

7-2020

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Recommended Citation

Rose, Daniel J. and Taylor, William V. (2020) "Open Research Projects and Public Sociology: Students Communicating Creatively in the Classroom and Beyond," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol12/iss1/1>

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Open Research Projects and Public Sociology: Students Communicating Creatively in the Classroom and Beyond

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Abstract: As teachers, we often deny students the freedom to choose topics of inquiry and methods of communication. We have developed an open research project that challenges students to identify a social problem, gather research, and apply what they have learned by targeting an audience and developing a strategy for effective communication. This assignment centers a “problem-posing” focus that tasks students with confronting relevant issues in their lives and communities. It emphasizes public sociology by shifting the audience for their projects from instructors to classmates, families, communities, and beyond. Students have communicated their work through a variety of mediums, including children’s books, videos, poetry, photojournalism, and other artistic formats. We discuss challenges and strategies involved with this open project. Paradoxically, we have learned from this project that lots of freedom requires lots of structure. We find that for students to create high-quality public sociology, teachers must commit to providing clear expectations, deadlines, communication, and accountability.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Open-format Projects; Open-inquiry Projects; Liberation Education

Introduction

We have developed an open research project designed to foster student autonomy and engagement, encouraging experimentation, critical analysis, diverse voices, and application beyond the classroom. The project combines open-inquiry with open-format models to support student engagement with a variety of social problems and styles of presentation. Students reflect on problems in their communities, choose an issue and an audience, review relevant literature, propose a viable solution, and develop an effective way to communicate their work. After selecting a topic, they determine the medium of communication for their work (e.g. art, video, photos, story, music). They then consider the audience for their projects in determining the tone of their project (e.g. academic, emotional, colloquial, poetic). We use a problem-posing model of pedagogy where teaching encourages critical thinking

as a pathway to student liberation, both inside and outside the classroom (Horton & Freire, 1990; Freire, 1970). Problem-posing education in this project centers student creation of knowledge around issues important to them. This openness has fostered sociological work from students that reflects greater applied understanding.

At its root, this assignment reflects a normative commitment to the idea that sociological research should play a larger role within professional, policy, and public circles and that sociological research should be oriented toward solving, not just describing, social problems. This situates sociology in the context of earlier visions of the field advanced by Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, C. Wright Mills, Michael Burawoy, and others. The project also reflects a commitment to

teaching as a practice of empowering students to be self-directed and engaged learners. As Myles Horton stated:

I don't know what to do, and if I did know what to do I wouldn't tell you, because if I had to tell you today then I'd have to tell you tomorrow, and when I'm gone you'd have to get somebody else to tell you. (Horton & Freire, 1990)

This does not mean the teacher has no role. Nor does it mean the teacher simply facilitates. Paradoxically, we have learned from this project that lots of freedom requires lots of structure. We find that for students to use their autonomy productively, teachers must provide a rigorous structure of clear expectations, deadlines, communication, and accountability.

In this paper, we will present the details of the open research project, along with our experiences and challenges implementing it. We begin with a discussion of problems with traditional undergraduate education that motivate the creation of this open research project.

Problems

This open-format project addresses two major problems with traditional education: First, in the classroom, the project addresses problems with pedagogy and assessment that reproduce social inequalities by privileging the voices of dominant groups. Second, the project addresses the problem that sociology—as a practice, profession, and discipline—is too often insular, inaccessible, or seen as irrelevant to the public.

