

NOTES

ASSESSING AN ADVANCED LEVEL INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY COURSE

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IN 2001, THE GOVERNING COUNCIL of the American Sociological Association (ASA) appointed Professor Caroline Persell of New York University to launch a task force with the goal of creating an advanced high school sociology curriculum that would also be a model for introductory sociology courses in colleges and universities (Persell 2003).¹The principle goal of the task force was to design a college-level sociology course that would motivate students' interest and help them to acquire scientific knowledge that would better prepare them for

college and pursuits in all scientific disciplines, increase their interest in postsecondary education, and help them in their future studies and work experiences, with the long-term goal of creating individual and societal benefits. Since 2003, this curriculum has been offered to high school students and undergraduates in a small number of colleges and universities. This study examines the learning outcomes of a class of undergraduate students at Michigan State University who took this course in spring 2006.

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¹The ASA task force consisted of distinguished college and university professors in sociology as well as several teachers who were engaged in teaching sociology in high schools and community colleges. The task force met over a period of two years and identified the need for an introductory sociology curriculum that was more focused on sociological principles and was more cognitively engaging for students. They also determined that this course needed to be more responsive to urban youth. The result was the model curriculum used in this course. The curriculum was generated by subcommittees of the members who expanded on their areas of expertise and developed pedagogical exercises that corresponded to the new content. The curriculum was then circulated amongst colleagues of task force members, presented at the 2002 ASA Annual Meeting, and piloted throughout the country, including pilots in high schools in New York; Chicago, Illinois; Princeton, New Jersey, and Greenfield, Wisconsin (Persell 2003). The curriculum focuses on certain key principles in the discipline that underscore many substantive areas (as stressed by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000).

ADOLESCENTS AND SOCIOLOGY

Introducing sociological principles to adolescents can be especially valuable for their development as they make the transition from adolescence into adulthood. Adolescence is a time when young people begin exploring their place in the world, testing a variety of identities, and imagining their futures (Cookson and Persell 1985; Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Erikson 1968; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Because sociology is the study of society, it can help adolescents understand their own world and the world of adults as they begin to plan for their future educational plans and occupational choices. Sociology is concerned with topics of particular interest to adolescents, such as peer groups, marital formation, deviance, inequality, and substance abuse. These topics are also developmentally relevant to young adults as they transition from their families and high school into the freedom and responsibilities of college life and the labor force.

Sociology courses provide opportunities to extend and deepen analytic skills critical to successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education and beyond. By emphasizing the use of scientific evidence to investigate, quantify, and interpret phenomena that occur in our social world, sociology reinforces the primary principles of scientific inquiry and relies on observation, logic, data, and analysis and presents opportunities to develop skills and tools that are useful in the acquisition of knowledge. A sociological perspective underscores the importance of examining society with a critical eye and questioning assumptions, stereotypes, and generalizations that underlie conventional social interactions and beliefs about one's world (Anderson and Taylor 2006). Given the increasing importance of developing stronger numeracy and literacy skills for college attendance and persistence (Bowen and Bok 1998), sociology can serve as a conduit through which these skills are extended and deepened for high school and beginning undergraduate stu-

dents.

The task force concurred in its deliberations that the introduction of sociology into the high school curriculum would stimulate and develop critical analytic skills as well as inspire interest in students and better prepare them both to make the transition into postsecondary education and to be competitive in the global economy. The applicability and relevancy of the topics discussed in sociology, coupled with the opportunities this discipline offers for increasing students' quantitative literacy skills, analytical abilities, and critical problem solving suggest that sociology may be particularly suitable for an advanced placement (AP) course. Advanced placement courses are designed so that the curriculum covered in the high school is of such high academic intensity and quality that it enables students to meet standards for college-level learning in these courses. Often students who take these courses also take AP exams. Students who achieve high scores on these exams can be eligible to receive college credit and subsequently have the opportunity to move into higher-level college courses when they start their college experience.

