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STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES AS TEXT IN TEACHING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION*

Although we may claim our students are developing a sociological imagination, it is quite another to realize this in our teaching and our students’ performances. Through a professional move from teaching in Chicago to Maine, I was led to rethink how I teach the sociological imagination. I argue that if we are to teach the sociological imagination, we must consider our students’ contextual backgrounds more carefully and use student’s lived experiences as “text” from which they exercise and develop their sociological imaginations. I illustrate this approach with an assignment designed to use students’ experiences from rural and small towns in Maine. The assignment challenges them to use their sociological perspective to look at the relationship between “private troubles” and “public issues,” and to demonstrate using a sociological imagination to reflect on their biographies.

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WHEN THE ASA TASK FORCE on the Undergraduate Major released its report in 2004, it came as no surprise that they would ground their thinking about the undergraduate major as a liberal learning experience. As they argue, the undergraduate major is about “opening the mind.” Our students should learn to critically question the customary and their own assumptions about the social world in which they live. They claim that if “[students’] ongoing learning is based on the template of understanding the importance of social structure and culture—the sociological perspective—then we will have succeeded in providing an education worth having and in producing citizens and workers who will be of continuing value to their communities and employers” (ASA 2004).

This parallels the general claims made about the nature of the liberal learning experience, and this should be expected.

The Task Force worked jointly with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). AAC&U has argued continuously that a liberal learning experience is grounded in challenging students to look critically at their assumptions, to subject ideas and claims to critical examination, and to empathize with and welcome the diversity of ideas and cultures that characterize our communities locally, regionally, and globally. AAC&U (2007) characterizes the liberal learning experience as how our students “understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that . . . [they] . . . master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that . . . [they] . . . cultivate a respect for truth; that . . . [they] . . . recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that . . . [they] . . . explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.” The Task Force’s claims appear to tailor AAC&U’s more general claims about the liberal learning experience contextually within the framing of the undergraduate

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sociology major.

For many of us, the arguments made by the Task Force are ones we take for granted. Within their claims, we clearly see the tacit allusion to Mills’s *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills’s (1959) “sociological imagination” is perhaps our best expression of sociology as liberal learning. Developing a sociological imagination, as he outlines it, challenges us to develop ethical, moral, and intellectual skills that we can use to critically understand the complexity of society and reflect on how society has influenced our “personal history.” It is important to note that Mills (1959) was critiquing schools of thought within social science and positing an alternative (p. 19). He was making an argument about how we should pursue the field as a profession. He was not talking about pedagogy or liberal learning. When we make our claims about teaching to the sociological imagination or fostering our students’ sociological imaginations, we do so from a subtext in Mills’s argument that speaks to the liberal learning experience. While Mills (1959) does point out that the sociological imagination “is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities” (p. 15), turning this into coursework and pedagogical strategies has been left up to us.

**OUR CLAIMS ABOUT TEACHING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

As the pages of *Teaching Sociology* witness, it is one thing to make the claim about the impact of developing a sociological imagination and quite another to claim our students realize this through our teaching and demonstrate this in their performances in our classes. The sociological imagination can be, admittedly, an ambiguous concept. We seem to “know” it when we see it, but we find it a bit more difficult to explain it to everyone’s agreement or translate it into common pedagogical content and practice (Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995). We can pull out common themes that seem to resonate with many. First, when we speak about helping students develop their sociological imagination, it appears we are speaking about how we sharpen student’s critical thinking skills with a sociological lens to think through central problems and issues in society. As importantly, we hope our students apply these concepts in their own social world by developing self-reflexivity and critically re-examining their social interactions (Crowes 2000; Kaufman 1997; Weast 1996). Second, using a problem-based learning approach strengthens the odds that students will begin to understand, work with, and develop their “sociological imaginations” (Brouillette and Turner 1992; Kaufman 1997; Renzulli, Aldrich and Reynolds 2003; Tynes 2001). In large part, what we find is that this approach challenges students to think with what they know; think with the concepts they have learned; test their interpretations against the interpretations of others; and critically look at the assumptions they carry with them. Third, there is a commonality of assignments, ranging from using personal biography to popular culture to engage students’ interests in class, to illustrate sociological concepts and perspectives, and to show the relevance of our claim about the sociological imagination in our students’ daily lives (Adams 1986; Bidwell 1995; Crowes 2000; Kaufman 1997; Misra 2000; Prendergast 1986; Renzulli et al. 2003; Tynes 2001). Finally, there seems to be an underlying sense that some students “get it” easier. It appears that the more varied the “life experiences” of the students, the easier it seems to foster their “sociological imagination” (Eckstein et al. 1995; Haddad and Lieberman 2002; O’Flaherty 1992; Tynes 2001). It tacitly appears that our students’ “lived experiences” provide us with a wealth of material to illustrate and explain the vocabulary, concepts, and methods of the sociological perspective and give students a way to explicate their lived experiences.