Reproducing social inequalities

Wagner and Yee (2011) argue that hierarchies of knowledge and ways of knowing encourage a detached and disinterested stance toward unequal systems, thus framing subjugated groups who study these issues as emotional and irrational. Sociology instructors have traditionally asked students to communicate learning through narrowly prescribed formats—exams and research papers being paramount. Exams are

particularly useful for evaluating mastery of prescribed content, and research papers allow students to demonstrate understanding in a clear, organized, academic format. However, these common assessments have several drawbacks. Exams have more value as evaluative tools than formative tools, which allow teachers to provide ongoing feedback during the learning process (Smith, 2007). Testing often gravitates toward assessing the most easily and economically measured learning (Fredericksen, 1984). Multiple choice exams, in particular, encourage memorization skill development at the expense of higher-level critical thinking skills (Stanger Hall, 2012). Authentic learning might be measured—and measured better—in other ways. Research papers can be more formative, but similar to exams, they often serve as better measures of how good a student is at responding to the instructor's prompt, instead of how well a student can critically engage with what they believe is worth knowing (Palmer & McIntyre, 2007). Furthermore, formal writing assignments tend to privilege particular voices and ways of communicating. Lensmire (1998) argues that traditional writing instruction frustrates student expression, especially for those situated at the margins of a racist, sexist, and classist society. Development of student voice, therefore, increases their participation in the social production of meaning in the public sphere (Palmer & McIntyre, 2007). This assignment creates space for students from non-dominant groups to challenge dominant assessment frames and draw on their lived experience to demonstrate skill, mastery, and understanding.

Make sociology relevant again

Sociology has lost significant ground to other disciplines in terms of public engagement, media coverage, and influence in policy circles. Wolfers (2015) cites evidence that the share of sociologists cited in the New York Times and the Congressional Record have declined relative to economists in particular. How can sociologists assert the relevance of social factors to problems like unemployment? The answer might lie in creative communication. An important part of this project is that it asks students to think about the normative purposes of sociological research and invites them to design ways to effectively communicate their

findings. When the audience for their work is shifted from the certified professionals (e.g. instructors, peer-reviewers) to audiences such as classmates, families, communities, and beyond, the development of a more public sociology is at hand. This project builds the capacity for more effective sociology through a variety of formats, with the goal of bringing research and recommendations directly to a public audience. As we explore the relationship between research and social change with our students, we answer ASA President Mary Romero's call to "examine the distinctive balance between scholarship and advocacy in pursuing an engaged research agenda for a better world" (Romero, 2019).

Literature Review

Researchers have contrasted assessments that foster rote versus meaningful learning (McGregor et al., 2017; Mayer, 2002). Rote learning has often been associated with more traditional formats of assessment such as exams and research papers, which are often prescribed in ways that lead to a focus on memorization or writing to please the instructor (Stanger Hall, 2012; Palmer & McIntyre, 2007). Meaningful learning, on the other hand, promotes not only the retention of knowledge, but the ability to use it to solve new problems (Mayer, 2002).

A growing body of literature demonstrates the benefits of arts-based social scientific research. Leavy (2015) notes, "Art and science bear intrinsic similarities in their attempts to illuminate aspects of the human condition" and describes arts based research practices as methodological tools used during all phases of social science research including data generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation. This project primarily deals with representational forms which include but are not limited to "short stories, novels, experimental writing forms, graphic novels, comics, poems, parables, collages, paintings, drawings, sculpture, 3-D art, quilts and needlework, performance scripts, theatrical performances, dances, films, and songs and musical scores" (Leavy, 2015). Baron and Eisner (2012) forcefully argue that arts-based social

science projects are justified to the extent they effectively employ aesthetic dimensions that provide otherwise unavailable important public service. Another notable justification for arts-based research methods comes from Foster's (2007) demonstration of the epistemological value of alternative "ways of knowing and showing."

In sociology, a number of innovative arts-based projects have resulted in transformative experiences. Samuels (1987) argued for the utility of students creating and citing poetry in their sociology papers. Yuen (2016) describes how collages may be used as valuable tools for analysis, representation, and social justice. Schell et al. (2009) found that asking students to photograph socially relevant subjects offered a new medium of knowledge creation that encouraged them to think critically and share their findings. Tabachnick (2011) found that students learned to develop sociological narratives and broader visual literacy skills through a filmmaking project. Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) have explored the importance of using storytelling as a means for understanding lived experiences. While there have been numerous attempts to alter the medium of assessments from the traditional research paper and exam, most have dictated a specific alternative to students (where *everyone* must do poetry or storytelling or photography, for example). Little research has been done on the value of what we term as *open-format* projects.