Research indicates that students who take more advanced placement courses in high school are more likely to matriculate to postsecondary institutions compared to students of similar abilities who take fewer AP courses (ACT, Inc. 2004). It is therefore encouraging that the number of advanced placement courses offered in U.S. high schools has increased considerably in recent years, as evidenced by the rise in number of students taking and passing AP exams (College Board 2007). However, the number of advanced placement courses is notably fewer in urban high schools serving predominately minority and economically disadvantaged populations than in suburban schools serving more advantaged populations (Adelman 1999). Advanced placement courses are also fewer in number in rural schools compared to suburban ones.

Taking college courses in high school helps to raise student consciousness about

postsecondary options and inspires college going. It allows students to visualize what work in college might be like and make relevant preparations. A model sociology curriculum, delivered in a rigorous advanced placement style with a corresponding exam for college credit, would be beneficial for all students—particularly for students in high schools serving large numbers of minority and low-income students.

Additionally, exposing minority students to the discipline of sociology may promote a higher engagement in this discipline as they progress from high school to postsecondary school. It has been shown that black and Hispanic students are significantly more likely than students of other races to indicate that they chose sociology as a major because they want to understand social forces, help change society, and prepare for graduate school (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Sociology can provide a mechanism for combining higher education aspirations with the tools and ability to impact society on a macro level. Fostering this interest in high school via an advanced placement course may alert greater numbers of students to the possibilities of studying sociology in college. A high quality introductory sociology course can also be used at the university level to develop an interest in sociology on the part of students who are unsure of their academic and career paths. Currently, however, sociology is one of the few social science disciplines not currently represented among the advanced placement courses offered by the College Board.

THE ASA MODEL CURRICULUM

One of the key aspects of the curriculum designed by the task force was to make the study of sociology more relevant to the personal life experiences of students by highlighting the applicability of sociological principles to “real-life” societal issues, such as crime, welfare, family, and sexuality. Another component was to strengthen critical thinking skills by implementing inquiry-based instructional formats that involved

student participation, group work, and the use of major national datasets and innovative assessment materials.

In 2003 the model curriculum was piloted in high schools and in some colleges. Following successful implementation at the high school and college level, NSF awarded a grant in 2005 to further expand the pilot at the postsecondary level. In the spring of 2006 the curriculum developed by the ASA task force became the basis for a pilot introductory sociology course at Michigan State University. The primary focus of this paper is to describe the activities of the postsecondary pilot implementation of this curriculum with undergraduate students and to analyze the effectiveness of the curriculum in this setting. One of the rationales for selecting the implementation of the curriculum at this site was that this type of university attracts large numbers of undergraduate students from urban and rural areas where the number of advanced placement courses in their feeder high schools can be limited. Therefore, these students represent the target group for testing the effectiveness of an AP-level and style curriculum on students who are not likely to have extensive prior AP exposure.

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE MODEL CURRICULUM

The curriculum used in the pilot was constructed around three developmental goals: (1) knowledge of sociology, (2) critical thinking, and (3) an interest in sociology as a discipline.

Knowledge of Sociology

As an advanced course providing an introduction to sociology, the course content covered a broad range of topics. The content was divided into eight general areas within the discipline of sociology: the sociological perspective, culture, socialization, social organizations, deviance and conformity, social inequalities, social institutions, and social change. These areas were identified by the task force as representing the

core of sociology as a discipline and emerging research themes. Within each area, several specific applications of the general paradigms were covered. For example, in the social inequalities section, topics included social class and stratification in general, as well as an overview of social inequalities related to race/ethnicity, age, and gender. Social institutions included an overview of the family, work, and education. Each content area included textbook readings, as well as key primary source articles.²

As in the high school course, the postsecondary pilot course provided a broad overview of the fundamental principles and concepts of sociology. The curriculum focused on four major areas: (1) problem definition, (2) analysis, (3) synthesis, and (4) personal reflection. *Problem definition* asked students to: describe, explain, and predict aspects of social issues; identify possible sources of bias by performing content analysis of texts or news stories; transform a topic of interest into a sociological question that can be researched; frame an issue in broader context and identify key players in this issue; and list possible unintended consequences. *Analysis* addresses the ability of students to construct a data table, interpret descriptive statistics, and use data to address research questions. Through this progress it is expected that students will learn to conceptualize what types of empirical evidence is necessary to substantiate claims, and to inter-