But do these, taken together, provide us a...
composite of what we mean when we claim we foster our students’ sociological imaginations in our courses? I pose this question deliberately. The majority of our students are not going to be pursuing graduate studies. And, at many schools the majority of the undergraduate students we teach may not be pursuing sociology as their undergraduate field of study. Many are in our courses as part of general education or as ancillary courses required for their academic field of study. This raises a rather interesting puzzle. It is one thing to think about what we do in class when preparing future sociologists and discussing the “sociological imagination” as a school of thought. But it is another thing to think about how our courses affect students in general, their liberal learning experiences, and the role our courses play in “priming” their sociological imagination as part of their liberal learning. These two may overlap, but they are not necessarily the same. Laff (2005) has argued “we cannot say for certain that there is a relationship between what we perceive in what we teach and the lives our students lead” (p. 8). We want to claim that the study of sociology fosters our students’ sociological imagination and affects their liberal learning experiences because it has affected ours. But what may be true for us may not be true of our students. Graff (2003) warned us of this. Our students are very good at doing school. Indeed, doing school well does not mean our students engage in a liberal learning experience or develop the “quality of mind” we might characterize as their sociological imagination in our courses.

**USING A COMPARATIVE LENS TO RETHINK HOW I TEACH**

I began to reflect on this when I moved from an urban campus in Chicago to a small liberal arts college in rural Maine. As I planned courses, I found, like many who have made a similar move, I had to rethink assumptions that I took for granted with my students in Chicago. My Chicago students came with diverse daily experiences. Minimally, 20 percent of them had immigrated to the U.S. Classes reflected a wide range of diverse economic, political, and social milieus. Students “rubbed elbows” with people from many different backgrounds. The majority of them had heard about Ramadan simply by living in an international city and interacting with different religious minority groups. They brought to class a “fertile ground” of experiences I could reference to illustrate, explain, and teach the sociological concepts that make up a sociological perspective. As Eckstein et al. (1995), Haddad and Lieberman (2002), O’Flaherty (1992), and Tynes (2001) argued, these students seemed to “get” sociological concepts easier. When I assigned a paper posing a sociological problem, the students had much to talk about because of their diverse experiences, so I assumed I was fostering their sociological imaginations.

However, for my students in Maine cultural insularity is more common (Goodnough 2007). I have both racial homogeneity and overall economic homogeneity. Approximately 60 percent are from rural or small towns; many have family member concentrated in industries such as mill/shipyard labor, contracting and building, teaching, healthcare (nursing), and small businesses. These characteristics alone do not necessarily lead to insularity (we can find insularity in ethnic enclaves in a large city) but my students reference their limited exposure to diversity. In Maine, 97 percent of the population is white from non-Hispanic backgrounds (United States Census Bureau 2000). Even with the well-documented growing trend of immigrant and refugee groups coming into Maine, the overwhelming majority of my students neither have had contact with these groups nor other racial minorities. And while they watch MTV and VH1 and have other ways to “see” others, most of my students acknowledge and understand that their community structure and composition have limited their experiences with different groups,
lifestyles, and ideologies. My students often preface personal experiences with statements such as “I come from a small town and had never experienced “X” before . . . .” My students in Maine clearly did not bring with them the same “fertile ground” as my students in Chicago. I could not take advantage of the same types of contextual examples I knew my urban students would encounter simply by living in an urban environment. For examples to prove relevant to the lives of my current students, I would have to figure out what my students’ lives were like, coming from communities in New England. It was when I engaged in this exercise, that I was led to question how I use assignments intended to have students understand and work with sociological concepts and methods. Teaching in Maine provided me an invaluable comparative perspective.

