HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP A SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION THROUGH INNOVATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS*

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As SOCIOLOGY PROFESSORS, WE CONSISTently try to impress upon our students the unique way in which sociologists view the social world. In introductory classes we generally approach this task by assigning C. Wright Mills's (1959) classic essay "The Promise" in which Mills eloquently describes the "sociological imagination" as a "quality of mind" that helps individuals critically assess events in society and link them to their own lives. In upper-division seminars we continue, through lecture and class discussions, to instruct students that sociology is not merely a discipline; it is a "form of consciousness" (Berger 1963). Ironically, the sociological perspective is difficult and frustrating to teach precisely because it is a cognitive ability rather than a simple vocabulary term. Students can be told through lectures and reading assignments that sociologists do not "look at phenomena that nobody else is aware of," but simply view "the same phenomena in a different way" (Berger 1963:28). Even so, they cannot be *taught* how to "'see through' the facades of social structures" (Berger 1963:31). Instead students must be given the opportunity to *develop* a sociological imagination through practice and application.

Creating assignments that challenge students to see the world as sociologists is quite difficult. They must be given the opportunity to critically assess elements of society to which they have been routinely exposed all their lives. The traditional term paper, although useful for teaching students library research skills and how to write in an objective, impersonal, and professional manner, does not allow them to explore ideas in novel, imaginative ways (Singh and Unnithan 1989). Professors who want students to develop a sociological imagination must be creative and willing to depart from conventional classroom assignments.

For most sociologists, the struggle to design assignments that challenge students to "question the obvious" is occurring during a time when educators are under pressure to incorporate more writing into their courses. Throughout the country, colleges and universities have established "Writing across the Curriculum" (WAC) programs that require greater emphasis on writing skills in all disciplines. The WAC movement, initiated partly in response to employers' demand for workers with better communication skills, is perceived by some as an onerous administrative directive designed to further burden professors who already are overwhelmed with crowded classes, research requirements, and ever-growing advising and committee responsibilities.

Far from being a burden, the increasing emphasis on writing has enhanced education by reinforcing what many educators already know: "writing is an important means of clarifying thinking" (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982:362). Research consistently shows that students learn more about a topic and retain the information longer when they write about it (Fassler Walvoord 1986; Karcher 1988; Zinsser 1988). Writing is not simply a means of explaining what one knows; it is an invaluable way to generate thinking, discovery, and learning (Karcher 1988). Sociologists must design assignments that allow students to think critically *in writing* about personal experiences and social events, for "as students write about and become familiar with what they hear[,] they move, almost despite themselves, to a more exacting appreciation of the sociological imagination" (Cadwallader and Scarboro 1982:362).

Writing is not incorporated into sociology classes *in addition* to helping students discover their sociological imagination;

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rather, it is an essential part of the *process.* Writing assignments should be designed to encourage critical thinking and creativity as well as to help students polish their writing skills. Professors should assign different types of writing—some informal, some formal—so students will learn to construct their thinking and writing in a variety of ways. Because students tend to produce better writing when they are motivated and excited about a topic (Zinsser 1988), professors who design writing assignments that allow students to explore subjects in novel ways will generally be rewarded with higher-quality work.

In this teaching note I describe a project I designed for a Women and Society course that helps students develop a sociological imagination and allows them to engage in several types of writing without producing the traditional term paper. Students report that they enjoy working on the project, and their writing reflects their enthusiasm. Although the project involves three separate writing assignments, none of the grading is burdensome. Students produce work that is interesting to read, often enlightening, and usually a pleasure to grade.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

The project, which I call "Women in Contemporary Culture," includes three writing assignments, class discussion, a collection of cultural artifacts, and informal class presentations. The objective is to make students more aware of the pervasiveness of women's images in culture, and ultimately to see how gender norms shape women's status in society. When students begin the course, they write a short essay in which they state what they believe the status of women in American society to be. Then they collect cultural artifacts (such as magazine articles, t-shirts, and music) that illustrate women's social, economic, and/or political status. Finally, after critically studying society for an entire semester, students write a long essay in which they reexamine their perception of women's status.

The "Women in Contemporary Culture" project is the focal point of the course. Students, however, also take three examinations on reading and lecture material during the semester (the syllabus is available upon request). The examinations include a combination of multiple-choice, short-answer, and essay questions.

THE IN-CLASS ESSAY

In the first week of class, before any reading has been assigned and before I deliver any lectures, students write an in-class essay titled "The Status of Women in American Society." In this essay they must explain how they believe women are treated and perceived in contemporary American culture, and must provide several examples to support their thesis. I do not give students specific guidelines for this first assignment because I want them to approach the topic from their own perspectives. Generally, however, the essays state one of the following theses: "Women are exploited and devalued"; "Women's status has improved, but they still have a long way to go to achieve equality with men"; "Women have attained equality with men"; and "Women have *more* privileges and choices than men."

