

"Hearing Voices"

Writing and Diversity in Sociology Courses

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In this brief article I intend to address the current push for greater use of writing in the sociology curriculum by creatively (I hope) linking it with perhaps the single most significant contemporary trend in colleges and universities: the increasing diversity of our student bodies. As we have known for some time now, the pool of young, white, middle-class college students is declining. In most urban universities, large percentages of students are 25 and older and/or part-time. And these institutions, as well as traditional liberal arts colleges, are looking to increase minority recruitment, fully cognizant of the fact that soon nearly 40 percent of the 18-24 year olds in this country will be Hispanic, African-American or Asia American.

One thing about this "new majority" of non-traditional college students is that they tend to be less well-prepared for college. They often lack basic writing and communication skills or, if they have them, they are more intimidated by the institutional structure of the university and less confident of expressing themselves. To a great degree, I would contend, this is due to the fact that the traditional white middle-class subculture of the university is more foreign to them. It is thus our responsibility as educators to address ourselves to the anxieties and concerns of the new majority students — to help them "find their voices" — without alienating or disenfranchising more traditional students in the classroom.

At the same time, many college educators are coming to recognize the importance of writing as pedagogy. In part, of course, this reflects the aforementioned skill deficits that have drawn so much attention. But the very need to teach so many students remedial writing and communication skills has begged the question of why this is important, and opened up a healthy — in my view — discussion on the role of writing throughout the curriculum.

As many of our colleagues in English departments have been trying to tell us for some time now, and some of us have known, or are just starting to learn, writing for and in college classes is neither a product nor a purely technical skill; rather, it is a non-linear, recursive *process*. Of course we sociologists have always asserted that language, as symbolic communication, is shaped by its cultural context. Words, we stress, are given meanings by human actors, both as senders and receivers. What we haven't done, I think (or at least we haven't done it well), is apply this sociological insight about the world at large to our own courses and classrooms. It is time for us to acknowledge that a great deal of the emphasis that we give to common complaints about students' lack of writing skills is misplaced; in fact, it is largely backwards. Instead of stating that students need to "learn to write," we need to be providing more opportunities for them to "write to learn."

No one can deny, of course, the role of proper grammar and punctuation in readability, and the contribution to precision of meaning of standard paragraph structure and the use of complete sentences and correct spelling. To have these as our primary focus, however, misses the point.

What do we really want students to learn in their sociology courses? I think most of us would agree that we want students to emerge from these courses with a mastery of basic sociological concepts and theories and an ability to apply them appropriately to their lives and society. Since the 1960s many, if not most, sociologists have wholeheartedly subscribed to C. Wright Mills' dictum that sociology should help us to "understand personal troubles as public issues." While it is easy enough for us to articulate the social forces and structures behind public issues, it is much harder, in my experience, to assist students in making the connections to their own lives, or "personal troubles." Yet, the establishment of those links is absolutely necessary if we are to move students, in Perry's familiar scheme¹, from simplistic dualism to committed relativism.

This is where writing can play a valuable role. Done properly, writing in sociology courses can not only help students to work through their understanding of the basic concepts, but it can provide the space for them to think through the application of these concepts to their own lives. Moreover, writing assignments can be tailored to affirm both the legitimacy and the necessity of students developing intelligent, informed opinions of their own. In short, writing can help students to "find their voices."

The difficulty of this task, though, should not be underestimated. In some of my first forays into student writing other than essay exams and term papers, I quickly discovered that unexpectedly large numbers of students were unable (unwilling?) to discuss personal experiences and express personal values. For instance, in one assignment students were asked to state their view of human nature and their basic values. I carefully stressed that I would *not* grade them on their views, but on only the extensiveness and clarity with which they stated them. Yet many students — even after two or three rewrites — insisted on writing detached, seemingly "objective" "social problem analysis" papers. They apparently felt that their real opinion was unimportant for purposes of their education. More telling perhaps was my experience with senior-level students. Asked to develop personal criteria by which to evaluate theories and policies, they responded that this was too difficult because no one had ever really asked them their own opinion before and they had no skill in expressing it.

Casting about for a way to get students to connect their own stories to the content of sociological analysis, I came upon *The Call of Stories* by Robert Coles (1989). Author of the acclaimed *Women of Crisis* and *Children of Crisis* book series, Coles is an acknowledged expert at listening to people's voices as they tell their own stories. In *The Call of Stories*, Coles describes his experience teaching in graduate medical, law and business schools, where his "textbooks" consisted entirely of short stories and novels. Through their writing and discussion, students were able to develop insights, make connections and render moral judgments that often surprised Coles in their depth and richness. His book stands as both a compelling argument as well as a resource for using literature in social science courses as a way of helping students to "find their voices."

One advantage of using fiction in sociology courses is that it is more immediately accessible to students. Because the stories have been "engineered" by the authors to be emotionally compelling, they draw students in and involve them in ways that are unavailable to even the best discursive writing. Indeed, this affective component represents one of the most neglected areas of college teaching, in my opinion. And precisely because the stories *are* fiction, students often seem far more willing to seriously consider the sociological issues raised than they would be from documentary nonfiction.

Another advantage of using fiction in sociology courses is that it provides instructors with an opportunity to ensure the representation in their classrooms of a variety of voices from divergent viewpoints. While this process and its results are pedagogically desirable under any circumstances, they become absolutely necessary in the diverse, multicultural environment of contemporary colleges and universities. Exposing students to multiple voices not only expands their sociological understanding, but it legitimates the diversity of life experiences and viewpoints we now encounter within the classroom. It empowers less-traditional students by acknowledging that their stories are worth listening to too.

