Online Teaching in Sociology: Prospects, Successes, and Problems

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Introduction

For thousands of years, since the time of ancient civilizations, teaching has been conducted in face-to-face (f2f) settings. Only in the last few decades, thanks to the introduction of the satellite technology and the internet, online teaching has been added, as a new and expanding setting of teaching.

During the fall semester of 2015, more than 20 million students were enrolled in the US higher education institutions, and more than 6 million of them were enrolled in one or more online courses. This represented 29.7% of all students and it showed a growth of 3.9%, compared to the previous year. The vast majority of these students (4,999,112, or 83.0%) were studying at the undergraduate level. About 55% of exclusively distance students lived in the same state as their institution, but a surprising 42% of them studied at out-of-state institutions. It's noteworthy that online education has expanded rapidly and significantly over the last few years, due primarily to student demand and to its contribution to institutional profitability. In 2015, about 15.4% (3,119,349) of students enrolled in some distance education courses compared to 13.3% in 2012. Likewise, in 2015, 14.3% (2,902,756) of students enrolled in distance courses exclusively, compared to 12.6% of them in 2012 (Allen and Seaman, 2017).

In the State of Georgia, enrollment in eCore online courses has increased by 35%, since 2001. However, there has been a dramatic increase in recent years. Enrollment in eCore courses was 9,691 students in 2014, but it increased to 14,189 students in 2015. Then, it increased again to 22,539 students in 2016, and to 26,068 students in spring 2017 (summer and fall 2017 enrollment has not been added yet). This represented a continuous increase by 46.4%, 58.8%, and 15.6% in these four years, respectively (USG Fact Book, 2017).

With this expansion, online teaching has faced major problems, which need to be addressed in order for this new approach of teaching to continue successfully. So, what are the major prospects waiting for online teaching, including sociology? What are the main successes and best practices? And what are the main problems facing it?

In this article, there is an attempt to answer these questions, using the published experiences of some colleagues, as well as my own experience, as I have been teaching two sociology courses online for the last ten years. The first of these courses is Social Problems, which I have been teaching at my institution. The second is the Introduction to Sociology, which I have been teaching at my institution and through eCore.

Engaging Students in Distance Learning

Researchers realized that the physical absence of instructors is the main challenge posed by online teaching. Therefore, they suggested several ways of engaging online students, as a solution to this challenge. These ways included class discussions, reflection papers, group projects, frequent and timely communication, and substantive feedback. While these pedagogical practices are also recommended in f2f classes, the instructor's physical absence can be reduced by the use of distance learning technologies (DLT), with audio or video capabilities.

Kennedy (2015) argued that using DLTs would make distance education more engaging, exciting, malleable, and fun. The communication tools that are now available to online learning allow students to contact instructors and classmates through emails, text messaging, and discussion threads. Moreover, students have more options to communicate in real-time through chat or instant messaging, web conferencing, and audio and video response options, most of which are available within a course, or can be integrated within a course. Thus, there are more ways for students to communicate with instructors and classmates online than there are in f2f classes.

Examples of such DLTs are Panopto and VoiceThread. Panopto is a lecture capture and recording software. VoiceThread is a video-based sharing and collaboration tool that allows instructors to post video for students to view and add their own comments and notes. The comments can be in the form of video, audio, text, or graphics (ULL, 2015).

Berardi and Blundell (2013) reviewed the use of several lecture capture technologies, including Panopto, and argued that such technologies offer students more than just receiving information from instructors as recorded lectures. With these technologies, students are active participants in the learning process. They can use the capture technology to generate new content and knowledge of importance to them.

Carroll (2013), however, warns against the heavy use of technology in online learning, as this can distract learners. More use of technology often erodes the human factor in learning, making the learning process a more isolated experience. With more use of technological applications students become more reliant on technology to get the content they need and to remain connected to peers. For example, Google is now considered one of the student first resources to get the content they need, which discourages them to reason, solve problems on their own, or engage in higher-order learning. This also is of concern to instructors, who find themselves in need for anti-plagiarism software, in their evaluation of student work.