pret and use data from a variety of sources to investigate and support hypotheses. Part of this task is learning how to critique the use of data by others by looking closely and examining the information in tables, figures, and methods presented in the primary source readings as well as in the textbook. *Synthesis* involves identifying behavior and social patterns, as well as offering sociological explanations for these phenomena; showing an awareness of probabilities and contingencies; focusing on understanding the “causal nexus” including correlation, time order, and learning how to eliminate alternative explanations. Finally, *personal reflection* focuses on issues of inequality, discrimination, and prejudice and presents students with the tools to compare and contrast one’s own context with contexts in other parts of the United States and the world; to describe the interplay between generalizations and stereotyping; to understand the role of social forces, determinism and choice; and to recognize and offer explanations of social inequality.

Critical Thinking Skills

As sociology seeks to debunk stereotypes and question the mechanisms and processes underlying social interactions, strong critical thinking skills are important for examining issues from a sociological perspective. Critical thinking skills are useful and present in other disciplines as well, however, there seems to be consensus among sociologists that critical thinking is an inherent and integral part of the discipline of sociology, and the development of such skills is one of the key learning and instructional goals in sociology (Baker 1981; Caldwell 2004; Goldsmid and Wilson 1980). Several scholars have argued that since critical thinking skills are inherent to the structure of the discipline, they should be explicitly taught to students (see Bruner 1960; Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003). Despite the importance sociologists place on critical thinking skills, research suggests that it may be difficult to translate these goals into reality in the classroom. In one study in California,

²The model curriculum developed by the task force was revised and modified for this course, which was offered for only one semester, whereas the model curriculum was designed to be used in a year-long course. Primary source readings are listed on the syllabus, which is including on the *Teaching Sociology* Web site (<http://www.lemoyne.edu/ts/kfs1.html>). Examples of primary source readings include classical sociological readings such as Weber, Durkheim, Mills, Merton, and Coleman, as well as more recent key works such as Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) and Arlie Hochschild’s *The Time Bind: When Work becomes Home and Home becomes Work* (1997).

89 percent of professors claimed critical thinking as one teaching objective, but only 19 percent could explain what critical thinking was, and fewer than 10 percent were teaching critical thinking with any regularity (Geertsen 2003).

These studies seem to suggest that sociology, as a discipline, should confront the issue of aligning the perceived importance of critical thinking with teaching practices. To further this objective in the context of this course, we follow Scheff's (1992) model of critical thinking in using primary sources, discussion, and a focus on actual problems and research questions to engage students in a "discovery model" of learning. Scheff's discovery model underscores the importance of teaching students to ask critical questions and the limitations of relying on an "authority" or a sole author for answers to complex questions. Although there have been several studies on teaching and assessing critical thinking in sociology classrooms (Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003; Shepelak, Curry-Jackson, and Moore 1992), most have used textbooks as their main text source. In the postsecondary pilot implementation, both textbooks and primary sources are used.

Critical thinking is a concept that is difficult to define, with variability in how it has been conceptualized (for a review of definitions specific to sociology, see Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003). For the purpose of this course and evaluation, the following definition of critical thinking was used:

Critical thinking is purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. (Facione 1990:3)

This definition was developed by the American Philosophical Association (APA) and is based on a collaborative synthesis of expert opinions mediated through a series of panels and discussions (Facione 1990). Additionally, this definition includes a clear statement of critical thinking as

"purposeful, self-regulatory judgment" and associates these components with resulting skills (interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation) and is therefore easily applicable to a classroom environment.

Interest in Sociology as a Discipline

The ASA model curriculum outlines an introduction to sociology that is designed to pique student interest and encourage engagement in studying sociology at the undergraduate and graduate levels. For the postsecondary pilot, the course sought to engage students in discussions of salient topics, to expose them to the importance of using data to inform their ideas and world-views, and to provide a broad view of the various branches of sociological study. Students were encouraged to interact with the issues being presented, and were given primary source readings to stimulate their intellectual curiosity about these topics. Additionally, the instructors consistently discussed sociology as a career choice and provided students with information on graduate school, career tracks, and the applicability of sociology to their daily lives.

DESIGNING THE COURSE ASSESSMENTS

In designing the course, the primary goal of the research team was to develop assessments that were authentic, required critical thinking skills, and promoted a strong grasp of the required sociological knowledge. Table 1 describes the assessment tools created by the research team and the developmental goals associated with each assessment.