Let me briefly illustrate this issue with a common assignment some of us use: the “On the Day I was Born” paper. (For a thorough explanation of this assignment, see Adams 1986; O’Flaherty 1992.) The purpose of this assignment is to introduce students to the first key component of the sociological imagination: the individual and society individuals inhabit, and how their “biography” may have been influenced and shaped by “history.” Playing off David Newman’s (1997) assignment in Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life, I ask students to describe some of the major events happening locally, nationally and globally on the day they were born. I also ask them to talk to family members or people who were old enough to remember the day they were born. Then, I ask specific questions that help them to speculate on how national and global social forces shaped who they are today. I used this assignment regularly with students in Chicago, and for the most part, students seemed to “get it,” albeit with some struggle. I assumed my students in Maine would also “get it.” This was not the case. The questions I received from students about the assignment, as well as their responses, revealed that this basic assignment was very much a challenge. I received many papers with comments like “When I talked to my mom about the day I was born, she said that the only thing she was concerned about around the time of my birth was me. She doesn’t remember anything about world events.” In some ways, the assignment reflected why Maine has been characterized as insular and it became a “go fetch” piece where students simply gathered information. They did not understand how to think with the concepts they learned in class about the influences at play in their lives when they were born and how those influences shaped their growing up. I assumed the difference, compared to the Chicago students, was that a larger percentage of them were first-generation college students and coming from rural backgrounds.

O’Flaherty (1992) argues that one challenge to this assignment for rural students is the difficulty they have in getting information. But O’Flaherty refers to the challenge of getting “print” material from local newspapers for the assignment. The Chicago Tribune is the local newspaper in Chicago, but I asked those students to look at national newspapers on microfilm. My students in Maine have access to the Internet and Internet library resources which gives them the same access to material that my students in Chicago would look at regarding the days they were born. After all, my first year students were born in 1987. Even so, for some reason, they struggled to see how their biography could have been shaped by history within a social context.

Others have commented on how students’ upbringing, social class and education may play a role. This dynamic could be further affected depending on the educational level of their parents. But Eckstein et al. (1995) note that this might not be the case. They point out that students from less privileged backgrounds appear to develop their “sociological voice” and apply concepts easier and more quickly. However, I found that in Chicago, regardless of students’ and their families’ social class and educational
background, they “knew” what was going on in the world. The students’ parents and families often could elaborate on events surrounding their child’s birthday. But I did not find this to be the case in Maine.

If social class and education do not explain all the differences and if I could not assume that this was just because students were first generation college students and coming from rural backgrounds, where are these differences grounded? It is plausible to argue that the difference is linked to lived experience. First generation immigrant students in Chicago had plenty to talk about in their “on the day I was born” papers, simply because their lived experiences were diverse, and they and their families could not help but be aware of social, economic, and political events that had affected their lives. As important, the diverse class make-up of my Chicago courses played itself out in differences in opinion during class discussion. In Maine, it appears I could not draw on this kind of lived experience or diverse class make-up. What I learned overall is that if I wanted to use my students’ lived experiences to help them understand and use sociological concepts, I would have to consider how to construct examples and assignments that would resonate with their lives. Because my students in Maine have different lived experiences than my students in Chicago, I needed my assignments to tap into that difference.

To incorporate their lived experiences as part of our class, I had to research the contexts of the communities in which they and I now lived. As I discovered, the decline in the manufacturing industry, a decrease in population, and an aging population are three major societal shifts to which many students can actually speak. They can speak to it because they experience it. Unlike my Chicago student, students in Maine are most likely from communities with limited job opportunities (U.S. Department of Labor 2007). In Maine when I lecture on the economy and how the economy affects families and communities, more students understand and comment on their experiences of the impact of a central employer cutting jobs. Many of them have expressed doubt about returning to their communities when they graduate because their communities lack work opportunities. These towns are also aging, and many students are preparing to work in areas that directly impact an older population, such as nursing or social work. Once I developed a context from their lived experiences and used that context to draw illustrations, my Maine students understood the concepts that I was trying to introduce.

