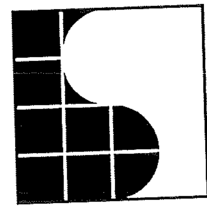

ASA Resource Materials for Teaching

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"Teaching as Modeling Inquiry"

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I. A Student-Centered Approach to TA Training

When the associate chair of Northwestern University's Department of Sociology asked me to organize a seminar on teaching for our first-year graduate students, I was honored, and also taken aback. Although I had teaching experience--a TA in four courses and instructor in four of my own, including a seminar on inequality, mid-size courses on field methods and on education, and a large (120-student) lecture course on *social interaction--how, I wondered, could I presume to teach others how to teach?*

I accepted the seminar, with the understanding that *my objective would be to help participants develop and articulate their goals as teachers*, rather than to try and impose my own. Because I believed that I could express my own teaching priorities, and relate them more broadly to my identity and agenda as a sociologist, I hoped that I could stimulate others to follow suit.

This student/TA-centered approach was natural, given my position relative to the other seminar members: Despite my being roughly ten years older than the entering graduate students, as a Ph.D. candidate I could not claim clear advantages of experience or of academic status which mentors typically enjoy. My appeal was not to authority, but to empathy for the practical and intellectual issues which, as new teachers, we all faced. Recounting and reflecting on this experience should also be useful, however, to more senior mentors, working to enhance the quality of teaching among graduate students. Any effective approach to TA training needs to take into account the difficult, often conflicting, pressures that surround this component of a broader initiation into academic life.

So, what I have to say reflects a broader set of concerns which, though germane to teaching, extend beyond it. These include:

- the need to reconcile TA assignments with students' course work and emerging intellectual biographies;
- the role of sociology in liberal arts education, since TAs mostly teach non-majors;
- uses of diverse sources, in popular media and the humanities, in teaching sociology.

My premises, in turn, were that

- graduate students and undergraduates alike are especially receptive to finding personal relevancy in sociology;
- teaching should involve *modeling inquiry*, rather than unilaterally passing down received knowledge; and, finally,
- as teachers we need to develop a broader rationale for selecting teaching materials from the array that are available and familiar to ourselves and our students.

I'll expand on and illustrate these ideas below, provide some sources which I found helpful, and indicate how the seminar was received. The seminar had no rigid syllabus; I wrote a series of "memos" to students (available on request), to clarify my thinking, and asked students to write several short response papers to spur discussion.

There are many fine sources on the techniques of classroom instruction (e.g., McKeachie 1986), and on the politics and philosophy of pedagogy (e.g., Shor 1992; Freire 1970). Though helpful, they seemed to me either too procedural or too abstract to facilitate the kind of individual reflection and creativity I hoped to foster. Also, with few exceptions (e.g., Goldschmidt and Wilson n.d.), they are not specific to sociology, and so can't relate teaching strategies to distinctive disciplinary problems.

During a planning meeting weeks before the seminar began, all participants identified topics for discussion. My position was that students could best define "good teaching" in relation to their own intellectual priorities, but that these first needed to be drawn out. That is, teachers can choose to emphasize any of several legitimate goals, including the transmission of substantive content, creating an interactive learning environment, developing undergraduates' ability to analyze issues sociologically, or sharing their own analytic or aesthetic "touchstones" in the literature (Stinchcombe 1986). Though not

mutually exclusive, these various goals do require teachers consciously to consider strategies and trade-offs.

However, these decisions are all the more difficult to focus on, because of external pressures which students feel most strongly early in their graduate careers; beginning graduate students often feel overwhelmed by demands of learning theory, research methods, and sub-fields, not to mention securing funding and faculty advisors. This period of initiation, often experienced as *estrangement* from concerns which first draw many into sociology (Wellin 1994; Reinharz 1984), often leads graduate students to form a culture geared more toward managing uncertainty and competing faculty demands than toward their own, distinctive identities as sociologists. This is a source of difficulty--and often attrition--in graduate programs, and can be an obstacle to the reflexive stance I see as essential for strong teaching.

Practical implications of this problem were evident from the start of the seminar. I asked members to write two pages, one devoted to their worst fears as teachers, the other to their fondest hopes. Woven through the responses--filled with humor and ironic exaggeration--were fears about such issues as mastering course material; how to handle questions; maintaining control during discussions of controversial issues; boundaries of self-disclosure in the classroom; undergraduates' indifference to sociology; and how to stimulate discussion.