The development of student knowledge of sociology was measured primarily by course-based assessments: weekly reading responses, an instrument construction and data analysis task, a research proposal, and the final exam. Each of these assignments required students to integrate and synthesize the sociological material presented in the course.

Table 1: Developmental Goals and Corresponding Assessments

Developmental Goal	Pilot Course Assessments
Knowledge of Sociology	Reading Responses Instrument Construction Task Data Analysis Task Research Proposal Final Exam
Critical Thinking	Critical thinking pre- and post-test Reading Responses Research Proposal
Interest in Sociology as a Discipline	Student Demographic Survey Focus Group Course Evaluation

Reading Response Papers

Students were assigned readings from textbook and primary sources each week and asked to write one- to two-page reading responses in which they analyzed the readings from a critical perspective. They received feedback about the extent to which they were able to comprehend, interpret, infer, analyze, and evaluate the readings. These weekly response papers provided an ongoing assessment of both sociological knowledge and critical thinking abilities.

Data Analysis Task

In order to promote quantitative literacy and a familiarity with the scientific process of inquiry, one data analysis task was assigned during the semester. Students were asked to identify a research question and use data from the General Social Survey³ to answer that question using the statistical evidence.

³The General Social Survey is a biannual (since 1994; annual prior to that date) survey which began in 1972 and completed its 26th round in 2006. It provides demographic and attitudinal data on a variety of topics, is able to track the opinions of Americans over an extended period of time, and is useful in researching social change and the complexity in American society. All data is available on the Web via an easily accessible interface, which makes it ideal for teaching students, particularly if the students do not have advanced statistical skills. Further information and data can be found at <http://www.norc.org/projects/General+Social+Survey.htm>.

This assignment also asked students to construct and explain three tables or figures.

Instrument Construction Task

Students were asked to design a survey or an interview protocol and justify from a sociological standpoint the importance of each question. This assessment required students to both understand and interact with sociological principles as well as understand how these principles can inform data collection and research design.

Research Proposal

Students wrote a basic research proposal, including a research question, a condensed literature review, a brief sketch of proposed methodology, and a concluding section explaining why their proposal would be valuable from the sociological perspective. The ability to write a research proposal is not only valuable across disciplines, but is also important for the development of sociological training and critical thinking (Grauerholz 1999).

Final Exam

In the last assessment students were given an online exam asking them to identify a research problem based on course readings and activities as well as individual experiences. The students were also asked to support the problem from a theoretical basis, to perform a basic data analysis, and, finally, to draw conclusions from their results. This

final represented an authentic assessment of student learning within the course and of the student's ability to engage in sociological critical thinking.⁴

COURSE IMPLEMENTATION AND SAMPLE

The pilot course met twice a week for 1 hour and 50 minutes each session. Class sessions included lecture-style presentation of course content, intensive discussion sections led by the teaching assistants, as well as group exercises designed to demonstrate key sociological concepts and evoke critical thinking and personal reflection regarding contemporary social issues. Lectures were primarily interactive in nature and utilized hands-on activities such as simulations, small group discussions, and interactive Web-based data analysis tasks. Rubrics were used for all course grading, and the professor and two teaching assistants graded the assignments. In cases of grading discrepancies, the grades were discussed and revised, with the final calculated score based on an average of the scores. Extensive comments were also provided on the weekly reading responses so that students could develop their skills along the specific dimensions of critical thinking.

The class was designed as a seminar-style course, with a target population of approximately 30 students. Some difficulty was encountered convincing students to try an experimental curriculum, particularly one with heavier amounts of reading and writing than other 100-level courses; ultimately 22 students were enrolled in the course. Of the 22 students, 10 were male and 12 were female. The majority were white (77 percent), which is representative of the student body population as a whole (the university is 82 percent white). Only three students were sociology majors.

⁴For a more detailed explanation of each assignment, see Appendix A, which can be found on the *Teaching Sociology* Web site, (<http://www.lemoyne.edu/ts/kfs2.html>).