In addition to the format of assessments, the role of inquiry style is an important consideration. Open-inquiry, where topics are not preordained, has been investigated, yielding mixed results. In a comparison of high school biology students who were randomly assigned guided- and open-inquiry, open-inquiry students were more satisfied and felt they gained more benefits from the process, as opposed to guided-inquiry students who felt they were simply documenting pre-existing knowledge (Sadeh & Zion, 2012). Using large-scale evidence, Kang and Keinonen (2018) found that open-inquiry negatively predicted student-achievement in science classes. However, they did find that a guided-inquiry approach using topics relevant to

students positively affected their interest and achievement. Other research has found open-inquiry to be a worthwhile challenge, requiring a gradual and flexible approach from both teachers and students (Zweekhorst et al., 2015). While most of the research on inquiry style examines students in the “hard sciences,” little is known about the prospects of open-inquiry in classes dealing with something students might be more intimately familiar with—social problems.

Centering what Neary (2016) calls the “student as producer,” open research projects seek to offer the opportunities for students to use a variety of approaches to demonstrate knowledge on a variety of topics. Cope and Kalantzis (2005) describe “multiliteracies” as a framework for reconceptualizing the variety of semiotic systems students can draw upon (e.g. cultural, media, community) in the practice of making meaning. This allows them to address relevant problems in relevant language.

Implementation

Building upon this literature, we aim to foster a variety of ways that students can critically engage with social problems and the discourse surrounding them. This work combines open-inquiry with open-format projects. It is being done at a community college and a public historically black university (HBCU). Both institutions are located in the South and have uniquely community-focused missions. Courses included so far are Social Problems (at both institutions), Honors Introduction to Sociology (at the CC), and Urban Sociology (at the HBCU).

To provide additional structure and guidance, we have developed an appendix of “canned” assignment guides from which students may choose to follow or modify. Those assignment guides include instructions and expectations for a variety of assignments including a children’s book, film project, photo essay, research paper, and an oral history project.

This is a semester-long project beginning with sessions to introduce the project on the first day of class, followed by workshops that help students brainstorm,

review scholarly research, develop the project, and present their work. All told, implementation requires several dedicated class periods for workshops and presentations, as well as critical feedback from instructors, so it is pragmatically best-suited for smaller classes with flexible course calendars. We detail the process in the sections that follow.

Introducing the Project

At the beginning of the semester, instructors provide an overview of the open project. This introduction is intended to provide clear information about the process involved, but also emphasize the autonomy that students have over the topic, format, and voice they will use to communicate their work. This can be very difficult for those who are unfamiliar with the subject matter of sociology. Instructors go over the array of topics the course typically covers, but also encourage students to think about other issues the field of sociology (broadly defined) can encompass. This discussion is designed to stimulate interest among students who might not be accustomed to thinking like a sociologist. However, it can also serve to empower the work of students already concerned about specific issues in their communities.

Brainstorming Activity

Brainstorming is encouraged as a group activity, allowing students to bounce ideas off of their peers, who help them develop their thinking about broader audiences for their work. The purpose of this activity is to push students to identify issues of interest and help them develop thoughts on why those issues matter, as well as a vision of how they might communicate important ideas. Based upon the brainstorming exercise and critical feedback from instructors, students will then select a topic and draft a statement of purpose for the project.

This is also the point in the process to introduce students to exemplary projects. We use exemplars from prior semesters and ask students to draw on their knowledge of popular media to share and analyze examples. It is particularly helpful to engage students with concrete examples of how a sociological issue might be communicated in the form of, say, a children’s

book, or a painting, or a video blog. Although past projects can be aesthetically pleasing, instructors emphasize that artistic talent is less important than using good sociological research and communication in high-quality projects. For example, one of our favorite projects was a children's book about homelessness that consisted entirely of rudimentary stick figure drawings, but stick figures thoughtfully constructed with symbolism and capable of conveying a variety of meaning and emotion. The student drew effectively without a high degree of technical skill.

