Teaching: From Disappointment to Ecstasy
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TEACHING: FROM DISAPPOINTMENT TO ECSTASY*

Unintended outcomes can derail the best of intentions in the classroom. Designing a new course for Honors students provided an opportunity to change my traditional teaching style. I envisioned a classroom where students enthusiastically became more self-directed learners. I was perplexed with mixed reactions from students; while some joined me and adopted the model of teaching and learning I proposed, far more than I expected resisted this change. Using a sociological framework helped me understand that I had overlooked the powerful influence of the larger institutional context for shaping and maintaining expectations for teacher/student role enactment. I argue that when students’ comfort is disrupted and their normative role expectations are rendered unpredictable or misunderstood, some respond with resistance. Honors students, in particular, may be the most resistant to pedagogical innovation because they are the most skilled at, and invested in, enacting and maintaining the institutionally normative roles.

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My work over the past 10 years in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) has put me in contact with a host of sociologists who are exploring how we can facilitate student learning in higher education. I believe these academicians are venturing into important territory adding into their already crowded research agendas the work of systematically investigating classroom dynamics set within the context of institutions related to higher education. A significant impetus to this work was provided in 2000 when the ASA along with the American Association of Higher Education brought together 60 sociologists representing a wide swath of experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives. The focus of this three day working session was to set an agenda for how our discipline could contribute to the burgeoning interest in SOTL. Out of this meeting came several important attempts to answer the central question, “What do we know and what do we need to know, about how students learn sociology?” (Benson et al. 2002; Lucal et al. 2003; Weiss et al. 2002; Wright et al. 2004).

In the eight years since that meeting, an impressive number of sociologists have answered the call of the authors of these papers to enter the SOTL dialogue surfacing within numerous journals and professional meetings. However, many of these presentations and articles are anchored in the literature from other fields such as higher education, educational psychology, or organizational management. This special issue challenges those of us working in this area to return to our roots—to be deliberate in using sociological lenses in our examinations of the classroom. Sociology offers a

*The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the guest editors of this special issue for their suggestions for strengthening this manuscript, and Regina Forni for her technical assistance. The study owes much to the cooperation and honesty of the students whose writing provides the data for this study. Please address all correspondence to the author at Buffalo State College, 1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, New York 14222; e-mail: alberscm@buffalostate.edu.

Editor’s note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Andrea Hunt, Kerry Strand, and Heather Sullivan-Catlin.
rich toolbox of concepts, theories, and methods that are useful in illuminating the complexities of teaching and learning. Yet, few of us have accepted the challenge of the call for this issue, to “turn the analysis inwards.” It is this call that motivated me to use a sociological perspective to illuminate one of the most puzzling teaching experiences I have had.

In 2006, I taught an upper level Honors Social Science Seminar. I volunteered for this assignment with considerable excitement viewing it as an opportunity to implement some new pedagogical approaches. The unexpected initial reactions of a number of students constituted one of the most disappointing professional experiences of my long career. In this paper, I call specifically on Berger’s seminal work Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective (1963) to consider why reforming my practice produced unintended outcomes.

THE CONTEXT

At State College¹ about 150 students from 9,000 undergraduates are selected for the Honors program based on SAT scores and high school GPA. In addition to meeting all requirements for their majors, they take seven general education seminars open only to Honors students. These courses are meant to challenge students in ways they would not encounter through the standard curriculum. The guidelines are kept general in order to encourage faculty from appropriate departments to volunteer to teach these courses on a rotating basis. The catalogue description of the Social Science Seminar is “Focuses on central ideas, epistemology, issues and significant works in and among the social sciences.”

Recent readings (Bain 2004; Finkel 2000; Light 2001) stimulated a new appreciation of the importance of attempting to create a classroom environment focused on knowledge creation rather than the transmission of information where students felt part of an intellectual community that balanced support and control.

Motivated by my reading, my goal was to create a course where students could use an inter-disciplinary perspective to:

- develop an understanding of human learning, higher education, institutional culture, and organizational change;
- develop a general understanding of social science research methods and techniques;
- use these understandings to address research questions that have personal and local relevance; and
- pair the results of these original investigations with knowledge from existing studies to design strategies for strengthening the learning culture at State College.

