

## Teaching The Skeptical Student

My colleague Ann Swidler has characterized sociology as the most “un-American” of the social sciences largely because of its emphasis on institutional factors that contribute to social inequality. The conventional “individualist ethic” makes personal traits (talent, hard work) the primary factor behind individual success or failure. Sociologists look at institutional arrangements that benefit the privileged few at the expense of the many, and take us into territory that some would consider politically dangerous. Sociological critiques of the ideals of individualism present unique challenges to those who teach sociology. Most students are not only unfamiliar with sociological approaches to social issues, but many enter the class with a skepticism that questions validity of the discipline itself. How then does one make the value of sociological insights into self, community, and our larger society apparent to our students?

While I would love to claim that my well-chosen, scholarly readings and scintillating lectures can turn the most ardent individualist into a disciple of Marx, Durkheim or Weber, I’ve discovered that students best learn sociology by doing sociology. Students must first discover the explanatory value of sociological approaches for themselves. Second, they must acquire the preliminary skills to produce sociological knowledge on their own. My job is to equip students with new tools to engage in processes of discovery and production of sociological knowledge.

In this discussion, I draw examples from my introductory sociology class (Soc. 3AC), but these approaches illustrate principles that I try to apply to all my classes. I start my courses with accounts of how sociologists debate basic questions among themselves, (e.g., what constitutes a good society, how do societies change or remain stable, how much inequality should societies tolerate). I present theories, arguments and data, but do my best to let students draw their own conclusions. In Soc. 3AC, where social inequality is the theme of the class, I use ethnographic studies of different schools to illustrate how differences in class, race, and gender affect the educational experiences and outcomes of our children. Once students have a very basic understanding of how external social forces may affect individual life chance, they are ready to tackle their first essay—what resources did they need in order to get accepted into UC Berkeley?

As background to this assignment, I present data that compares two Bay area communities and their high schools. One community has high achieving students, (e.g., Piedmont High School in Piedmont, CA) while the contrasting community has low achieving students, (e.g., McClymonds High School in West Oakland). Statistical data from the US Census Bureau prompts questions about why two communities in close proximity display enormous variation in racial composition, income, and life expectancy. Our earlier conversations about institutional factors that create unequal communities now have a concrete context. The historical practices of “redlining” and “greenlining” neighborhoods by racial/ethnic composition, contemporary patterns of housing development, real estate steering, banking practices take on tangible dimensions. We can then ask what larger social consequences stem from the concentration of poverty or wealth in a single geographical area? Looking at data on high school performances from

the California Department of Education, my students can begin to make predictions about the future of these high school graduates.

With this background, I ask students to interpret their own experiences in high school through a sociological lens. For students raised in more fortunate circumstances, the assignment encourages them to identify resources that they have taken for granted. For students from less fortunate circumstances, they acquire a new context to interpret the challenges they have faced. Most important, students are not simply “told” about social inequality. This assignment gives them the opportunity to discover the living impact of social inequality on their lives and others.

My final project in Soc. 3AC builds upon this foundation of discovery. I ask students to write a research prospectus as if they were preparing to spend a year as an ethnographic researcher in one of Oakland’s high schools. I give students handouts with statistical data on an Oakland high school, (e.g., Oakland Tech) which provide abundant evidence of racial/ethnic differences in academic achievement. While these data demonstrate the existence of racial/ethnic inequality in academic achievement, they cannot explain the causes behind these differences. Their task is to advance our understanding of racial/ethnic inequality by formulating a research question that would better identify the dynamics that lead to differences in academic performance. Once they have chosen their question, they review relevant literature with an eye to identifying a gap in the literature that their research might answer. This assignment forces students to think concretely about how to gather sociological data. While I outline the parameters of this assignment, they choose their topic, they choose which literature to read, and they begin to formulate possible hypotheses. This assignment asks students to put sociological research into practice—a practice where they can see the potential for generating sociological answers to important social questions. Once students can produce their own sociological analyses, this is the transformative moment that can potentially (and often does) dispel skepticism of sociology as a discipline. This is the moment when students “get it.”

Sociology classes are a journey, and not necessarily a comfortable journey. By accepting student skepticism as a sign of their critical thinking skills, I can show compassion for the “strangeness” of thinking past an individualist ethic where human virtue determines all. In practice, I spend much time in direct contact with my students—extra office hours, group office hours, responses to emails, and reading sections of essay. I understand that I am giving my students a set of tools, rather than a set of conclusions. By connecting course content to information that they themselves can see, interrogate, and interpret, I hope to inspire lifelong practices of interrogating the “normal” and asking why.