Research

Once students have chosen their topic, they can begin their research. No matter what format, tone, and voice they wish to utilize, projects must be grounded in scholarly research. Research allows students to familiarize themselves with the established literature on their topic. We encourage them to be open to what they find and revise their project's message, aims, or purpose based on research findings. We remind them to maintain a critical eye toward the varying degrees of nuance, accessibility, and quality in academic sources. Library professionals are invaluable resources in helping find sources, but they should not be expected to instantly locate relevant sociological works for students. Often instructors need to converse with students about what interests them and help translate the jargon of sociology so that search engines can produce useful results.

After identifying at least three scholarly sources related to their topic, students select one of these works for an in-depth review. Students must submit a written report on the source's focus, relevance, methods, findings, and recommendations. They reflect upon the ways in which it influences their understanding of their topic. This activity helps students familiarize themselves with sociological research on their topic.

After this activity, each student takes a brief amount of time during one class period (class size permitting) to describe the research to classmates and field questions. In addition to creating some accountability, asking students to present some research on their

topics sets a tone for the semester, boosts confidence, and helps foster a learning community. Students taking the role of teacher helps establish the dynamic so central to this project. The goal is for students to become "go-betweens" who are familiar with academic understandings and prepared to make the knowledge more widely known through their projects – the task of the public sociologist.

Developing the Project

This activity prompts students to articulate a clear vision of the final product and devise a plan to execute their vision. It takes the form of a proposal. For more artistic projects, this is a time to precisely outline key elements of the vision, explain its merit, and clearly delineate the connection to sociological research. This is their chance to defend their ideas. Students must be able to answer why the project matters and why they have chosen a particular medium of communication. What will the subjects of their photographs be? What does the storyboard for their video look like? How will their children's story convey the issue and to what specific age-group? What will they communicate with their painting, sculpture, or spoken word and how? How is this work sociologically grounded and publicly accessible? What is your timeline for completion? For more traditional (text-based) projects, students are expected to outline their work. All projects at this stage should have an abstract that introduces the purpose of their work, discusses the sociological research, and states what contribution their project will make. Again, feedback is critical here. Students need guidance about how the elements or components of their work can be honed into more valuable instruments of communication. Students present proposals to the class and all proposals require approval by the teacher. Proposals lacking appropriate rigor or clarity may require resubmission. Since it is difficult to clearly articulate specific guidelines for the vast array of project formats, the proposal acts as a clear contract that lays out precise expectations mutually agreed upon by student and teacher.

Sharing Findings

By the end of the semester students have been brainstorming, sharing ideas, and presenting their work all semester. The last few class periods are a time to share the product of their labors. Rather than framing final project presentations as high-stakes formal presentations, we frame it as a time to celebrate, come together, support classmates, and learn together. In addition to sharing their work with peers, students should describe how they have (or could) share their work outside the classroom in impactful ways.

Outcomes

The quality of student work and feedback suggests that our open-format project has been overwhelmingly successful. Students have produced high-quality, engaging, and creative methods for communicating relevant sociological insights beyond the classroom. As one student who wrote a children's book wrote, "I like that I've got to do something for class that I could share with my kids. To teach them about the environment and where electricity comes from has been on my heart." Another student, who indicated that they struggled with traditional assessments, took brilliant pictures at a cluster of high-end supermarkets in a wealthy neighborhood, which they dubbed a "food glut" in their photo essay reframing the conversation on food deserts. However, some students felt intimidated, confused, or rudderless by the amount of choice and freedom afforded to them. One student expressed frustration in a survey, "I wish [the instructor] would just do his job and tell us what to do. Just tell me what I need to do to get a good grade and I'll do it." For that reason, although the format and topic of this project are open, the effectiveness of the assignment hinges on teachers providing a highly structured *process* to support students' creative endeavors. These steps included clearly communicating expectations, providing examples, building in-class time for student brainstorming and research, checking in, enforcing deadlines, and guiding development of their work. Timely feedback was essential at every stage in order to build partnerships between faculty and students and foster higher-quality work.