I decided to use SOTL as a coordinating theme for this Honors course. This served the dual purpose of giving students a meaningful way to apply the content of the class to investigating relevant teaching and learning issues in addition to expanding student agency in the classroom. I spent months excitedly designing a course that I believed would be both challenging and engaging for the most select students on campus (see appendix A for more details of course content and assignments). On the first day of classes I welcomed 17 students, three Caucasian males, two African-American females, and the remainder Caucasian females. After the second week and the grading of the first essays, 15 students remained, while two others consulted the director of the Honors program about dropping the course. In response, I initiated a classroom discussion in the third week of classes in order to determine the pervasiveness of concerns that some students had expressed to me and to the director of the Honors program. To my bewilderment a third of the class expressed dissatisfaction with the grounding of the class in student directed learning. They wanted a more teacher directed experience—clearly not the

¹The institution and students’ names used here are pseudonyms.
reaction I anticipated while I was enthusiastically designing the class. I summarized my reaction to this discussion with the following note in my teaching log, “My perception is that students are not used to this amount of self-determination. The lack of prescription from me is causing stress” (personal log entry 2-9-2006). At the time, my response to the negative attitudes I perceived involved defensive efforts to justify my pedagogy to the director of the program and the students. Now, accepting the challenge of this special issue and having recovered from my dismay, I turn to a sociological examination of what transpired.

FRAMEWORK

In hindsight I see that a wide range of key concepts came into play in this situation. What I know about institutions, roles, social control, and social change could have informed my practice. As a sociologist I should have been keenly attuned to how such factors can affect the social interaction in a classroom. During a recent rereading of Berger’s (1963) Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective, I was struck by how useful ideas expressed in this text could be in providing a framework for reflecting on my experience with the Honors class. The title of this paper is derived from Berger’s suggestion that a crucial element of sociology is “ecstasy” or “the act of standing or stepping outside (literally, ekstasis) the taken for granted routine of society” (p. 136).

It is all too easy to let teaching become a “taken-for-granted” routine. Breaking that routine by teaching a new course and/or implementing a new teaching approach involves planning based on assumptions regarding how the other actors in our social routines will react to this change. These assumptions seldom heed a basic tenet of Berger’s work “... that the outcome of ideas is commonly very different from what those who had the ideas in the first place planned or hoped” (p. 39). Therefore, it should not be surprising that our actions as teachers can produce unintended outcomes.

Berger and Luckmann’s classic The Social Construction of Reality (1967) establishes a basic framework for examining why some students responded so unfavorably to this course. The core assumption of this framework is that while society is a human product, people are, in turn, products of the society they create. For the most part we engage in our everyday lives using habitualized patterns of acting. Our social world consists of structures that rely on culturally defined typifications of how individuals will act in given situations. Social roles are the tacit codification of these behaviors. “Universe maintenance specialists” use social control to discourage deviance and encourage conformity to the institutionalized definition of reality. While these basic tenets of sociology permeate many of the lessons I have taught over the years, I had not thought to use them as constructs to understand the factors that took this class in an unanticipated direction.

I base this reflection on Berger’s (1963) suggestion that it is not necessary, in fact it may be undesirable, to apply traditional “scientific method” to analyze multiple data sources to examine what transpired in my classroom. “[S]ociology comes time and again on the fundamental question of what it means to be a [person] and what it means to be a [person] in a particular situation. This question may often be obscured by the paraphernalia of scientific research and by the bloodless vocabulary that sociology has developed in its desire to legitimate its own scientific status” (p. 167).

DATA AND METHOD

By the midpoint of the semester, about a quarter of the students were still resisting the basic structure of the class. Around this time students wrote their third essay. It was an avenue for applying some of the ideas from readings and discussions regarding learning in higher education to their experiences in this class. After posting their essays on the course web site, students read the essays of fellow classmates and selected two to offer a written response. I’ve chosen
a close examination of this work because it provides insights into students' reactions to the behavioral changes I initiated. Guidelines for the essay are given in appendix B.

These 45 essays were analyzed twice before producing this manuscript; as neither analysis was conducted from a sociological framework, they fall outside the guidelines of this special edition. However, a brief discussion of the results highlights the stronger explanatory power of the third analysis grounded in sociological concepts.

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The first analysis using open-coding served two purposes. In preparation for a presentation about the class for a professional meeting, I was looking for a way to summarize student reactions to the course. This occurred around the time that I was teaching students about analyzing interview transcripts. My work with student essays and reaction letters was used to illustrate coding. Students joined me in creating codes and identifying emerging categories. We ended up with the following themes to capture elements of the course that were facilitating and hindering learning for students (Table 1).