This comparative lens led me to question something else. After I had adapted the examples I use to illustrate sociological concepts to those familiar to my students, I then began to question the effectiveness of simply replacing examples within my lectures, class discussions, and in assignments. Because students can identify and work with these concepts on exams or short essays, does this mean they are developing their sociological imaginations? I began to ask whether I was planning assignments that challenged my Maine students to think with these concepts to develop their sociological imagination or, as Eckstein et al. (1995) have pointed out, were my students learning only how to “voice” the concepts on the assignments (p. 361). Could this also have been the case with my students in Chicago? Did my Chicago students find it easier to learn concepts because of their diverse life experiences and easier to apply them on structured tests and assignments? As Eckstein et al. note, our tendency to use multiple choice tests, short answer, and structured assignments that ask students to apply concepts does not necessarily lead them to naturally develop a sociological imagination. Graff (2003) echoes this point with a University of Chicago student who noted “in social sciences I regurgitate” (p. 28). Were my urban students just doing “go fetch” work, but at a better level of academic sophistication?

CHALLENGING MY OWN ASSUMPTIONS

The litmus test came when I was working with a senior preparing her personal essay
for graduate school. This student is one we all would want in our classes—dedicated, bright and engaged. Her writing was excellent; her questions insightful; her class work outstanding. And, her Graduate Record Ex-
aminations scores qualified her for most of the top graduate programs. She understood most of the readings, used questions in class to clarify what she did not understand, and demonstrated that she understood the concepts on every type of assignment. For example, I assigned a paper on race and ethnicity. I asked the class to talk about their racial and ethnic backgrounds, and talk about the history of their families as an ethnic group, keeping in mind that everyone in my class was “white” except for one student. One challenge of the assignment was to get students to reflect on how complicated it is to talk about “whiteness” as a racial category. She was one of a few students to pinpoint the challenge of addressing “whiteness” as a racial category. She did not write a descriptive piece on her ethnic background but tried to understand the concepts we had discussed in class and to apply those concepts to the assignment. Would I be wrong to assume that because she could demonstrate her understanding of sociological concepts and could apply them to assignments that she was also gaining a sociological perspective and developing her sociological imagination? We all might make this assumption.

She asked me to read her personal statement for graduate study. Her interest is in gender and equity, and in her personal statement she could accurately apply sociological terminology. Trying to ground her interest personally, she wrote “I remember arguing with people as a young teen about the injustice of women being unable to fight in the front lines during war. Women need to be protected, they would argue. . . . But now I can explore the debate that argues that benevolent sexism is hardly any better than hostile sexism.” Clearly she understood concepts, and could apply them to well-structured problems. Her essay began with something quite personal and simple. She was one of the very few women to graduate from her high school and go to college. As she put it, “Students were perceived as failures by the school—men were ignored and women were expected to get pregnant early on and drop out.” She did very well in high school, graduated and left for college, wondering why so many of her friends had been forgotten by or lost in the system. Here was the ill-structured problem and the moment in her personal essay where she could demonstrate the palpable “feel” that one’s life has been affected by what Mills (1959) refers to as “public issues of social structure” (p. 8). She could demonstrate her sociological imagination by looking at the two-way relationship between “troubles” and “issues” that played out in her high school. This was a moment when her life could become “text.” But, she struggled to “put her finger on” the relationship when I first asked why she thought her friends were not graduating. She had a sense of the “what”—that many students were labeled and treated in certain ways by the educational system, even if those labels did not fit. I began to ask her questions: Why do you think certain groups of students were treated in different ways? Do you think that these students were making a purely personal choice, or do you think they were falling into roles they were projected to play? Why did many think that these girls’ futures were bleak and why didn’t the school try to intervene? Did these girls internalize this view of themselves? Why didn’t you internalize this view? I asked similar questions about the men in her high school. The point behind these questions was to prompt her to look at the two-way relationship between “troubles” and “issues.”

Asking her guiding questions challenged her to think with the sociological concepts and methods to understand her own experience within a social context. These questions pushed her to first look at “troubles” and then to look at “issues” that might be
affecting and impacting her personal biography and the biographies of her high school friends. These were her first steps to developing her sociological imagination. As Mills (1959) might argue, through the questions she was beginning to become “aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility” as she reflected on and thought about her personal and social realities (pp. 10-11, 192).

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND ILL-STRUCTURED PROBLEMS

My work with this student led me to rethink how I claim to teach to the sociological imagination, especially if I claim to do this effectively in my classes. What I realized is that the questions I asked this student were not the type of questions I outline for assignments or for in-class discussions on those assignments after they had been handed in. Those questions focused on applying concepts to a structured situation. The questions I was asking this student focused on seeing the interconnection between societal forces and her individual experiences. If my best student was struggling to see this interconnection, then I could be sure that all my students would be struggling. I was successful at finding connections from their experiences to illustrate and help them understand concepts. What was missing is that the types of assignments I prepared did not challenge my students to look at the relationship between troubles and issues.