Amador and Mederer (2013) recognized that without engaging students, online teaching becomes a dull and isolating experience for students. They compared online to classroom teaching in sociology and soil science courses, using class discussions, as a student-engaging activity. They found that such activity has its own advantages and disadvantages, in teaching online or in the classroom.

Jacobs (2014) also recognized the importance of engaging students in online courses. He described using group projects to achieve that goal, which was followed by several formative assessment methods, such as student self-assessment and reflection papers.

Pearson (2010) used online blogs with more than 263 students over a period of four semesters in an introductory social problems course. She argued that the use of blogs as a course-writing requirement enhanced student participation, engagement, and skill-building. She also used students' qualitative assessments of the blog assignments as an engaging activity.

Costello (2012: 69-77) found that some students had poor reading comprehension of the course content materials as well as instructions and feedback notes. She also pointed to a problem in the discussion activity, when some students don't take it seriously and write minimum or off topics. Her solution was explicit rubric and instructions. Finally, she mentioned the problem of delaying discussion posts to the last minutes before the deadline, which does not allow students to respond to each other. Her solution is requiring an early deadline for posting the discussions then another deadline for the student responses to each other.

Xu and Jaggars (2013) found that students who were more disposed to take online courses tended to have stronger overall academic performance than their peers. They also found that adaptability to online courses was more difficult to students who were males, younger, and minority members. They also found that student lower grade-point average was associated with more difficulty in adapting to online learning.

Orso and Doolittle (2011) asked students of psychology, sociology, and history online courses about which instructor characteristics affect their success. The students in the study emphasized quick professor's communication and availability, feedback, compassion, and organization. Students wanted frequent and timely communication, as well as substantive feedback on their assignments.

Prospects for Online Teaching

There are great prospects for online teaching to increase and become more institutionalized in the future, for the following six reasons.

First, it responds to the need of non-traditional students, who want to pursue their higher education but unable to attend the traditional classroom setting, such as full-time employees and stay-at-home moms.

Second, for traditional students, it addresses the problem of course schedule conflicts, thus allowing them to add online courses, while keeping other needed f2f courses.

Third, online teaching is very much less costly to the institutions of higher education providing it than f2f teaching. It does not need classroom facilities or related expenses accrued by the use of electricity, electronic equipment, or restrooms, at least for non-

traditional students, who don't come to Campus. Even when students come to take proctored exams at the testing centers on campuses, they pay for taking it there.

Fourth, the infrastructure of online teaching has already been established and it is expanding. Online courses have been offered in almost all of the university system institutions, with some of them offering full online degrees, such as in the case of eMajor programs.

Fifth, it's just a matter of logistics and official approval for a total Georgia online university to emerge, utilizing the courses which are already being offered, building on the eCore program, and expanding it to full degrees for various majors.

Finally, it is a survival necessity for the faculty and their institutions, as the competition for online students continues and increases over time, on the state and national levels. So, we may be approaching a time that could be near, in which the faculty will face the choice of "teach online or perish" and institutions having the choice of "offer online degrees or perish."

Successes and Best Practices

Evaluation of the online courses, which I teach at my institution, is divided into three areas. These are unit exams, which account for 50% of the grade; chapter online tests, which account for 25% of the grade; and written discussions and responses, which account for 25% of the grade. At eCore, a fourth area is added, called "writing assignments" (short papers).

In my Introduction to Sociology online course, I have been using the OpenStax College free online **textbook**, providing students with the entire text in pdf and separate chapters in a Microsoft Word document form. While the pdf version stays available throughout the semester, the Word chapters are made available unit by unit, as a matter of organization, in order for students to see only the required chapters at the time a unit is covered.

I have also supplemented the textbook with my **lecture notes**, chapter **handouts**, and chapter power-point presentations. In the course evaluations as well as in emails sent to me, students have been appreciative of the availability of the free textbook, the supplementary reading materials, and the organization of the course in units.