This approach helped condense the narratives and provide a sense of the level of

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### Table 1. Facilitating and Hindering Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reactions/Letters/Comments on Aspects of the Class that Facilitate Learning</th>
<th>Number of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Open-ended student-run discussions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Meta cognition</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Active learning</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Contributing to SOTL knowledge</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Forming relationships with classmates</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reading one another's essays</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Different class format</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Bringing student voice into the classroom</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Receiving reaction letters from classmates</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Writing reaction letters to classmates</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reactions/Letters/Comments on Aspects of the Class that Hinder Learning</th>
<th>Number of comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ambiguity about course outcomes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Unclear grading criteria for essays</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of time</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Lack of guidelines for reacting to essays</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Too little practice with research techniques</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Low levels of teacher control</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Course structure</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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n = 15 essays and 30 reply letters
importance of each theme identified by students. Students were adamant regarding the perceived lack of direction in areas such as course outcomes, grading criteria, and reaction letters to classmates’ essays. This was troubling to me because I thought I had been very specific in the syllabus about course outcomes (see appendix A) and had provided guidelines which I believed conveyed criteria for essays and reactions. I needed to balance these perceived ambiguities with what these data and ensuing discussions told me about aspects of the course that students found conducive to learning.

High frequencies were found on “metacognition” and “active learning” indicating the students valued the opportunity to study learning in higher education in a way that allowed them to apply course content to their own experience. Interestingly, they mentioned student-led classroom discussions as more conducive to this than the written assignments. My hunch is that this reflects the fact that at the time the students wrote essay three they had all received extensive feedback on their first two essays and letters of response to classmates’ essays, while only a few students had the opportunity to lead one of the open ended discussions. I believe receiving extensive and individualized responses to writing from both myself and peers provided students with substantive feedback and challenges to their thinking that could not be ignored or explained away. It is possible that this indisputable, public documentation made some students question the value of these writing exercises in contributing to their learning. The verbal feedback received during open-ended student-run discussions left no permanent record of reactions to be pondered and dissected. Therefore, it was easier to forget, discard, or ignore challenges to thinking resulting from discussions.

In discussing the results of this first analysis with a colleague, she suggested I recode the data using the course objectives as categories, rather than letting the categories arise from the data. In this analysis I examined the numbers of students referring to specific course goals as facilitating their learning. I was hoping that this approach would provide some guidance regarding students’ perceptions of how the course was supporting the goals that motivated me in the first place.

Gina is representative of the three students who found value in my attempt to give students a “voice” in the class.

This class has also demonstrated to me the importance of the student voice and the great lack thereof that exists on many college campuses. I am more aware of my surroundings and the everyday operation of this campus because of the topics that we have talked about in this course.

While only a few students viewed having an outlet for their own voice as important, many more valued the opportunities in this course to hear the voices of their peers.

Participating in a “community of learners” appeared to be the most well met goal of the course with nine students making over a dozen comments like those of Carol:

The writing in this class, particularly the opportunity to read and respond to the essays of other students is very interesting to me. I have never had the opportunity to interact with and evaluate fellow classmates and their work before. I rather enjoy getting to know the people in this class a little better and believe that the process will greatly facilitate the SOTL project we will have to work on together. In most of my previous classes, I have gone through the entire semester without communicating with any classmates at all.

This second analysis provided some reassurance that certain aspects of my course design were accomplishing my goals. However, just knowing which aspects of the course were functioning well, provided little insight into why some students remained reluctant or even adamantly against taking agency for their learning. I conducted a third analysis for this paper with the aim of discerning why there seemed to be more initial student dissatisfaction than in my other courses and certainly more than I had
anticipated given the experiences of other sociologists who had given students more control of their learning (Fobes and Kaufman 2008).

In the third analysis, I take note of Berger’s (1963) suggestion that sociology provides a framework to examine the “... role-playing and identity-building processes [that] are generally unreflected and unplanned, almost automatic” (p. 109). Sociology offers a way to examine the reality my students and I created in the classroom—specifically, how the interactions in the classroom were shaped by the students’ institutionally influenced normative role expectations, and how my contravention of these norms created some initial disruption and discontent.

The Classroom as Social Interaction Space

“. . . [I]t is difficult to improve on Max Weber’s definition of a ‘social’ situation as one in which people orient their actions towards one another. The web of meanings, expectations and conduct resulting from such mutual orientation is the stuff of sociological analysis” (Berger 1963:27). Weber offers a starting point for the sociology of the classroom. His definition is a perfect description of the microcosm that we find ourselves in for significant portions of our working lives. Each semester or quarter, we enter into a new social situation. Whether we have put hours, weeks, or months into preparing for the experience, we conduct ourselves in ways that we believe will elicit desired responses from students. Students also begin each new class with expectations and anticipations. They bring their own experience of how to reach their desired goals. As the course unfolds, differences and similarities in meanings become evident.

The Larger Institutional Context

Professors and their students do not develop their expectations in a vacuum. Each classroom is a social context nested in a number of other influential social contexts. Professors and students are influenced by their membership in gender, racial, class, and age groups. Notions of roles are also shaped by primary and reference groups such as family, peers, political groups, and religious communities. While the effects of any one of these groups could provide a powerful sociological lens, understanding the totality of the interaction among these groups and their combined effects on individual expectations would be an overwhelming task.