For students accustomed to completing their work at the last minute, lack of engagement early in the process can exacerbate the difficulty of producing something meaningful. To combat the tendency to procrastinate, a deadly habit for a large project, we developed a clear set of milestones and emphasized that the project is not just a singular effort. As a result, we treated each activity (brainstorm, academic source review, proposal, presentation) as a unique assignment. This also made the project less intimidating, with several small tasks instead of one giant, nebulous undertaking.

Traditional Research Paper

For students who wished to produce work in a more familiar medium the traditional academic research paper remained popular. Certainly, this can still be an effective medium for communicating data and theory. The suggested length of the research paper (2000-2500 words) encouraged students to pursue other formats. However, this requirement was not so unusual or onerous that it was unfair to students who preferred traditional writing. Given the public sociology focus of these projects, students still needed to use a problem-posing framework that included critical engagement with a social problem and a discussion of potential solutions.

Photo Essay

This project was popular for students who wanted the structure and familiarity of a traditional essay, but also wanted to dabble with a creative, visual media component. The suggested word count (1000-1500 words) encouraged this trade-off. Some students needed guidance on taking meaningful photos, but this also required an open-mind for instructors of students who made a case for why their selections were sociologically significant. This conversation took place at the proposal stage of the assignment, where students had to describe the pictures they planned to use.

Students produced some compelling photo essay projects and pointed their lenses at diverse subjects. One project captured images of stores in local food deserts starkly contrasted with groceries in wealthier neighborhoods. Another used images of long lines at polling stations to drive home their critique of voter

suppression. Another took before and after photos of a neighborhood being gentrified during the semester. Students have used photography powerfully to convey important themes relating to sociology.

Children's Book

These have been some of the most inspiring and thoughtful projects. Translating sociological knowledge into children's fiction, consisting primarily of story and image, is challenging work. Still, many projects did a magnificent job of communicating serious issues to young audiences. Students produced children's books with an enormous variety of topics. For example, many students at the HBCU wrote about the conversation African Americans often have with their children about racialized violence. Other topics have included child abuse, eating disorders, McDonaldization of society, technological unemployment, internalized racism, drug abuse, and addiction. Book materials have varied as well, including pen and paper, paint, flip books with moving images, and digital works using art software. We have been impressed by the students' diverse artistic skill, technical ability, and knack for using symbols to communicate poignant, powerful, and memorable messages.

Film Project

The film format has produced mixed results. A benefit of the format is that it lends itself to sharing on social media and other internet platforms. Several quality videos featured revealing interviews with peers about some aspect of campus life. One student submitted a video in which she was covered with body-shaming words like fat, ugly, and worthless. She performed an interpretive dance, smeared the words, and finished the video with statistics about eating disorders, mental health, and domestic violence. The music, dance, and information worked together to create a powerful message that elicited tears from the students and professor. Though students could easily imagine and articulate a wonderful vision for a documentary-style film, many found that a lack of time, resources, experience, and skill frustrated their attempts to execute ambitious visions. Storyboarding, filming, and editing often required planning and coordinating with media

facilities on campus. As many lived off-campus and had work, family, and other obligations that took up significant amounts of their time, some students abandoned their plans in favor of another format. Others filmed themselves talking at length about a subject they were interested in, without adding any other voices or footage. Still others created slideshows with photos and bullet points set to music and called it a day. The film project may lend itself better to a group project in which the work can be divided. Developing a special set of guidelines and procedures for this format might also help.

Unique Formats

Some of the best projects have been uniquely tailored to the student's particular skillset, which can engender a "design your own" format. For example, two music majors wrote an original score and performed a duet about how neither felt comfortable in narrow gendered boxes. Another student wrote a fictional short story about a young man from a socially conservative family coming out to his parents. One led a workshop on confronting refugee crises. Another constructed an American flag made from broken beer and wine bottles to represent the "broken" addiction-related policies of the US armed forces that hurt US soldiers, veterans, and their families. One went before city council to present on why the numerous non-functioning wheelchair ramps throughout the bus system intersected as a classist and ableist hardship for some of the city's most marginalized residents.