ASSESSING THE CURRICULUM: MEASURES AND RESULTS

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in the assessment and evaluation of the pilot ASA curriculum. The qualitative data were generated from the course evaluation given at the end of the course and during the focus group. These data were used to evaluate the course using the three developmental goals: sociological knowledge, critical thinking skills, and an interest in studying sociology.

Measures

Knowledge of sociology. As would be expected in a classroom setting, the acquisition of sociology-based knowledge was measured using class assignments. Student scores on reading responses, the data analysis and instrument construction assignments, the final research paper proposal, and the final exam were used to establish a baseline degree of student familiarity with sociological ideas and concepts, as well as growth in sociological knowledge over the course of the term. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all assessments. An independent sample t-test was run comparing males and females and no statistically significant differences were found for gender.

A pre-test measure of sociological knowledge is not available, because of the difficulty of accurately determining sociological knowledge at the beginning of the course. We can assume that it was relatively weak, as this was an introductory sociology course with only three sociology majors in a class of 22 students. However, as a proxy, the mean scores on assessments given early in the term were compared with assessments given later in the term. Reading responses were given beginning the first week, and the data analysis and instrument construction tasks were the first two major assignments.

Critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills were measured in three ways. A critical-thinking test designed to measure spe-

Table 2. Mean Scores on Class Assessments

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Reading response (percent)	56.3641	20.51228	11.25	84.00
Data Analysis (percent)	80.6905	13.82251	57.00	99.00
Instrument Construction (percent)	76.9365	18.15385	30.67	100.00
Research Proposal (percent)	89.5238	10.33740	60.00	103.00
Final Exam (percent)	85.0952	8.47293	66.00	96.00

cifically critical thinking within the discipline of sociology⁵ was administered twice during the course (as a pre- and post-test). The rubric used to score weekly reading responses also measured critical thinking skills, providing an opportunity to demonstrate change in critical thinking over the course of the semester. Finally, research proposals (suggested as an assessment that can be used in sociology classes to develop critical thinking skills; see Grauerholz 1999) and are used here as a final cumulative measure of critical thinking, as well as knowledge of sociology.

Interest in studying sociology. To measure student interest in studying sociology, students were given an end-of-course evaluation that asked specifically about their interest in studying sociology. Students were also given the opportunity to participate in a focus group. Late in the semester, 17 of the 22 students from the course participated in a 90-minute evaluative focus group moderated by Kathryn Edin, Professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Edin, who specializes in ethnographic and qualitative methods, facilitated an exploration of the students' perceptions in several domains: the difficulty of the course, the relevance of the course content and pedagogy to developing critical thinking, and the perceived development of sociological knowledge and interest in the study of sociology. Both teaching assistants took detailed notes while Edin conducted

the focus group. These notes were then analyzed for key themes and relevant feedback.

Results

Knowledge of sociology. Students in this course appear to have achieved a reasonably strong knowledge of sociological ideas and concepts, and more importantly, appear to have increased their knowledge of sociology over the course of the term. The mean scores on the assessments from the end of the class (the final exam and the research proposal) were higher than the mean scores on earlier assessments, the instrument construction, data analysis, and reading responses. The assessments from the end of the course represent a final measure of student sociological knowledge. That the scores are higher suggests that students became more familiar with using sociological thinking through the course of the semester. Since the course was taught based on the ASA model curriculum and the final exam was designed based on the instruction from that curriculum, we can reasonably infer that students acquired a solid sociological foundation.

The overall reading response mean score is by far the lowest of the assessments. Table 3 shows the mean reading response scores for each week. Looking at the mean reading response scores for each week, we find that the mean score increased steadily and is in fact statistically higher in week 10 than it was in week one ($p < .05$), which suggests that the low mean overall reading response score is influenced by the low scores at the outset of the semester. The increase in reading response scores suggests

⁵For a more detailed description of the test development and construction, please see Appendix B on the *Teaching Sociology* Web site, (<http://www.lemoyne.edu/ts/kfs3.html>).

