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A Thematic Approach to Teach Introductory Sociology

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A THEMATIC APPROACH TO TEACHING INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY

Abstract

Soon into his career, the author discerned several pedagogic flaws in introductory sociology texts. Responding to these flaws, he organized his introductory course around the theme of social change. This theme serves as a background for and lead-in to just five other topic areas amenable to a basic understanding of the discipline: demography, social differentiation, social stratification, the family, and deviance. Sociological theory, statistics, and methods are linked to these substantive topic areas only where appropriate. Topics are covered in depth and important concepts are directly illustrated by college-level readings, written by sociologists. The result was the development of an integrated and cohesively presented course in which the instructor had total control of the pace, content, depth of coverage, and level of presentation. For an introductory class that is both effective and satisfying to teach, the author suggests that other instructors base their courses on their own areas of interest and expertise. Such a course should be accompanied by a set of college-level sociological readings selected to illustrate the topic areas and concepts the instructor has chosen to present.

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Part I

The Intro Textbook: What Does \$90.00 Get You?

In the mid-1970s, a survey, sponsored by the American Sociological Association's Project on Undergraduate Education, found that the typical instructor utilized a standard introductory text (Geersten 1977). Respondents often rationalized use of a text as "absolutely indispensable," because it "tied everything together." Without the text, it was argued, the student would become "quite lost." However, the survey also found that, for most instructors, the text comprised the complete organizational framework for the course. Syllabi topics tended to reflect nothing more than chapter headings. The text clearly determined the number of topics covered in a course and the ordering of their presentation. Lectures and reading assignments were virtually interchangeable.

At about this time, in the first few years of my career, I was having my own problems with introductory texts (see McCormick 1992). My frustrations led me to review the literature (see Allen 1979; Geersten 1977; Kurtz and Maiolo 1968; McCormick 1992) and look critically at texts themselves.

First, texts typically begin with what I term the "Apologia," which is a seemingly obligatory discourse justifying the existence of sociology. To establish sociology's legitimacy even further, this is almost invariably followed by lengthy descriptions of the scientific method, theories and theoretical orientations, data collection techniques, statistical analysis, and related topics. I have never felt compelled to demonstrate the justifiability of my profession. By now, sociology is well established in academia. Further, in my view, detailed discussions of theory, methods, and statistics have no place in an introductory course, certainly not as lead-off material.

Why introduce students to the “how” before they are even sure of the “what”? In fact, as Geersten (1977) demonstrated, these introductory chapters quickly turn students off.

Second, the typical text contains over twenty chapters and/or “shortens” the number of chapters by combining two or three different substantive areas into a single chapter (e.g., urbanization with collective behavior; groups with organizations, bureaucracy, and the workplace). If an instructor wanted to cover the entire text, only two or three class hours could be devoted to an entire substantive subfield. This leaves no time to impart any in-depth, comprehensive, integrated feeling for a topic. Not only is topic coverage rapid and shallow, the instructor is likely to follow a rigid structure which does not permit interesting digressions and elaborations. This enhances the mutually repetitious nature of lectures and text materials.

Third, many texts chronically lack continuity in presentation, with each chapter presented as a discrete unit unrelated to previously presented material. Hence, the student is rarely shown the interrelationships among the various substantive areas of sociological inquiry. Further, many chapters are included because of *Zeitgeist* popularity. Thirty years ago, texts usually included a segment on student political activism. Current texts ignore this, but typically cover such subjects as the “new” ethnic groups (e.g., Hispanic-Americans and Muslim Americans), health and society, aging/death and dying, and terrorism. These questions certainly are important areas of sociological inquiry. They are *not*, however, critical to a *basic* understanding of social behavior, which is the primary goal of the introductory course.

Fourth, it is exceedingly difficult to find the “right” text, that one book that matches one’s own notions as to how concepts, theoretical perspectives, and substantive areas should be addressed. Quite likely, this is because there is little agreement among sociologists about which precise principles should be taught at the introductory level. The ASA Project found universal

agreement on only seven core concepts (Geersten 1977). It took the University System Regents' Advisory Committee on Sociology thirty years to develop a list of general education outcomes for the introductory course acceptable to the state's sociologists, and those three statements were deliberately worded in such a broad manner as to preclude any objection.

Finally, the publishers of intro texts tend to stress marketability over substance. Book reps try to sell "presentability" and peripheral "educational aids" (i.e., glitzy gimmicks), not quality of content. The ultimate embodiment of this is the "managed" or "in-house" text in which content is determined by marketing specialists through data gained by surveys. In attempts to be all things to all instructors, such works are shallow, rapid surveys of the discipline which fail to provide sufficient background material for true understanding. Worse, as a pretext for "readability," texts are deliberately written at the eighth to tenth grade level (Allen 1979). This runs counter to the very purpose of a *college* education.

Part II

Cutting the Umbilical

My primary assumption about introductory sociology has always been this: the fundamental goal of the course is to have students come away realizing that sociology is an analytic effort to uncover the basic rules, processes, and procedures governing social behavior. In my view, this goal is best met by:

- 1) learning a few things well rather than many things superficially,
- 2) experiencing a course that has continuity and cohesive organization,
- 3) concentrating on basic concepts, not temporary fashions, and
- 4) promoting a true higher-level education through use of college-level materials.