To do this may in part rest in how we have our students engage “fuzzy” ill-structured problems we craft into our assignments. We begin this when we use examples from our students’ lived experiences to illustrate concepts we are trying to teach. But where we might be falling short is in our assignments. Once students demonstrate that they have mastered concepts, we may want to add into some assignments “ill-structured” problems. Structured problems have implied relationships between questions asked and answers looked for, and lend themselves to particular solutions that are testable and replicable. Ill-structured problems require evaluating a number of approaches, careful consideration of evidence, imagination of counterarguments, and the integration of information, concepts, and contexts, including how those have been influenced by values and attitudes (King and Kitchener 1994; Petraglia 1998; and Voss 1989). Ill-structured problems lend themselves to the types of learning activities that will help students, as Mills might argue, “To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility . . . to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux” (pp. 10-11). For Mills, this is critical if we want to claim that our students have developed their sociological imaginations in our courses. One way to do this so that these ill-structured problems speak to our students’ lives is to use their lives as the text of the problems, to draw these problems from their “biographies,” and challenge them with the critical thinking prompts and questioning that drives how they engage the two-way relationship between “private troubles” and “public issues.”

ADAPTATION OF A PEDAGOGICAL ASSIGNMENT

We cannot assume that because students understand sociological concepts from examples relevant to their lives that our students are developing their sociological imaginations. If I wanted to foster my students’ sociological imaginations, then I would have to rethink how to plot out my assignments and how I lead class discussion on those assignments. I began to shape my assignments off the interaction I had with my student who was struggling on her personal statement for graduate school. I focused on the interaction between “trouble” and “issue,” intentionally modeling critical thinking questions, and how those questions can drive students to engage the two-way relationship. As Mills (1959) suggests, as we think about formulating ill-structured
problems, we need to pay attention to “a range of public issues and of personal troubles; and they should open up for inquiry the causal connections between milieux and social structure” (p. 130). To rethink my assignments, I could use the context of my students’ lives as text for assignments. By constructing ill-structured problems from their lives as text, I could challenge them to look at the relationship between “troubles” and “issues” in an immediate way that speaks to their lives, and in so doing, help them learn how to exercise their sociological imagination. In Introduction to Sociology, I assign a paper early in the semester, after we read parts of Mills’s Sociological Imagination. By introducing the challenge of thinking sociologically at the start, throughout the course students and could reflect back to the assignment’s focus on the two-way relationship between troubles and issues, and we could continually work with the critical thinking questions that drive this relationship. Let me briefly illustrate the assignment.

Economic Restructuring Assignment
As I mentioned above, two major societal shifts that students can speak to are the decline in the manufacturing industry and a decrease in population. I begin by asking students to define or explain terms we have covered. I require students to use the Internet to find information on their town/county, and to talk to a family member or older relative. I suggest to students that if they are struggling to find information, to call their hometown or county’s representative or Chamber of Commerce. I request the paper to be 3-4 pages in length.

In the first section of the assignment, I begin by asking students about the kinds of jobs there are in the town they are from: As discussed in class, explain the terms “primary sector,” “secondary sector,” “blue-collar,” “white collar,” and “service-industry” jobs. (Look up your town/county on the Internet, and look under “employment opportunities” which indicate new jobs, or jobs that are open.) Using your town/county as a reference, what kinds of jobs are available? What sectors or categories do these kinds of employment fall under? Are there any credentials that are needed for these jobs? As Mills suggested, students must understand the “larger historical scene.” These questions ask them to review terms we have covered in class, giving them a foundation from which to build. Identifying examples of work from their hometowns encourages students to think structurally and focus on social “issues.” Jobs represent issues because they are experienced collectively and are influenced by historical changes in a society’s economy. When students can identify and categorize the kinds of jobs in particular areas, they begin to understand that a community having work is essentially a public issue. At the same time, jobs are personal, and they also are “troubles.” Although most students can speak in general terms about the communities they are from, these questions ask them to carry out basic research which provides them with an accurate portrayal of their hometown economy and also tacitly asks them if they can find a job in their town (a personal trouble). More importantly, students may be led to challenge assumptions they have about their communities’ economies.