The purpose of the initial essay is to force students to clearly articulate their perception of women's status. After the essays are completed and we discuss them in class, I tell students that I want them to temporarily suspend their preconceived beliefs about the status of women. I instruct them to look for *any* symbols or indicators of women's status in culture, even those which do not conform to their initial assessment or thesis.

THE "WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE" COLLECTION

Images of women abound in culture, although we do not always recognize them. The second component of the project is designed to help students notice and evaluate the indicators of women's status that surround them. I assign them the task of finding at least two symbols or "indicators" of women's status in culture per week. Indicators can be found virtually everywhere, including song lyrics, television shows, movies, advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles, greeting cards, bumper stickers,

posters, clothing, calendars, and personal conversations and experiences. Every item collected must be accompanied by a brief written explanation of how the student interpreted or reacted to it.

At least part of one class period each week is devoted to discussing the collected materials. Students are asked to bring items to class or to recount events from that week which they believe illustrate women's status in society. Requiring students to share their materials and their perceptions with classmates produces some of the best classroom discussions I have conducted in seven years of teaching. After one student shares a magazine advertisement or recounts a "joke" which he or she heard that week, other students are eager to respond.

Students' reactions to their colleagues' presentations take a variety of forms. Often students react to the objects or events that others present by sharing similar items or experiences. For example, students usually do not have any trouble finding magazine advertisements that reflect some cultural attitude about women. After one student shares a cologne advertisement in which a bare-breasted woman is shown but the product is not mentioned, other students eagerly discuss similar advertisements. During the discussion other types of advertisements depicting women as executives and as mothers also surface; the students ultimately learn that there are a variety of images and stereotypes of women in contemporary society.

Students do not always agree on the "appropriate" way to interpret cultural symbols and events. One semester, several female students became very interested in collecting greeting cards that contained male-bashing messages. Some students laughed at these messages, arguing that turnabout is fair play. Others asserted that the messages were sexist and inappropriate, whether they insulted men or women. Song lyrics also sparked fierce debate; some students believed that music which depicted women as sexually aggressive was "liberating," and others thought the same songs were "degrading." Class discussions became a forum for airing and understanding diverse opinions.

Although this portion of the project is an excellent tool for stimulating class discussion, the objective of the assignment is to give students the opportunity to develop a sociological imagination—the ability to recognize and question the obvious. After only a few weeks of class, students report that they now recognize items and events in their environment which they formerly ignored. They begin seeing messages in movies and hearing messages in songs that they had overlooked countless times. Most students, for example, were amazed at the violent, controlling theme of the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb." They had heard the song hundreds of times and had even sung along, but some students reported that they never had actually *listened* to the message until the song was played in class.

Shopping trips, visits to the local video store, and even an hour at the laundromat provide opportunities to use the "sociological imagination" and learn a lesson in women's studies. Students now notice that pink and blue disposable razors are exactly the same, but the pink ones cost more. The lack of strong female characters in movies becomes painfully obvious after a weekend of viewing the newest releases with a roommate. One male student even went so far as to bring his girlfriend's negligee to class and explained how he had gained sudden insight into "the beauty myth" while folding laundry. He said he realized for the first time that men can wear comfortable, practical clothes most of the time, but women must be beautiful and sexy even in their sleep.

Students are encouraged to bring various indicators of women's status to class. Therefore the instructor must have access to both a cassette tape player and a VCR. To save valuable class time, I instruct students to preset any audio or videotapes to the appropriate starting place, and I ask that their examples not run longer than two minutes.

Students submit the final collection about three weeks before the semester ends. The artifacts tend to be quite diverse, so I allow students to be as creative as they like when putting together the collection. The only requirement is that every item must be accompanied by a written explanation of how the student reacted to it or interpreted its significance. Some students choose to keep a scrapbook of items they find and

make journal entries describing what they believe each item indicates about women's status in society. Others construct collages and submit their explanations of each item as an appendix. Students have even compiled video albums of excerpts from television shows, commercials, and movies along with a written narrative.

THE FINAL ESSAY

The final component of the project is a five- to seven-page typed essay titled "The Status of Women in Contemporary Society Revisited." In this paper students reexamine the initial assessment of women's status that they made in the in-class essay. They must state whether their opinion of women's status in society has changed or remained the same, and must support their argument by drawing on materials assigned in class or included in their collection.

The final essay gives students the opportunity to synthesize the various materials to which they have been exposed throughout the course. Many students still hold to their initial assessment of women's status at the end of the course, but now they can support their argument more strongly. Others report that their perspective has changed dramatically after examining gender images in American culture through a sociological eye. Virtually all students contend that they cannot stop analyzing cultural images of gender from a sociological perspective, even after the assignment is officially complete. One student, who became fascinated with analyzing television programs and commercials for gender messages, reported that her roommate asked her in exasperation one evening "Can't you ever just watch TV like a normal person?"