In order to meet these goals, I completely rethought, then reorganized the course. I decided to approach matters by concentrating on those areas of the discipline in which I was interested and knew best. Given my undergraduate minor in history and my doctoral minor in social change, I have always been struck by the massive transformations that have occurred in American social structure. Therefore, I chose the theme of social change as the framework for the course's organization. I selected five other substantive areas to cover as well: demography, social differentiation, social stratification, the family, and deviance. All five areas are easily linked thematically with social change. Further, I have long had research and/or teaching interests in all five areas.

Then I did something radical. I cut the umbilical and completely eliminated an introductory text, freeing myself from the organizational shackles a text imposes. I concluded that the basics would be provided solely through my lectures, rather than merely repeating what students could read in the book. Instead, working through a custom publishing house, I compiled a set of sociological readings selected because they illustrated key concepts I presented in class. I wrote introductory commentaries for each chapter, and, for the third edition of the reader, contributed two of the articles (see McCormick 1998).

Part III

A Thematic Approach

Social change, as it has affected American society, sets up the entire course. I begin by describing types of economic production and their consequent structural requisites for social organization. In 1790, the year of the first census, America was an agricultural society of about 4 million, 95% of whom were farmers. Agricultural societies emphasize *primary production*, with consequently typical occupational and educational systems, birth rates, family structures,

age and sex roles, stratification systems, etc., which I briefly describe. Then I jump to the year 1865, when America was a rising industrial society increasingly emphasizing *secondary production*. The structural changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution on occupations, education, birth rates, family structure, etc., etc., are detailed. Finally, I jump to the present, where currently only two percent of the work force is engaged in agriculture and less than 20% are employed in the manufacturing sector. The American economy now increasingly emphasizes *tertiary production*, as fully 75 % of the work force provides services of one type or another, usually through white-collar employment. Society is still undergoing the Post-Industrial Revolution, yet the effects of this set of technological changes on social structure have already proven to be as substantial as those of the Industrial Revolution.

This introduction leads naturally into a discussion of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* societies and the effects of homogeneity and heterogeneity on social structure, such as the nature and importance of primary and secondary groups. The transformation of our society from *Gemeinschaft*-like to *Gesellschaft*-like has occurred through uneven rates of social change. This leads, in turn, to a discussion of *cultural integration* and *cultural lags*. This logically leads, finally, to some of the consequences of social change with a description of *alienation* and *anomie*.

This treatment of social change serves as background for and lead-in to the other course topics. For example, changes in birth rates, death rates, and growth rates are delineated when demography is covered, as is demographic transition theory. Changes in age and sex statuses/roles are discussed as a part of social differentiation. Social stratification looks at changes in social class structure, such as the development of the “new” industrial-based upper class and the “new” post-industrial based middle class. Socio-historic changes form a bulwark

of the course section on the evolution of family structure and its functions as a social institution. Variations occurring to our society's normative structure and the link of deviance to anomie are also connected to social change concepts.

While I do not bore students with early and extended instruction on theory, methods, and statistics, they are linked to substantive areas *where appropriate*. For example, the section on social stratification includes discussion of Marx and Weber's analyses of class and power. Demography includes the rationales and formulae for various vital statistic rates. Structural functionalism is an important element in how the family is covered.

The relatively few substantive areas I treat in the introductory course are collectively amenable to a *basic understanding* of what sociology is all about. Most of the "traditional" core concepts are explored. Further, because I spend an average of two and a half weeks per topic, a better flavor for sociology is given by the *depth* of the coverage. Additional depth is provided by the assigned readings. Major concepts introduced in lectures are *directly illustrated* by articles written by sociologists. These articles require (and reinforce) a college-level reading ability, but they are not the technical, jargon-filled works found in discipline-oriented journals.

For example, the chapter on deviance has articles on:

- a socio-historical study of cigarette smoking (Neuhring and Markle), illustrating changes in *folkways* and *mores*.
- the institutionalized use of an illegal tool in an aircraft plant (Bensmen and Gerver), illustrating *ideal* versus *real norms*, and consequent *norms of evasion*.
- chronic schizophrenia (Ludwig and Farrelly), illustrating *retreatism* and *secondary deviance*.
- white collar crime (Sutherland), illustrating *innovation* and *primary deviance*.

The pertinence of each article is a part of the series of lectures on deviance. The salient points of each article are further reinforced through the interactive lecture/discussion format that I follow in class.

In summary, I have developed an introductory sociology course with which I am very comfortable. It begins with a topic of interest, not the Apologia and turn-off lectures on theory, methods, and statistics. Basic core concepts are encompassed through an in-depth coverage of a few substantive areas with which I am quite familiar. Because the initial topic serves as the background theme for subsequent topics, the course is integrated and cohesive. Finally, the course is not organized and managed by a text. Rather, I have *total* control over content, depth of coverage, pace, and level of presentation.

Based upon my experiences, my advice to fellow professors of sociology is simple. Develop your own introductory course. Base it upon your own areas of interest and expertise. Develop your own set of associated readings, and even make your own contributions to it (several custom publishing houses are out there which can lend a great deal of assistance). The result can be an introductory course that is both effective and satisfying to teach time and time again.

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