In the second section, I ask more specific questions about their families, jobs and education. Using a few older family members as examples, describe their work. What kinds of jobs do they work in? What is their level of education? Has their level of education shaped what they do for employment? If so, how? Has anyone changed jobs—either by choice or by being laid-off. These questions address occupational attainment and education among people they know, and people who are older than them. There is often overlap between their initial description of the community and their answer to these questions about relatives. Students provide examples using the terminology from the first question of the assignment. These questions naturally focus on Mills’s discussion of “biography.” Because I am
STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES AS TEXT

asking about specific examples of work, educational levels and changing jobs, students are guided to think personally. The decision to attend or not attend college probably strikes them as a personal decision, shaped by the values a person may hold. This section emphasizes the individual, laying the groundwork to consider “personal troubles” when someone leaves or loses a job.

The second section serves as a bridge to the third section: the students themselves. To create a sense of self-consciousness as it may be shaped by something larger than themselves, I ask about how their social history has shaped who they are. Does going to college for you continue a trend in your family, or are you one of the first to go to college? Did your high school set expectations for students to go to college—either community college or 4-year—or not? What kind of work is available for you when you finish college in your town? If you were not in college, speculate on the kind of work you would be doing. Would you work in the same kind of jobs as other family members? Why or why not? Does a college degree shape the kind of work you hope to go into? How so? These questions challenge students to reflect on how their lives have been “shaped.” Students can often speak about their friends who have not gone to college. Their friends who are not in college are working in the trades, manufacturing or other family businesses. When asked about the role their high school played in their decision to attend college, many can speak to the subtle or explicit pressure—or a lack of thereof—to succeed and attend college. Asking them to look at their communities and institutions, such as their high school, challenges them to make connections between their biography, or personal troubles, and something larger—public issues such as economic forces. They begin to consider how larger social forces shape personal decisions. Asking them to speculate on their future, sets the stage for assignments asking them to speculate on other issues they are not personally connected to.

Finally, I ask students to try to use their sociological imaginations. Has your town gone through any major economic change(s) (changes in the kind of work, where people are employed)? If so, how? If you were a young adult 30 years ago, what kind of work would you be doing—with or without a college degree? What was the economy like thirty years ago, and what is it like now in terms of jobs available? Has the economy of where you grew up influenced your decision to go to college? Why or why not? The first few questions may require students to talk to parents and older relatives as they did for the third section. But this section compels students to use their sociological imaginations by speculating on how the economic conditions of their communities have shaped their own decisions to go to college.

Through generational comparison, students can begin to understand how biography—such as the work someone does for a living—is shaped by economic and other social forces. Employing this “structured thinking tool,” students begin to realize how economic shifts (public issues) may influence their decision to go to college and/or concern of finding decent employment (individual or personal troubles). Many students mention their parents desire to have them attend college because the parents worked in demanding manual labor jobs. Often, students coming from small towns or rural areas of Maine speak of one factory or plant shaping their perception of work and the economy all around them, their friends, and their friends’ families. In Mills’s terms, students are pushed to make connections and understand the distinction between “the personal troubles of milieux” and the “public issues of social structure.”

I do want to note that this assignment works for those students in my classes who are from urban areas around New England. During our class discussions, these students begin to appreciate the need to empathize with those from different areas because their classmates put a real face on the impact of social and economic forces on a community. And, because of the nature of
the guiding questions, they begin to reflect on the “issues” that affected their communities and shaped their choices. Both the structure and the questions built into the assignment provide a flexibility that can fit most students’ lived experiences in the class.

DISCUSSION OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

This assignment helped foster my students’ sociological imaginations by asking them to reflect upon and analyze two societal forces in their lives: the decline in the manufacturing industry and a decreasing population. Students from different communities found the assignment interesting, but the assignment was specifically geared to students from rural communities in New England. My goal was to craft an assignment to resonate with their lives. By specifically laying out guiding questions, students had to look at the relationship between the individual and society. By doing this, I helped my students realize the personal value in developing their sociological imaginations. What my students discovered is that the guiding question challenged them to reflect on how they looked at their communities and themselves within those communities. The class discussion after the due date revealed my students beginning to develop a “sociological” way of thinking. They began to understand how the decisions they have made for their education and their lives have been also shaped by social forces. They demonstrated that they began to see how history and public “issues” are connected to their biographies and personal concerns or “troubles.”