But, you ask, how does a sympathetic teacher identify and locate quality fiction that represents diverse viewpoints? Fortunately, an excellent resource has recently become available in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lauter 1990).² Over twelve years in the making, this two-volume work (each about 2500 pages, available separately) represents a progressive response to the "canon wars" that have been fought in literature circles over the last decade or two (c.f. Lauter 1983). In addition to the acknowledged "classics" (largely written by white males), *The Heath Anthology* attempts to integrate the voices and stories of the excluded — African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and female and working-class writers of all ethnic persuasions — into an exploration of the American experience. The result is a rich treasury of sociological themes.

Even while acknowledging the value of doing so, many sociology instructors are going to be uncomfortable with the thought of having students write about literary works. "I am not a literary critic," you say. This may be true, but you don't have to be. After all, you are using the literature to illustrate and provoke thinking about *sociological* themes, and this is something you already know. Discussions of plot, theme and characterization are secondary, if not mostly irrelevant to this purpose. (See the Appendix for two examples of this approach.) On the other hand, we might actually benefit, in our teaching and our own writing, by a better understanding of the insights of literature instructors. The more I talk with colleagues in literature, the more I am convinced that much of what they teach is actually sociology. Couldn't both we *and* they benefit from a fruitful exchange of ideas and insights, then? Resources to aid in this process include the excellent and extensive *Teacher's Manual* that accompanies *The Heath Anthology*.

Another objection that can be raised is the potentially enormous time commitment involved in assigning and evaluating a significant amount of writing in our courses. In times of rising course sizes and increasing class loads, this is no idle protest. Yet, the evaluation of writing does not have to be excessively burdensome for either the students or the instructor. First of all, not all student writing has to be evaluated for a grade — student journals, for example, where the emphasis is on the student processing the information and providing a thoughtful response and the instructor providing substantive feedback on that response. Where grading is deemed to be necessary and appropriate, it can be significantly streamlined by stating the specific assignment clearly, and providing relatively simple and explicit criteria for evaluation. (Examples will be found in the Appendix.)

I don't for a minute wish to suggest that this is the only, or even the best way to address writing in the sociology curriculum. But providing opportunities for students to find and express their voices, and to acknowledge the legitimacy of diverse "stories" is a way of dealing with two of the most pressing pedagogical issues we face today: improving the writing/thinking skills of our students, and recognizing and dealing with the increasing diversity of our students.

Notes

¹William Perry (1970) argued that student intellectual development ideally moves through a hierarchy of four stages:

Dualism. Meaning and knowledge are clearly divided into two realms: truth vs. falsity, good vs. bad, us vs. them, etc. The right answers can be unequivocally determined, and the authorities can provide them.

Multipism. There exists a multiplicity of opinions, and only purely arbitrary distinctions can be made among them. All knowledge is equally valid, and truth is in the eye of the beholder.

Relativism. While a diversity of values, opinions, etc. exists, our understanding of them must be qualitative — i.e., sensitive to context. Comparisons and contrasts can be made in this light.

Committed Relativism. Difficult decisions and commitments are made in light of, and while sensitive to, the relativistic nature of knowledge. The student chooses a position that is right for themselves.

²A pioneering, discipline-specific attempt to use fiction to understand sociology was Clowers and Mori (1977). Interestingly, not a single one of the 32 selections in that book is by a woman writer.

References

- Clowers, Myles L. and Steven H. Mori. 1977. *Understanding Sociology Through Fiction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lauter, Paul. 1983. "Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties." *Feminist Studies* 9:3 Fall. pp. 435-63.
- Lauter, Paul (Gen. Ed.). 1990. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 2 volumes. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath.
- Perry, William. 1970. *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt.

Appendix

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1

Length: 1-2 pages

Due: Wednesday, September 4

Purpose: This assignment is designed to allow you to develop skill in applying the sociological imagination.

Assignment: Read the short story "Lullaby" by Leslie Silko and answer each of the following questions:

- What are some of the social forces and/or conditions that affected the lives of Ayah and Chato?
- What role does language play in the experiences of Ayah and Chato in this story?
- Can you relate the experience of the characters in this story to any aspect of your own life? Why or why not?

Evaluation: Papers will be evaluated on how thoroughly and thoughtfully each question is answered and the extent to which you employ the sociological imagination as it is described in class and in the readings.

Grading: Papers will be graded according to the five-point scale in the course outline.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT #4

Length: 1-2 pages

Due: Wednesday, October 16

Purpose: To help you gain skill in understanding and applying basic sociological concepts.

Assignment: Read the short story "Nineteen Fifty-Five" by Alice Walker.

- In narrative form, discuss the relationship between Traynor and Gracie Mae using each of the following concepts:

norms	status
values	reference group
subculture	

- Using your best sociological imagination, state what you think is the basic sociological message of this story.

Evaluation: Papers will be evaluated on the extent to which the basic sociological concepts are appropriately and thoughtfully applied to the analysis of this story.

Grading: Papers will be graded according to the five-point scale in the course outline.

GRADING

The writing assignments will be graded on the following 5-point scale:

- 5 pts. — Outstanding use and application of course materials; comprehensive coverage
 - 4 pts. — Above-average use and application of course material, but some details are lacking
 - 3 pts. — Good use & application of course materials, but there are large gaps/omissions
 - 2 pts. — Some appropriate application of course materials, but omissions are significant
 - 1 pt. — Some effort made to use course materials, but major flaws are present

 - 0 pts. — Missed the point altogether or misunderstood the assignment completely
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