Sharing With the Class and Beyond

After students completed the projects, many were eager to share their work, learn from one another, and enjoy the culmination of a semester's worth of work. For others, sharing something they had invested so much (or so little) into was an anxiety-ridden experience. Some students dressed up and made elaborate presentations with music, food, visual aids, or handouts. Others said few words, and maybe passed a copy of their work around the room and just wanted to be done with it. Their enthusiasm might have corresponded to their level of effort, but also related to their personalities. Overall, though, presentations filled the

classroom with a sense of accomplishment, with students having created projects of a great variety of topics, formats, and moods.

A central focus of the project is to build a practice of sociology relevant beyond the classroom walls. Some students have run with the idea. For example, one group of students conducted a social media campaign. They created a Facebook poll measuring attitudes towards millennials. They used the results along with scholarly research to engage poll participants and then push them to think about age discrimination. Others wrote to elected officials. One student posted a video on YouTube featuring students and faculty speaking about their views on feminism and campus climate for women. Another created a podcast and posted it to iTunes. Another took her board game, "The Game of Life: Mental Health Edition", home to play with her family. A particularly motivated student had his book, "Mommy, Where is Home Tonight?" professionally published, translated to Spanish, and distributed to local shelters. Other students have used their work on poverty as the basis for creating free stores, where people give what they can and take what they need according to the principle of mutual aid.

Challenges and Strategies

Implementation of this project can present some daunting challenges. We have developed several strategies for a more effective process. In this section we discuss several examples of potential issues and strategies for addressing them.

Fear

With these projects, it's important to assure students that it's okay to take risks. They often don't believe us. After all, if they fail, they could lose their scholarship, their spot in the nursing program, or their financial aid! For others, they risk pouring too much of themselves into a creative and public endeavor. What if their topic reveals something personal, vulnerable, or sensitive? Creating and maintaining a positive, supportive, and nurturing classroom community helps embolden those who fear investing themselves in their work.

For students who might like to create an art piece or a children's book but worry they will fail to execute their vision of the project, we make sure to reiterate that this project is about communicating sociology, not artistic ability. Try something new! In asking them to do so, we offer both verbal encouragement and a grading structure that assures students will not receive a poor grade if they try something ambitious, put in the work, but run into obstacles. The proposal they submit acts as a contract for the grade. If they have done all the work along the way and made clear their vision and a good faith effort to execute it, they will still receive high marks. For example, a student wanted to create a bright and soft children's book out of felt cloth. They did the research and communicated that through their annotated bibliography. They communicated their vision and purpose for the book clearly in their proposal, but ultimately the final project was a disaster. The pile of felt scraps emanated noxious glue fumes. The problem for them was in the execution and mastery of crafting felt, not their understanding of sociology. For students who feel the final product did not live up to their vision, we ask them to reflect on what they can learn from that failure and how they can use that knowledge. Next time, knowing what you know now, how would pursue the project differently?

The Last-Minute Poem

Certainly, not every student will put forth their best effort, a problem not unique to this project. Invariably some students will bring in, for example, half a page of uninspired rhyming couplets to present as the culmination of a semester's worth of work. Perhaps some of this is unavoidable, and there are myriad reasons for shoddy work, but there are strategies for boosting the quality of work. One, consistently implementing workshops, due dates, check-ins, and feedback can help provide structure and accountability for procrastinators. For example, even a talented visual artist needs help envisioning how the themes of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* can be expressed through a painting. Two, offering tools, encouragement, and resources for students can help those lacking confidence or efficacy. This might include sharing exemplary work and connecting students with campus academic support services (i.e. library research

assistance, media center assistance with film production). Three, for the self-doubting student, a bit of encouragement and listening can go a long way. Structured discussions (i.e. small-group brainstorming) and formal assignments (i.e. the proposal) that ask students to articulate the personal, local, or global significance of their work might help generate a sense of purpose. Between the proposal and the final due date, ask students to write down their feelings and concerns about the project, and follow up with any necessary assistance. Four, many students' biggest barriers to success lie outside the classroom. Poverty and other stressors are nearly universal among students, but particularly at the community college and HBCU where we teach. Connecting students with support services and offering some flexibility on due dates might help.