As we discussed what they learned as they reflected on their communities, their “choice” to attend college, and their future plans, the discussion showed that developing a sociological imagination is not an easy task, and they struggled with this “habit of the mind” even when reflecting on their own personal lives and their communities. A few students claimed, “I don’t really think anything shaped my decision to go to college—except for me.” But through the discussion with the assignment as context, students came to understand that even when a decision or preference seems to be purely personal, it is always made within a social context.

A history student from a small town noted on his reflections in his assignment that:

it made me look at the bigger picture and where mine and my friends’ individual experiences fit in the context of our town. We (my friends and I) were very smart and thus observant and we didn’t want the lives we saw around us, and could see we wanted more and college was the way out. And “out” is meaning we, for the most part, will have to move away in order to get jobs in our fields.

His narrative reveals his first steps in developing his sociological imagination. By saying “it made me look at the bigger picture,” he began to realize that social forces at play helped shape his decision to attend college. When he noted “we didn’t want the lives we saw around us,” he placed his college decision as a reaction against the social forces he perceived, rather than simply a personal decision. His reflection echoed other students’ comments on “personal decisions” after thinking about and witnessing people in their communities. He began to sense the private-public/troubles-issues connection that marks thinking with a sociological imagination.

A communications student commented on the girls from her high school who did not go to college and are now young mothers. After discussing the kinds of low-wage work these young women are now doing, she claimed:

My parents wanted me to go to school so I wouldn’t have to struggle as much as they did. There are mostly low-income jobs in my town which drove me to strive for a college degree . . . I think my decision to go to college was sort of given. I’m not sure I would have had the choice and I don’t think it would have been accepted in my family.
Like the history student, this woman identified her family as a force behind her choice to attend college. But she notes her life circumstances and local economy also shaped her decision. Her decision to attend college was made in the context of her knowing that job choices are limited, when she claimed, “I’m not sure I would have had the choice.”

A pre-pharmacy student notes how his town had not changed for the past few decades. He also began to see, in part, how social forces helped shape his decision to attend college.

If I was not in college, I would probably leave my town because there wouldn’t be any job opportunities for me. I might have considered working for my uncle’s insulation business if only for the reason that he’s family . . . [my town’s] economy hasn’t progressed much in the last thirty years. If I were a young adult 30 years ago, I would probably work in the wood product mill or my grandfather’s farm. [A local factory] has grown as a business, but the wood product manufacturer has lost some prestige. The community doesn’t like change, so it hasn’t. This lack of local economic stimuli has influenced me greatly in choosing to go to college. Between me wanting more and my town not having what I am looking for, I had to leave and earn a degree.

This student, like many, pointed to the lack of economic opportunities in their communities. He seems to blame his town for the lack of economic change when he suggests that they could change, but chose not to. He explained that tradition, rather than personal interest, would have led him to work with his uncle had he not decided not to attend college. Nevertheless, he thinks that if he were not in college, he would have had to leave his town for work opportunities. More importantly, he began to see a connection between a personal choice and larger social and economic forces and the influence those larger forces had in influencing his thinking.

One business student had never reflected on his community—at least consciously—until he worked on this assignment.

I wasn’t even aware at how barren my small town seems. Almost all of the land is farms and many families lived on them for generations. It’s a fine life for some people, but it isn’t anything I’d want to do.

This student began to understand how his “trouble” of finding work or living in a particular community can be shaped by the economy or an “issue.” In addition, he revealed to me that he was studying business so he could find a job in another part of the state or work from home.

I learned from a few of my students during our class discussion that their personal choice of major was shaped by their perception of either possible choices of occupations in their hometowns or careers that appear to be immune from job lay-offs and plant closures. All were driven by the desire to bring in a good, secure income. A nursing major noted her decision was based on what would lead to a “stable, well-paying job;” consequently, economic factors that impact a town also impacted her life. She discovered a historical occurrence in her town that has influenced the aging of her town, and thus another reason why she wanted to leave her town after college.

About 10 years ago, a major source of tax relief in [my town]—a nuclear power plant—shut down. This led to a decreased school budget and increased taxes. This, I believe, has decreased the number of families, especially with school-aged children from moving here and staying here.