Not being directly encouraged to connect TA duties with their central sociological interests, graduate students understandably tend not to see teaching as a way of integrating and expressing those interests. However, this potential opportunity for TAs coincides with undergraduates' need for an organizing perspective through which to make sense of so fractious a field as sociology. In an early discussion memo I wrote, "As a TA, you'll be called upon to introduce and relate many concepts and findings. The pedagogical challenge is to make them cohere in some way that approximates disciplinary wholeness. Since there is not one image or logic of wholeness shared among sociologists, we must either try to provide one, or, to mine the field's rich tradition of controversy. Seen from the latter perspective, an introductory text book is more a truce than an expression of consensus."

II. Multiple Agendas in TA Training

It is as true of Northwestern's as of other programs that TA training is constrained by limitations of faculty members' time and energy and of departmental resources. Even given college-wide standards and policies regarding TA-ships, the burden of carrying them out rests at the departmental level. Previously, our seminar had been attached to the department's introductory course, for which first-year graduate students serve as TAs. Seminar time had been loosely divided, then, between broad pedagogical issues, and tasks (such as preparing discussion questions and objective exams) attendant to teaching "intro" to several hundred students per quarter. Under this arrangement, there were tensions between two seminar agendas--one, to serve as a forum for free exchange of ideas about teaching and, two, to carry out administrative work related to the mass lecture course. It seemed this tension could best be resolved if the two agendas were disentangled. So, we ran the seminar independent of the introductory course, and though students were welcome to discuss TA matters, the first agenda was given priority.

This is not to deny the importance of TAs serving mass lecture courses, which are a major source, both of funding for graduate students and of undergraduate majors. It **is** to suggest that administrative or departmental interests in TA training may well differ from those of graduate students, and that mentors' role is partly to recognize and mediate these conflicts. Success in this role is more likely when:

- TAs are formally involved in planning training activities;
- mentors are candid about the administrative (versus pedagogical) obligations TAs inherit with their position; and
- evaluation of TA performance includes faculty and peers alike, and formally ties teaching to evaluation of students' progress in graduate school.

Of course, it is difficult to define and assess the place of teaching as a dimension of scholarly work among students when, usually, there is no parallel system in place for faculty (see Jencks and Reisman 1977:531-539).

III. Teaching as Modeling Inquiry

I believe that many problems in TA training can be addressed by approaching teaching as the *modeling of inquiry*. That is, even the best-prepared and most conscientious new teachers (especially TAs) are bound to feel vulnerable about their command of subject matter. Though important, perhaps substantive findings or sub-fields are no more important for teachers to impart than are basic perspectives and modes of inference in sociological inquiry. Helping undergraduates pose and pursue questions shifts the teachers' burden, from being an omniscient source of knowledge to being a constructive inquisitor, leading students systematically to question taken-for-granted aspects of social life. And what more efficient way to convey this process of inquiry than for TAs to use their own research exemplars and experiences as source materials?

To demonstrate such an approach, and to expose myself to the same scrutiny I was urging on them, I shared a videotape of myself leading a discussion among 30 students in my course on "school and society." During the session shown, the class was reacting to an ethnography by a former Harlem grade school teacher, which focuses on the implications of racial and cultural differences between teachers and students for the latters' investment of effort in school (Rosenfeld 1971). My objective in the discussion had been to introduce the ethnographic perspective and the utility of seeing "multiple realities" operating, even in such a familiar and ostensibly sheltered locale as an elementary school. Most of my own research has been ethnographic, and the discussion had allowed me to bring up parallels (e.g., conflicts between bureaucratic and institutional aims) in my own work.

Of course, watching the video also revealed my lapses in attention or judgment, missed chances for continuity or closure in guiding discussion. My hope in showing and discussing the video was to ease any anxiety the TAs had about making "mistakes" in the classroom. Also, we dispensed with the notion that discussion-oriented teaching is possible only with small groups.

At my invitation, several seminar members demonstrated specific classroom strategies, conveying their own, distinctive perspectives on teaching matters. I asked that students use presentations as occasions to demonstrate, rather than merely to describe, teaching objective styles. Memorably, one student who admires jazz used that musical idiom as a vehicle with which to elaborate many angles of sociological inquiry: its social and occupational organization; its distinctive cultural location vis-a-vis' racial and geographic boundaries; its shared expressive style which unites players and listeners alike--all were implied in a sociology of jazz. This was effective, both as a substantive "case" and as a way to allow this TA to model his vivid engagement with sociology. Other student presentations dealt with humor in teaching; small-group discussion techniques; and reflections on academic freedom by a student from the People's Republic of China, comparing the U.S. with her native country.