Table 3. Mean Reading Response Scores by Week

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Week 1: Sociology as Field of Inquiry	13.74	3.35	7.5	20
Week 2: Culture in Society	15.90	3.09	8	20
Week 3: Socialization	12.96	2.86	7.5	17.8
Week 4: Social Organization	13.50	2.41	9	19.1
Week 5: Deviance and Conformity	14.15	2.30	9	19.4
Week 6: Race and Ethnicity	15.38	3.12	11.5	20
Week 7: Social Inequalities	15.60	2.82	12	19.75
Week 8: Social Institutions: The Family	16.28	2.85	10	20
Week 9: Social Institutions: Work and the Economy	16.46	3.07	10	20
Week 10: Social Institutions: Education	16.27	2.71	11.5	19.75

Scores of zero were dropped because they represented students who did not turn in a reading response for a particular week.

that students' knowledge of sociology increased over the course of the semester. It is also possible that students were more engaged in certain topics than others, which encouraged them to read more carefully and write with greater focus and interest.

Critical thinking skills. The evidence supports the conclusion that the critical thinking abilities of students increased over the course of the semester. The mean score on the critical thinking post-test was higher than the pre-test ($p < 0.10$), suggesting growth in critical thinking over the term (see Table 4).

One major limitation is that we do not have pre- and post-test scores for every student. The pre-test was given on the first day of class, but university regulations allow students to add and drop courses for several weeks after that date. Every effort was made to ensure that all students who added the course took the pre-test, but institutional research guidelines prohibit faculty from requiring student participation in research activities of this nature. Our students' goodwill notwithstanding, ultimately the mean pre-test scores were generated by a different group of students than those who took the post-test.

Reading response scores were also used

to measure growth in critical thinking, in addition to growth in sociological knowledge. Reading responses were assigned each week and required students to critically analyze the week's readings. They were graded using the critical thinking rubric included in Appendix A (which can be found on the *Teaching Sociology* Web site, <http://www.lemoyne.edu/ts/kfs2.html>). As stated previously, reading response scores rose throughout the term, and the final mean reading response score was higher than the initial score, suggesting growth in both critical thinking and sociological knowledge, and that these two measures, in fact, appear to be correlated. Scores on the critical thinking post-test are correlated with final exam scores ($R = 0.595$, $p < 0.01$ level) and with the research score ($R = 0.692$, $p < 0.05$ level).⁶ Scores on the critical thinking test are related to scores on these other assessments, but not so strongly that they are measuring the same underlying construct.

Interest in studying sociology. In the end-

⁶The "research score" was generated based on the elements of the research experience that we integrated into the course: the data analysis assignment, the instrument construction assignment, and the research proposal.

Table 4. Comparison of Means for Critical Thinking Pre- and Post-Test

	Mean	St. Error
Critical Thinking Pre-Test	26	2.27
Critical Thinking Post-Test	29.09	1.84
Difference in Means	-3.09 (p=.10)	1.66

of-course evaluation, 11 of the 21 students who completed the evaluation indicated that their interest in studying sociology had increased as a result of the course. Five said either that their interest decreased or that the course helped them realize sociology was not a field they wanted to pursue as a major, and the remaining five did not answer the question.

In the focus group, students compared the course content and assignments to other college-level courses, offered by either the university or their high school. Generally, the participants expressed that they found the class intellectually stimulating. Many students explained that the course content connected easily to other social science college-level coursework, but the pedagogy and curriculum of the course seemed more effective than methods employed in similar courses. Most students agreed with the following comments made by two of the participants. One student said:

I find myself being like, talking about sociological knowledge. I'm in an honors anthropology class and a child psychology class, but it's funny how we all talk about the same things but [have] different takes on the same things and I can take what I learned here and insert it in there. I am applying my knowledge. . . . Everything I do in those classes somehow relates to this class.

Another student expressed the seeming continuity of the class, stating:

We'll talk about how to do studies and I'll be like, "I know how to do that." It's different because in ISS, globalization [integrated social science class on globalization], we talk about this and I feel like I got that stuff already. It's

crazy because [this is] a 100 level class and it translates into most 300 level classes.

When asked about the reading assigned for the course, the students expressed that they appreciated the variety of perspectives and topics presented. They indicated that this variety contributed tremendously to their ability to think critically, even when presented with "expert" knowledge. Students also expressed the awareness they gained of their social position and privilege. This was poignantly described by one student who stated:

Some of the readings we did on minority cultures, some of the stuff we read on deviance, from the position—we're all in college, we're in a position where you've gained some social status by being in college, and we're going to have an extreme bias toward individuals who take a different route. We're analyzing these articles where there is no one in the class to represent these people.