As reviewed above, among the widespread techniques used in maximizing student engagement throughout the course are brief quizzes, applications, reflection questions, and chick lists for covering course materials.

In my practice, I have used detailed chapter online tests, preparation for the proctored unit exams, as well as structured discussions and feedback, as effective techniques to maximize student engagement.

I have used **chapter online tests (OLTs)** as a tool to engage students and encourage them to study the reading materials on a timely basis, as each OLT is dated according to the course schedule, and timed for one hour each, giving students a week to take it, from Monday to Sunday. The OLTs I use ask in detail about specific information in the reading materials as well as testing student comprehension, and they are different from what's known as **quizzes** in three ways. First, OLTs contain about 35 questions, while quizzes are usually composed of about ten questions. Second, I give students the option of taking each OLT twice, to improve their grades. I use this technique as an incentive for students to study the reading materials again. I advise them to study from Monday to Friday before taking the first attempt on an OLT. If they don't do well, they need to study again, particularly the areas they did not do well on, and take the second attempt by Sunday. Third, to make sure that they study before taking the first attempt, the grade they get is the average of the two attempts. Using OLTs as an effective way of engaging students has been a great success in my experience, as evidenced in test results as well as in student comments, in the course evaluation.

Concerning the **proctored unit exams**, I used to require four proctored unit exams for the online courses I teach in my institution, one at the end of each unit of the course. However, I have reduced them later to a mid-term and a final, to match the eCore practice. Results have demonstrated that students who do well (making As and Bs) in the first attempts of the OLTs are more likely to do well in the proctored unit exams too. There is no doubt that unit exams maximize student engagement, in both online and f2f courses, by reviewing the reading materials and the chapter online tests (OLTs) in preparation for taking them. I have practiced sending a message to the class as a whole, telling students to prepare for the proctored Mid-Term exam, two weeks before its scheduled date. I tell them to review the reading materials, which include the covered chapters, handouts, lecture notes, chapter power-point presentations, and the relevant OLTs, which would be reviewable with the correct answers, at that time. I also do the same for the proctored Final exam.

Posting structured discussions and **responding to three classmates** have been very useful activities in my online courses. First, these two activities are enjoyable by students and very effective in engaging them. Second, I have been using the written discussions as a tool to motivate students to study the discussed topics in more depth. Third, students learn the skills of writing correctly, using Microsoft Word, which enables them to see their language mistakes color-underlined, and consequently correct them. Fourth, written discussions train students to be more focused when they read the instructions and address them. Fifth, I respond to every student with **detailed feedback**, which shows them the strengths and weaknesses of their discussions. In case of posts which do not address what needs to be addressed, I consider them "unsatisfactory," and give students the option to revise their discussions, benefiting from my feedback. In almost all cases, they welcome this opportunity and do better in their revised versions. Finally, and most important, these two activities enable students to respond to each other with substantive discussions of their posted topics. Thus, linking responses to the

posted written discussions is important. Otherwise, responses to classmates may become just short exchanges of greetings and words of praise.

An example of the structured discussion topics, which I use, is the one about social class and social mobility, from Chapter 9 of the textbook. The assignment instructions tell students to write four paragraphs, with specific titles and specific content for each. Students are instructed to choose a family that they know, **without disclosing their relationship to that family**, in order to avoid any possibility of sensitivity or inconvenience. They are also instructed **not to use the real names** of the members of that family, who are mentioned in the discussion.

According to the instructions, the first paragraph is required to be a description of the adult head or heads of the household, in terms of the combined annual income, occupational types, and educational levels. These three essential variables are covered in detail it Chapter 9 and the Lecture Notes. Students are also instructed to provide other relevant variables, such as age, marital status, and racial background of the adult heads of the household.