Addressing this shift, she came to understand how social forces impact decisions families make to move from the community. While discussing this, she highlighted another trend happening simultaneously in her community affected by the aging community. While most of the elderly, she mentioned, still live in their homes, she discussed concern about the price of housing.

I think people in my area want to own their own land, have housing and property and stay in it. Elderly are likely to own property be-
cause they moved to [that] area when first growing up. It gives people something to hold on to. [The lack of housing] affects me because I would want to own property too. . . . I don't want to be in a nursing home with no privacy or independence. [This] influences me because if I see [people] in a nursing home, it makes me nervous about being "stuck in a home."

When she claimed, "the lack of housing affects me because I would want to own property too," she began to see how an individual choice is affected by a social force.

**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

The strength of this assignment is in how they helped students begin to work with the strategies that ground the development of a sociological imagination through topics that they can engage personally. First, I find that students naturally engage with studying their hometowns. Their communities are "familiar terrain," and asking them to apply sociologically related terms to the landscape of their communities and their lives within those communities is a great place to begin. Asking questions using these terms about their communities opens them to larger, structural questions that can be asked later. In classroom discussions that focus on their communities, students are less scared to speak up in class, when they know they will be sharing with the class information about each others' communities. Second, students enjoy and are familiar with doing Internet research. Although they may need prompting ideas about where to go and who to phone (if they are contacting their towns), they all generally find information that I am requesting for their papers. Finally, this assignment has appeal across student backgrounds.

My students from urban areas mention gentrification; my students from suburban areas mention housing costs; and my rural students mention factory closings as social and economic trends that are affecting their communities. All becomes sensitive to their own situations. The goal of this paper and the ensuing discussions is to introduce them to using their sociological imaginations, and it seems that crafting topics from our students' lives-as-text lend themselves well to this process. These same pedagogic strategies can be applied on any campus. There are some limitations. First, for students who have moved recently, relying on parents or relatives for information about their current town may be difficult. Parents may not be able to speak to the economics or the social history of their current town. In addition, more research may need to be done to learn about a student's current town. Another weakness relates to students from suburban areas. Some students come from economically booming areas where finding well-paying jobs is not a concern. However, this does not necessarily compromise the assignment. As students from rural areas discuss the economic challenges of their communities, suburban students are pushed to reflect on their opportunities and privilege. They become aware of their privilege and have the chance to reflect on how their circumstances shape their views.

**CONCLUSION**

I would like to offer some final, yet critical, thoughts on the argument I have laid out. The argument I am making is a challenge to an assumption that I took for granted about our claims that our teaching helps our students develop their sociological imagination: if we use good and solid examples from our students' lives to teach with, our students would master those concepts on the way to developing their sociological imagination. If we believe that teaching to the sociological imagination is a liberal learning experience, we may need to consider that it is not simply a matter of trying to find examples our students will be interested in, but rather how well we can connect our
examples and assignments to their lived experiences. Tapping into their lived experiences as part of the "course text" should be a consideration in our teaching. This is how we model our claim that the sociological imagination informs our day-to-day lives.

I do not want to suggest that I have limited all my assignments simply to things that connect with my students' immediate experiences. Nor am I suggesting that all of our assignments should be crafted around ill-structured problems pulled from our students' lives as text. But I am arguing that we need to consider how to incorporate at least one such assignment in our classes if we want to claim that we are fostering our students' sociological imaginations. If I use this approach intentionally early in the course, I can outline, demonstrate, and get my students to begin to see the personal value of and learn how to exercise their sociological imagination by working with this three-part process of looking at troubles, raising self-reflective critical thinking questions, and reflecting on the two-way relationships between "trouble" and "issue." Throughout the semester, as I move from one topic to the next, if I continually pose the questions in this assignment to my students, they can develop the habit of mind to think about the relationship between private-public/troubles-issues. The immediate first steps after an assignment like this are to apply this process to new topics, such as when I cover globalization.

In designing ill-structured, problem-based assignments, I found value in elaborating guiding questions. Open-ended yet highly "guided" questions provide critical thinking steps. Elaborating questions models critical thinking, intentionally demonstrating to student the need to consciously raise questions, probe their assumptions, become clear about the gaps in their understanding, and be able to draw inferences through the lens of sociological concepts so they can develop their sociological imaginations in the process.

REFERENCES


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