Letting Go

Devolving authority to students requires trade-offs and challenges us as teachers. Offering students freedom and voice means giving up some of our own ability to steer the direction of the class. Students do not always pick the same topics or analytical frameworks we would. This may be difficult but worthwhile for instructors interested in a liberatory framework that encourages students to communicate their sociological perspectives. Asking questions, posing problems, and offering tools to help find empirically and theoretically rigorous answers counters sometimes ill-informed or unfounded ideas students might wish to communicate at the outset of this work. Also, the iterative process of clear expectations, working deadlines, and feedback can help increase the thoughtfulness of projects, even if the student's focus or conclusions do not resonate with the instructor. We believe it is important to encourage students to use sociological research to explore the issues that interest them. Embracing the concept of autonomy at the heart of these projects means letting go of much of the power that instructors typically wield. As long as the project is grounded in scholarly research, topic selection and communication are the domain of the student. Even when students draw conclusions with which we disagree (sometimes strongly), if we have done our job well, we should be

able to observe growth and maturation in the student's ability to think critically and sociologically.

Discussion

Thus far, a wide range of outcomes have been generated by these open-format sociology projects. They have been successful in facilitating the production of autonomous, high-quality, creative, solution-oriented works from many students. It has provided creative outlets for students who felt stifled or overwhelmed by traditional assessments. It has cultivated new and interesting approaches to social problems that reframe our academic understandings for a more public audience.

While many students have fulfilled the teaching and learning goals of the project, others have languished with lackluster efforts. Moving forward, the particular challenges appear to be getting students to buy into the possibilities of this format early in the process, develop a vision, take risks, and combine their unique standpoints and talents with the rigorous investigation of a social problem. It is crucial to provide guidance for students looking to translate their visions into something sociological. It is also important to make space throughout the semester for students to express their fears about the projects they want to do. These challenges must be met against the backdrop of a grade-obsessed educational system that continues to prize memorization, obedience, and regurgitation. Some students have been beaten down by this model to the point that they are just looking to survive, no matter what type of work they have to complete.

A major lament of the discipline is that nobody listens to sociologists. In part this might be due to the critical or subversive character of sociological research, but no doubt, much has to do with the fact that much important sociological research is poorly communicated. This project is an attempt to rectify this problem by allowing the possibility for more creative forms of representation that resonate and connect with people in authentic, deeply meaningful ways. As Leavy (2015) notes, arts-based research aims to "bridge and

not divide both the artist-self and researcher-self with the researcher and audience and researcher and teacher” and adds, “researchers working with these new tools are merging their interests while creating knowledge based on resonance and understanding. This project has accomplished those aims in meaningful ways. As many students have sought to develop viable solutions to the problems they examine through this project, it is important to build upon the potential to put these solutions into practice. That said, some students have gone on to present their findings publicly, making demands of their student governments, city councils, and other institutions. It is advisable to encourage the *implementation* of a solution as the ultimate goal of these projects, such as organizing for political action or creating mutual aid programs. The grounding of this project in sociological research lends itself well to these goals.

The open-format nature of the project requires partnership, where instructors work with students to refine the presentation of ideas and help them become sociological, while at the same time giving creative control to students. Similarly, the open-inquiry style of these projects requires a delicate process of topic suggestion and revision, with students ultimately in control. This type of assessment has the potential to significantly increase student autonomy, means of demonstrating mastery, and ability to envision and implement solutions to social problems. By teaching students to critically analyze social problems and creatively participate in the creation of their learning, we hope the open project empowers students to apply sociological tools to create a better world.

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