The second paragraph requires students to identify the family social class on the basis of the educational levels, occupational types, and the combined income of the working adults in that family. To do that, they need to compare these three variables in the reading materials with those of the working adults in the family. Then, students describe that social class from the reading materials (See Appendix 1).

In the third paragraph, students discuss whether these three variables, which characterize the working adults in the family, are consistent or inconsistent with the expected variables of the discussed social class. This paragraph trains students to apply what they learn from the reading materials to the real-life situations they observe around them in society. It also attracts their attention to the fact that some families fit exactly in the sociological model of social class. However, other families may not fit in the three variables. So, they learn the two sociological terms of consistency and inconsistency in a practical way. In particular, they learn that the combined income in a family alone does not identify a family social class. It is the first to be considered but the expected levels of education and the expected types of occupation are also required in identifying a family social class.

Finally, in the fourth paragraph, students compare each working adult in the family with his/her parents in terms of social class, also comparing the three variables. Then, students conclude whether there was any type of social mobility, or not.

Students are given a week to write and post their discussions, from Monday to Sunday. However, they are required to post their discussions by Saturday, in order to enable their classmates to read the discussions and respond to them by Sunday. To motivate students to observe this requirement, they are rewarded by getting 10% of the grade for early posting. Otherwise, in the absence of such requirements, students may wait until

the deadline, late on Sunday night, to post their discussions, which defeats the purpose of having substantive class discussions of the posted topics (See Appendix 2).

Structuring the online class discussion in this way leaves no room for trivial posts, or for distractions to other personal or social issues, away from the course. Moreover, it keeps students engaged in substantive discussions of the major topics of the course.

In their course evaluations, as well as in their emails to me, students frequently express their appreciation for this component of the course, as an enjoyable, engaging, and informative activity.

Problems / Challenges

There are several main problems or challenges facing online teaching in general. From my own experience, I can identify three of them in relation to the course components, student reading problem, and class size. I can also relate to other colleagues in their general concern that online learning may become a second-class education.

In designing and modifying my online courses, I have always been thinking about the challenge to keep my online teaching on par with my f2f teaching, in quantity and quality. I can argue that I have addressed that challenge through the activities I described above. This means that the content of the materials to be covered should be the same. The actual physical presence of the instructor in f2f courses should be compensated for in online courses by successful engaging methods and by frequent and timely communication between the instructor and students. Finally, using two proctored exams has demonstrated to be a serious assessment of the course content. However, proctored exams should have the weight of 40-50% of the course assessment, to be considered a credible measure of the student learning of the course content. Such considerable exam weight tells students that they have to study the reading materials seriously in order to pass these exams, and consequently pass the course. Otherwise, if there's, for example, only one required proctored exam, weighing only 15% of the grade, students may still pass the course without putting serious efforts into learning the course content. When this happens, it contributes to the major criticism of online teaching by critics, who don't take it seriously.

On the side of students, there's always the possibility of having some of them who can be described as poor readers. These students may not be able to comprehend what they read, whether in relation to the course reading materials, or in relation to the assignment instructions. The solution that I have been using is writing a detailed feedback and offering them a second opportunity to write the discussion, following my feedback. Some students do well in their second attempts on a discussion but others may still have difficulty in following the feedback. I don't think, though, that this problem is unique to online teaching, as students who may be described as poor readers are also found in f2f courses.

The large size of classes is a major problem facing online teaching, as it contradicts with the expected quality in addressing the writing-intensive course components, such as substantive discussions and papers. From my own experience, a class of 15-20 students is an ideal class size, in which a high level of quality teaching can occur. However, that is not the case in some institutions, in which the class size reaches 30 or more. In that case, teaching online with the expected high quality will be on the expense of the instructor, who will be spending much more time on his/her online courses than on f2f courses. If institutions insist on large class sizes, then instructors have no other alternative but to decrease the number of the writing-intensive activities.