IV. Potential Problems

To regard teaching as modeling inquiry and to expose oneself while teaching as a particular individual with intellectual passions and preferences, can be risky. Seminar members were quick to see the trade-offs between disclosure and authority in the classroom, and between spontaneity and control. Several pointed out that the risks of "engaged" teaching are more easily borne by those with academic status and rank which TAs lack. So, how are TAs to weigh potential risks and benefits?

In this connection we read and discussed Bernard Beck's provocative (1972) article "Toward A Poor Classroom." A Northwestern sociologist who has also sustained a career as a professional actor, Beck is especially open to the performative dynamics of classroom teaching (see also McLaren 1986). In calling for a "poor classroom," he draws on a theatrical metaphor of minimalism (versus elaborate technical presentation); he invites teachers to transcend the staid, hierarchical protocol of the classroom, which can deaden students' sense of surprise and investment, and to incur the risks that come with genuine scholarly interchange. He writes,

> The classroom is a theater. People come there to perform and present for the enrichment of their audiences. They must find their voices and their bodies to make their words and meanings available...[T]o call the classroom a theater is not to denigrate it, but to exalt it. As in the theater, not every popular performance is good and vice versa; and not all the tricks and techniques of the

trained performer are as satisfying as the moments of human truth which are discovered without warning (1972:31).

The value of the article, and of Beck's reflections on it to the seminar after 20 years more of teaching, was to clarify the potential benefits, over the familiar risks, of such an approach to pedagogy. Again, the underlying point is not to contrive a theatrical persona, but rather to access and express one's distinctive personal and intellectual energies.

We also connected the issue of teaching styles with gender norms. To the extent that young women feel compelled to reproduce a style of teaching rooted in "masculine," positivist approaches to scholarship, the potential for estrangement is heightened. For example, Statham and associates (1991) found that women college teachers worry more than males do about establishing classroom authority, and are more likely to personalize classroom discourse (referring to their own and to students' lives) as a way of "building bridges between the students' experiences and the material" (1991:129). Given the gender parity in the current cohort of sociology graduate students, and the critical reaction of many undergraduates to "personalized" teaching, as somehow less legitimate or "scientific," it will be increasingly important for us to consider the risks and rewards of engaged teaching.

On the affirmative side, to use one's own experience as a catalyst in teaching is also to recognize the same potential in one's students. Hardly a new idea, decades ago Everett Hughes wrote of *teaching as field work* (1984:566-576), making the point that students' language, work experiences, and career anxieties all express something of the socio-historical moment of their lives, and so raise questions to which sociology may hold insights. In a seminar memo I concurred, suggesting that, "In trying to turn undergraduates on to the value of sociology, I think fewer can be reached by direct appeals than through identifying relevant problems to which sociology can then be applied."

V. Teaching Through Exemplars

Earlier I used the term "aesthetic" to capture part of what is distinctive to sociological discourse. I'm less concerned here with broad aesthetic or literary *conventions* which have shaped sociological traditions (see e.g., Atkinson 1990), than with how books, films, and research experiences impact on one's own understanding and that of various audiences (Nisbet 1976). In the context of the seminar, I argued that *new teachers, seeking to elicit thoughtful and complicated responses from students, should try to reflect on and articulate those influential sources, or exemplars, which most affected them.* Stinchcombe writes:

> ...the reason we need such touchstones is that first class science functions with aesthetic standards as well as with logical and empirical standards...No philosophy of science tells you where the chill of excitement at the beauty of the thing comes from. We may not ourselves know how to produce the beauty we admire...[but] if we embed the examples of excellence in our minds, as concrete manifestations of aesthetic principles we want to respect in our own work...we may very well manage to work at a higher level than we can teach (1986:352).

For me, Goffman's *Asylums* has been a powerful exemplar of empirical, humanistic sociology. His voice in the book was at once "objective," and filled with moral indignation; he concretely documented a place and set of cultural adaptations, yet from a perspective that was politically-charged (see Fine and Martin 1990). I encouraged others to write brief synopses and discussions of their own exemplars, and to expand the range of things which can be discussed as exemplars: in a world where students are bombarded with popular media--visual, musical, textual--it seems essential that as teachers we be able to accommodate more diverse materials. This will increasingly be true as college faculty seek to integrate the social sciences with the humanities, as appears to be taking place even in large, research-oriented institutions.