GRADING COMPONENTS OF THE PROJECT

Supporters of the Writing across the Curriculum movement argue that less is more in grading written assignments (Fassler Walvoord 1986; Lindemann 1987). They believe that meticulous grading of every spelling and grammatical error intimidates students, stifles creativity, and ultimately does not improve student performance (Fassler Walvoord 1986; Karcher 1988). Students should be taught to "focus on writing as a way of learning to think, as opposed to writing as a way of earning a grade" (Karcher 1988:170). Therefore not all writing assignments need to be graded; those which are graded should simply include the professor's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the work with brief suggestions for improvement.

Although I agree with this newer philosophy of grading, I have found that if students know in advance that the work will not be graded, many will simply ignore the assignment. Therefore, I grade each component of the "Women in Contemporary Culture" project, but I apply slightly different criteria to each assignment. The initial essay, which is written in class with time limits, is essentially a tool to help students clarify for themselves how they believe women are treated and perceived in society. The essays are graded on the basis of whether the student has articulated a thesis clearly and has provided some support for the argument. These initial in-class essays generally are only about two pages long, and are not difficult to grade.

The second component of the project, the collection of the indicators of women's status in society, is a pleasure to grade. Students usually find interesting materials for their collections and often provide unique interpretations of their meaning. The written reactions to each item are designed to help students reflect on women's status and ultimately to help them "see" society with the sociological imagination. The audience for this writing is supposed to be the student rather than the professor. Often the reactions are written in a stream-of-consciousness style, so I do not grade students on grammar, spelling, or punctuation. When assigning a grade, I check to see that students have included at least two items per week and that a written commentary accompanies each item. In addition, I expect that students will have spent some time preparing the final collection; I penalize students whose work is sloppy and

thrown together. It is important to grade and return the collections to students promptly so that they can use them for their final essay.

In the final essay, students are expected to demonstrate their written communication skills by articulating and defending a thesis, and organizing information effectively. Unlike the two previous components of the project, the final essay is not meant to help students clarify their thinking, but to present logical, convincing arguments to the reader. Grades are based on the thoughtfulness of the student's argument, on whether suitable support for the argument is provided, and on the mechanics of writing, including organization, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

ADJUSTING THE PROJECT TO FIT VARIOUS CLASS SIZES AND ACADEMIC CALENDARS

I have used this project in women's studies classes that were taught during the standard fall or spring semester with enrollments of approximately 50 students, as well as in a summer school course with 15 students. The assignment was equally effective in both large and small classes and during regular and condensed semesters, with some minor adjustments. In larger classes the students present more diverse materials, although some duplication occurs. In smaller classes I require students to bring in a minimum of five indicators (instead of two) so that we can discuss a variety of materials.

In summer school courses, which usually meet daily for longer class periods than during the regular semester, one can devote more class time to students' informal presentations. During fall and spring semesters, when classes usually meet for 50 to 75 minutes, time limits often must be placed on class discussion to allow ample time for lectures.

ADAPTING THE PROJECT TO OTHER SOCIOLOGY COURSES

The basic structure of this project—an in-class essay in which students articulate their ideas about the course topic at the beginning of the semester, a collection of items or events in culture related to the subject matter, and a final essay in which students reevaluate their initial argument and synthesize course materials—can be adapted to virtually any sociology course. Students in stratification courses could be asked to collect symbols of social class; similar types of essays could be assigned. Likewise, students in a course on minority groups could search for indicators of the social and economic status of a particular racial or ethnic group. Gerontology students could be assigned to examine the social environment for evidence of cultural norms and stereotypes surrounding aging.

Professors who use this type of project should find that the cultural indicators which students collect are very useful in helping students understand and apply theoretical concepts. To facilitate theoretical thinking, students could be asked to state in their informal class presentations or in their written assessment how each of the items they have collected would be interpreted from different theoretical perspectives. Students also could be asked to review their evaluation of particular items and to determine the theoretical perspective with which they agree most closely. Furthermore, this assignment is useful in helping students identify structural factors that explain the status of a particular group. Students could be asked to use their collection of cultural indicators to describe specific social and economic factors that contribute to the status and stereotypes of the social group they are studying.

CONCLUSION

The "Women in Contemporary Culture" project allows professors to meet discipline-based and broad educational objectives without a substantial increase in workload. Students receive the opportunity to develop a uniquely sociological view of the world and simultaneously to refine their writing skills. Because students generally are enthusiastic about the project, they produce work that is interesting and enjoyable to grade.

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