Many students expressed that they appreciated the critical reading and analysis they were asked to apply to the assigned readings and class lectures. The students valued both the range of the reading and lecture content, but mentioned an additional appreciation for being able to recognize relevant critiques of the primary sources presented as part of the curriculum. One student candidly stated:

The readings covered a diversity of topics. They did really well in this class pointing [that] out—I've never had a class where they said, "there are some things wrong about this, read it anyway"—others classes always say "this is true."

The students indicated that reading both

the textbook and primary sources, though seemingly necessary, often proved overwhelming. Many of the students suggested using academically oriented articles that were shorter and providing additional references and information for those who were interested. Another popular idea was to use sources such as *Contexts*⁷ more throughout the semester. One student in particular stated:

The textbook helps a lot with other readings . . . more simplified—helps you translate, helps with the difficult readings. [It's] hard to get the main ideas out of the [primary source] articles...[but] Contexts does not assume you know things—starts from the beginning, helps you access it. [Contexts] was better than other stuff, except Ain't No Makin It, which was like a story. Contexts articles are short. If you're not interested, you're done. [You] can test your interest [with Contexts] and then go to recommended readings and read more—it's a way of finding out if you have an interest in a particular area of sociology. The textbook was easy to understand but was just definition.

Finally, the assessment and focus group data also suggest that the curriculum was successful in making the study of sociology more relevant to the personal life experiences of students, while also encouraging them to be more critical by applying the sociological perspective in their everyday lives.

This class, it's frustrating sometimes, I don't want to read. But truthful, I find myself, hanging out with my friends, and I find myself

⁷*Contexts* is a magazine published quarterly by the ASA, which provides a timely means by which researchers disseminate their research to both academic and public audiences. It includes feature articles, photo and personal essays, bulletins of the latest findings from social science research, and reviews that are relevant to daily life, ranging from religion and discrimination, to pop culture and foreign crises. In this course, it was used as a supplemental reading to expose students to applications of sociology in real-life situations and to give them an overview of the most current research in an easily digestible format.

saying things like, "I learned that in my sociology class" and then I'm like, I'm a nerd. I feel like I can relate it to my life more than any class I've ever taken. The class may be frustrating, but it has been really good. They [the professor and TAs] are always stressing to us that that's your perspective. That's great but sociologically, what does this mean? What's the next level? We're selfish sometimes, and this class made me realize that people think different ways.

The students articulated that the course's content and assignments went beyond challenging their perspectives and stimulating their intellect. Many expressed that the course's content and pedagogy pushed them to think of the perspectives of those who are different and may be less privileged than themselves, as students able to attend a large, resource-rich research institution. The students voiced that their interest in sociology also increased.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is that the validity and reliability of the instruments is unclear, as they were piloted in this course. Additionally, this pilot course benefited from the presence of two teaching assistants, which allowed for small discussion groups, personalized feedback on critical commentaries, and individual attention that may have impacted the success of this course. In end-of-course evaluations, the majority of students mentioned that discussion groups were an extremely important element of the course to them and functioned as a place in which they could further develop their ideas and interest and engage critically with the material. Providing for discussion time in some format seems to be an integral and necessary portion of the course.

However, the resources available in this course are unusual, as many introductory sociology courses are taught in larger sections. While using this curriculum in a larger setting is not optimal, it is possible, particularly with some modifications. For

example, the number of assessments could be reduced; in the pilot course, a majority of the students mentioned that the number of reading responses was too high, and suggested lowering them to one every two or three weeks, versus weekly. This would reduce the workload on both the teaching staff and the students, but would still push students to a periodic assessment and critical integration of what they are learning. Discussion groups could be conducted during lecture time in the lecture hall, with the professor providing each group with several motivating questions and then rotating to different groups to hear their responses. Alternatively, the professor could require online posts in response to key questions, generating a blog-style discussion within the class.

While this curriculum may be more difficult for a professor to implement given fewer resources, it also provides a structured syllabus, pre-set readings, and a series of assessments that hopefully lessen the teaching burden while at the same time providing professors with a more innovative approach to teaching introductory sociology. Additionally, perhaps the results of this study could provide evidence for creating smaller introductory sociology sections.