Is Online Learning Becoming a Second-Class Education

Some researchers argued that, on the long run, there is a possibility that there will be a potential stratification of the educational system, with the traditional f2f courses gradually becoming a first-class education and online courses as second-class education.

One area of support for this argument is the fact that enrollment in online courses has been increasing in public institutions as well as in private for-non-profit institutions. At the same time, there has been a steady decline in private for-profit institutions. During the academic year 2012/13, enrollment in online courses, in private for-profit institutions, decreased by 73,577 students. Enrollment in such courses decreased even more in 2014/15 to reach 90,442 students (Digital Learning Compass, 2017).

Carroll (2013) uses Ritzer's (1993) view of the "McDonaldization of society" to show that the four McDonaldization principles of predictability, calculability, efficiency, and control are also adhered to in online education. The result is a mass production (graduation) of products (students), who are trained to find information in various locations of the cyber world, by mere clicking on it, rather than through self-study or debates with other students and instructors. He also mentions the profit maximization, as a result of the less cost of online education, just like the less cost and price of the McDonald fast food meals. However, he did not mention the similarity between McDonaldization in fast food and in education in that both target the same customers, in terms social class. So, there is a possibility that education may become stratified in two main tiers, in which online education occupies the lower, second-class, in the educational system.

Allen et al (2016) reported problems related to online education in terms of looking down at it, as inferior to f2f education. Annual surveys of the faculty between 2002 and 2015 showed that less than one-third of the faculty expressed their acceptance of online education. The also reported that the proportion of academic leaders who rated online education as good as or better than f2f instruction was 57.2% in 2003 but increased to 77% in 2012. Though that rating decreased to 71.4% in 2015, it was still representing the vast majority of academic leaders who look favorably at online teaching. However, the high level of skepticism towards online courses among the faculty has posed a

problem to its growth. Between 2002 and 2015, less than one-third of all academic leaders reported that their faculty would "accept the value and legitimacy of online education." This means that about two-thirds of the faculty does not have a favorable attitude towards online education, according to the perception of the surveyed academic leaders.

Jaggars (2011) mentioned that it may seem intuitive that online learning would encourage new college enrollments among low-income populations, who could take advantage of its flexibility to juggle school, work, and family responsibilities. However, realities of college access can be counterintuitive. Studies of the Pell grant program found that it had no impact on new college enrollments among low-income populations, due to the complexity of the Pell eligibility and application process, which obscures its benefits and prevents the program from reaching the individuals who need it most. Similarly, there are also several factors, which may discourage low-income young adults from leveraging the flexibility of online coursework, such as limited numbers of online degrees, inadequate technological infrastructure, and cost of online courses. She concluded that financial aid needs to be restructured to allow low-income students to buy computers and high-speed internet services, in order for them to be able to benefit from the exploding number of online courses and programs.

Although I do not see now that online learning is providing a second-class education, I share with other colleagues the concern that it may become so in the future. In particular, it may become so with more intervention from administrators to increase the class size, limit the number of the proctored exams, or not requiring them altogether. However, I do not see this problem as unique to online education. The quality of f2f education may also be lowered by the intervention from administrators, who link tenure and promotion of the faculty to the numerical student evaluation.

Conclusion

Online teaching is here not only to stay but also to expand and flourish. It's the future trend for higher education. The major challenge of online teaching is engaging students through variety of course activities. For this author, these activities include chapter online tests, papers, discussion-posts, substantive responses to classmates, detailed feedback, as well as timely and frequent communication with students. Poor reading students and large class sizes are two major problems facing online teaching. A more important problem is addressing the perception that online courses are easier to pass than f2f courses. This problem can be addressed by requiring two proctored unit exams, with considerable weight, which makes such exams credible measures of the student learning of the course content.

Several studies about online learning have found that students who are more mature, self-motivated, and having genuine interest in the discipline are more likely to be successful than others. Younger students, who work, may not be as successful because

of their struggle to meet the obligations of school, work, and family. However, this is not limited to online courses, as similar students in f2f courses maybe less successful than their peers who have a higher socio-economic status, which does not require them to work.