In this vein, I provided seminar members with some "reviews" of ethnographic and documentary films I had used in my courses. For instance, the documentarian Frederick Wiseman has explored the "underside" of American institutions in such *cinema verite'* films as "Titicut Follies" (about a state mental institution) and "High School." Because the films are free of explanatory narration, they allow students vicariously to engage in "field work," to adopt an inductive, ethnographic stance toward familiar

social settings. As a group we watched and critiqued some films relevant for the teaching of race relations, and discussed the implicit analysis in such theatrical films as Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*. [Also see the ASA Instructional Guides to Films and Video Sources.]

Also relevant was experience I had presenting ethnographic work through performance (Wellin 1996), and Becker's (1986) article "Telling About Society," in which he develops a conceptual and organizational scheme for comparing various representational forms for what they reveal about the social. In sum, rather than speak generally, say, about the virtues of using films in teaching, or compile lists of sources in different media, we in the seminar tried to pin down connections between particular sociological perspectives and goals, and various representational forms.

VI. Reflection and Evaluation

In conclusion, the topics I tried to incorporate in the seminar presume no special importance or virtue. What value they had came, I think, from their common roots in a position seeking to integrate teaching with graduate students' emerging professional interests and identities, and which finds affinity between that developmental process and undergraduates' desire to see personal relevance in sociology. More generally, it has been found in occupations from medicine (e.g., Becker and Geer 1958) to sociology (e.g., Bates 1967) that the process of entry involves dilemmas of commitment; orienting TA training to graduate students' intellectual biographies provides affirmation at a stage of professional socialization when autonomy and idealism are especially tenuous.

If we are to engage strong undergraduate majors, we are not well-served by teaching strategies which feature recitation of prior research. Instead, we can demonstrate how our disciplinary perspective both accommodates and transcends passionate, personal viewpoints. Likewise, if we want to instill confidence and creativity in new teachers, we are not well-served by neglecting the experiences and interests which drive them to pursue sociology as a career.

What was the verdict on our seminar from the participants at Northwestern? It was mixed, at best, and few members responded to my request for written evaluations. One member wrote that "The presentation of multiple teaching styles, through the assorted readings, the sharing of our own personal essays, and our seminar presentations were invaluable for understanding the wide open nature of teaching--how each teacher can impart knowledge in his/her own individual fashion." Another noted the benefits of seeing, from the outset, that "even within our relatively small cohort (numbering a dozen) there was great diversity in attitudes and philosophies toward one's role as a teacher."

More critically, there was frustration with the "impractical" tone of many discussions, and with the lack of "structure" from one session to the next. Some members wished we would have covered topics such as syllabi preparation, and how to elicit student-feedback (a task for which formal evaluations can be a crude gauge). And one student complained that the weekly memos I wrote place undue emphasis on my own responses to readings and issues.

Part of the problem is one of timing: in Northwestern's program, as in most, the first year is packed with required courses, faculty presentations, evaluations of student progress, social adjustments--not to mention forging a life in a new city.
I recognized these pressures and minimized outside reading and writing in the seminar, yet insisted that, on a rotating basis, students shape the agenda of most meetings. Understandably, their time and initiative were limited. Ironically, the broader approach I took might have been better-received by students later in their graduate careers, but that was precluded by other constraints in the departmental time-table. As with "multiple agendas" on the faculty side, TAs' finite and conflicting demands need to be appreciated if any effort to enhance their training is to succeed.

In concluding, it's useful to point out that, beyond the first year, TAs tend to work closely with faculty, in courses that are more focused topically than is the introductory course. These later assignments provide TAs exposure to various practical tasks and approaches to teaching, which they can choose to adopt or to reject. Knowing this, I decided that our one seminar devoted to teaching should privilege TAs' emerging ideas, over general classroom techniques. Naturally, the success of those later

TA assignments, and of the overall approach I've described, depends on a departmental culture in which faculty are both concerned and candid about their own teaching.

I continue to believe that many strong teachers share an ability to fuse their teaching with the rest of their academic work and, therefore, that in our attempts to train teachers we should foster, rather than negate, the distinctive commitments which sustain sociological careers inside and outside the classroom.

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