DISCUSSION

As this was a pilot implementation under relatively unique conditions, the small sample size limits the ability to generalize findings. However, the effectiveness of the curriculum is suggested by these results. The majority of students agreed that the course was intellectually challenging and that they would be able to apply what they had learned in the course to outside situations. It is also important to underscore that this course made students uncomfortable at times; the level of work and the critical analysis were new to students. Many of them wanted the professor and teaching assistants to provide “the answer” and were often frustrated when they were referred back to the text and ultimately, to their use

of the sociological perspective to understand a phenomenon. Despite this, in the end-of-course evaluations and in post-course contact with students, the challenges of the course were also its strengths. Students appreciated the emphasis on critical thinking and reading, and enjoyed the challenge of the course.

The quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the course activities and pedagogy encouraged students to engage in issues of social justice on their campus and within their respective communities. The data also indicate that students were intellectually stimulated by the course subject matter and activities. As issues such as addressing prejudice and discrimination are core to the discipline of sociology, this is a key outcome from the implementation of this curriculum at the college level. The students in the course gained the ability to apply a variety of lenses to different issues, and learned how to examine a controversial issue, such as gender norms or racial inequality, from a sociological, as opposed to a personal, perspective. Students clearly understood the course content and demonstrated an ability to work with it in a variety of ways. They also demonstrated a level of engagement with the material that suggests that even if they do not pursue sociology as a major, they will use sociological principles in their future schooling.

The increase in critical thinking skills suggested by the data is also encouraging. Critical thinking is integral to the discipline of sociology, as sociologists want to be able to observe, make inferences, and analyze data in a systematic fashion. Developing strong critical thinking skills in students is an important objective for introductory sociology classes, both because these skills are useful to students in their academic careers (regardless of discipline), and because successfully applying these skills within the discipline of sociology is key to sparking interest in further sociological study. An emphasis on strong critical thinking skills is especially important if sociology departments want to prepare students to become

knowledge producers, as opposed to simply knowledge consumers. Students who cannot effectively analyze, infer, and evaluate information from primary sources and synthesize that information with their own work will face significant challenges in joining the sociological discourse. Given the "leakage" in the academic pipeline that occurs between master's and PhD level (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006), it is increasingly important that sociology courses, particularly foundational courses such as introduction to sociology, be taught with an explicit goal of fostering strong critical thinking and analytic skills. Even if students do not pursue graduate study in sociology, sociology courses should be constructed in such a way that the critical thinking abilities of students in those courses are developed.

While the sample in this course did not allow for this to be tested directly, courses such as this one may be well positioned to help direct minority students into the discipline and help them persist in their studies. In 2004 over 16 percent of sociology bachelor's degree recipients were black, nearly 10 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were Asian. The percentage of minority students receiving bachelor's degrees in sociology is higher than in the other behavioral and social sciences (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Despite the fact that black students are proportionally overrepresented at the undergraduate level, these students are discontinuing their studies prior to doctoral level, with an 85 percent loss of black master's students, compared with 51 percent loss of white students between the master's and PhD levels (Spalter-Roth and Erskine 2006). Better preparation in sociology at the undergraduate level could help to reverse this trend. Courses such as the one described in this paper, with its emphasis on sociological knowledge, critical thinking, academic writing, and quantitative literacy, can help to motivate qualified students maintain their interest in sociology and perhaps channel this interest into future career opportunities.

The original goal of the ASA taskforce

was to create a model curriculum for introductory sociology. This curriculum has now been piloted in both high school and college with positive results in both settings. The results from this analysis show that the content and structure of the curriculum, combined with a set of assessments and teaching tools, is an appropriate college-level course. Given the importance of the study of sociology to adolescents, particularly minority and low-income adolescents, and the usefulness of advanced placement courses in the academic achievement of students, it is important to attempt to merge these two beneficial academic strands in a meaningful way and make them widely available to students. These pilot implementations provide evidence to suggest that this curriculum is rigorous, relevant, and engaging for students, and as such, could form the basis of an advanced placement course and exam, while also functioning at the college level as an introductory sociology course, as was implemented in this pilot study.

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