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Appendix 1
Updated Gilbert and Dahl's Model of Social Class in the United States
Using education, Occupation, and Income

Levels of Education	Types of Occupation	Annual Combined Income	Social Class
Prestigious Colleges and Universities	Corporate Leaders, heirs, investors	$ Millions	Upper 1%
Master's or Ph.D. Post-Graduate Degrees	Upper Managers Medium-sized business owners Professionals: Physicians, Attorneys	$150,000 - $999,999	Upper-Middle 11.3%
Bachelor or Associate Degrees, at least High School	White-Collar Job Holders, Semi-professionals, Lower managers Craftsmen, foremen	$50,000 - $149,999	Lower-Middle 42.9%
High School Diploma	Blue-Collar Jobs, low-skilled manual, Clerical, Retail Sales	$25,000 - $49,999	Working Class 22.7%
High School Dropouts	lowest-paid manual, salespeople, service workers	$15,000 - $24,999	Working Poor 10.5%
High School Dropouts	Unemployed, Part-time manual jobs, or on public assistance	$14,999 or below	Under Class 11.6%

Adapted from Gilbert and Kahl (1998) and Gilbert (2003), using 2015 US Census data.

https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/income-poverty/p60-256.html

Appendix 2
Instructions for Discussion 9
Social Class in the United States

Your Name
Sociology 1101
Discussion 9 Social Class in the United States

***

Write your discussion on a <u>Microsoft Word</u> document, using the following template as it is, including the section titles and numbers.

Write <u>without indentation</u>, in <u>single-spaced</u> lines, using <u>Arial 12</u> as the standard font for this assignment.

***

Discuss social class and social mobility in relation to a family that you are familiar with, **<u>without disclosing your relationship to the family members</u>**, as follows:

1. Description of a Family Social Class:

Provide a detailed description of a family you're familiar with, <u>in the U.S. at the present time</u>, describing in detail the basic variables related to the adult heads of the household (annual income, occupation, education). Add age, marital status, racial background, and current employment status, for the working adults in the family.

2. Description of a Social Class Category:

On the basis of the information you provided in the first section, use the updated Gilbert and Kahl model, mentioned in Lecture Notes 9, to identify the social class that fits that family (using the three variables of educational level, type of occupation, and combined income of adults in the family).

After identifying the family social class, provide a detailed description of that social class (<u>from the Gilbert and Kahl model, mentioned in Lecture Notes 9</u>), in sentences.

3. Family Status:

Compare the three variables of combined income, types of occupation, and levels of education mentioned in the social class category (in the second section) with the family you described (in the first section).

Look for similarities and differences, pointing them out.

Mention that there is a <u>status consistency</u> whenever there is a similarity in the expected levels of education, types of occupation, and combined income.

Mention that there is a <u>status inconsistency</u> whenever there is a difference in the expected levels of education, types of occupation, and combined income.

4. Social Mobility:

Compare heads of the household with their families of origin, in terms of social class (according to their levels of education, types of occupation, and combined income).

Then, mention whether there was an intergenerational <u>social mobility</u> (upward, downward, or staying the same), or not, as a result of comparing a person with his/her family of origin.

Add your own comments, or opinions about how the family has reached its current social class status, and / or about how it can be better off.

***

Notes:

1. Post your discussion at least a day before the deadline, to enable your classmates to read and respond to it.

2. Read and respond to three of your classmates, with substantive discussions of their topics.

3. Make sure that language mistakes are corrected before posting your discussion and your responses (Microsoft Word enables you to see such mistakes as color-underlined, in red, blue, or green).

***

Grading:

Your discussion will be graded as follows:

1. Discussion: 70%.

2. Responses: 30%

3. Language mistakes may decrease your grade by 10%.

4. Submission of the discussion on Sunday or after may decrease your grade by 10%.

5. Responses to classmates cannot be made up after the deadline.