Course

All Courses

Course syllabus.

A standard, college-level dictionary.

Packets of photo-copied readings and/or exercises are required in most courses.

Introduction to Sociology

Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life.

Anthony Giddens, Sociology, A Brief but Critical Introduction.

Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.

Shulamit Reinharz, On Becoming a Social Scientist.

Criminology and Deviance

Steven Box, Deviance, Reality, and Society.

Steven Box, Power, Crime, and Mystification.

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.

Erving Goffman, Asylums.

Susan Martin, Breaking and Entering.

Marriage and Family

Jessie Bernard, The Future of Marriage.

Michele Barret and Mary McIntosh, The Anti-Social Family.

Sex and Gender

Mary Jo Deegan and Michael R. Hill, Women and Symbolic Interaction.

Julia Kristeva, About Chinese Women.

Social Change

Anthony Giddens, The Nation State and Violence.

Social Problems

Mary Jo Deegan, American Ritual Dramas.

C. Wright Mills, The Causes of World War Three.

Hilda Scott, Working Your Way to the Bottom: The Feminization of Poverty.

Social Research Methods

Shulamit Reinharz, On Becoming a Social Scientist.

E.J. Webb, et al., Nonreactive Measures in the Social Sciences.

Development of Sociological Theory

No primary text, 30-40 pages per week from a photocopy packet of readings selected from works by Jane Addams, Hubert M. Blalock, Jr, W.E.B. DuBois, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Erving Goffman, Jurgen Habermas, Harriet Martineau, Karl Marx, George Herbert Mead, Otto Neurath, Alfred Schutz, and Max Weber.

Undergraduate Seminar in Visual Sociology

Howard Becker, Art Worlds

David Lowe, The History of Bourgeois Perception.

Janet Wolff, The Social Production of Art.