In an examination of classroom interaction, the institutional context in which that classroom resides provides an important influence on professors’ and students’ expectations. While some role behaviors (providing a syllabus, meeting classes at scheduled times, grading students) are dictated by codified rules, many result from the informal norms of the institution. For the most part these norms at State College created the expectation that I was the knowledgeable expert, and that my job was to provide students with an experience that would enable them to leave my class with more knowledge than they came in with. The comparable student expectation involved assuming some intellectual gain from each new class and each new professor. Achieving that gain sometimes required placing faith in the instructor’s definition of what was worth learning and how to learn it, and always involved deference to his or her higher status position. These roles bear some resemblance to Freire’s (1972) “bank-clerk educator” who is charged with depositing information in the minds of students who view this information as knowledge to be received, filed and stored.

My attempt to change the normative “professor” behaviors were based on the assumption that students would welcome the changes this wrought for them. Implementing such change quickly brought me into contact with the degree of comfort some students have with the predictability of existing roles.

Enacting the Teacher/Student Roles

As the class progressed, students began to
exhibit a variety of responses to the disruption of the student/teacher roles they were accustomed to. These changes applied to both inside and outside of class learning strategies. For example, in-class activities included student developed and run Open Ended Seminars which lasted 15-20 minutes once a week. My role in these sessions was secondary. At times, I helped the class stay focused or intervened to keep the conversation civil. If requested, I facilitated a summation of the work at the end of the session. But the topics and discussion during these sessions were totally dependent on what students felt needed to happen for them to better understand the ideas presented through course material (see appendix A for more details).

These sessions proved particularly difficult for students like Frank who had a strong preference for the institutionally normative teacher led discussions: “Although I respect and appreciate the open debates and the ability for your students to speak their mind, I also think that there is time in a classroom for students to talk and a time in a classroom where a teacher should take control.”

Other students like Gina challenged Frank’s desire to retreat into the comfort of the traditional roles. She found student-led seminars to be a refreshing change and expressed an understanding that student agency within the classroom was one of the aims of the course. Gina said:

I liked that Dr. Albers trusts us enough to give us the freedom of taking our communications in the class where we want to. I got the impression that you didn’t like this aspect of the class because you insisted that the professor maintain control over our discussions. I cannot speak for everyone else but I felt that the entire point of this method of teaching was that she was allowing us the autonomy of discussion, not to control what it is that we choose to focus on.

However, while Gina supported the changes in in-class interaction, she expressed concern over the nature of the writing done in preparation for in-class discussions. For someone who was used to being rewarded for the production of technically superior assignments, the challenge to use writing to explore metacognition was “disheartening.” She wrote:

I have always prided myself on being a good writer, but after receiving feedback from the papers I have written for this class, it seems that the mentality that I have when writing these papers places me completely out of my element. I have attempted to present my thoughts concerning the topics we’ve discussed in the best way that I can comprehend, and thought that I did a decent job at it. After receiving my grade I’d realized that I was completely off base. The negative feedback I’ve received makes me feel not only disheartened but it makes me feel as though the expectations that are placed upon me (because I am an Honors student) are sometimes more than I personally can live up to. I do not feel like all the hard work that I put into this class really pays off and it leads me to focus my energy on other courses where my hard work is actually getting me positive results.

Gina’s exasperations stemmed from changed expectations, both in the kind of work being required, as well as the kind of critique to which her work was subjected. The ability to read peers’ essays and have them respond to yours often presented incontrovertible comparisons between those who were figuring out the challenge to use writing in different ways and those who were having more difficulty. I trust that Gina was putting a lot of hard work into preparing for class, but reactions to her efforts left her feeling inept at figuring out unfamiliar expectations.

While Frank’s disillusionment stemmed from changing expectations for students’ in-class behaviors, and Gina’s from out-of-class expectations, Anne had difficulty with both, “I most often dread coming to this class, based purely on the ‘vibe’ I get in the classroom. I feel as though I am never doing the right thing, even though I am reading, and writing the essays.”

Clearly the course was not being met with
the universal acceptance I had expected. While some students responded favorably, there were others who were perplexed and distressed by my refusal to enact student/teacher roles in ways that students had come to take for granted.

**New Definitions of Reality**

Thinking sociologically about planning this course, I realize I made choices expecting to create the conditions that would facilitate students’ redefinition of their roles to accommodate the new definition of reality I pursued. The content of this course presented students with a range of social science concepts relevant to higher education including organizational culture, organizational change, and adult learning. The additional focus on knowledge creation was intended to foster students’ insights about how little the higher education context promotes students’ examination of what they are doing and what is being done to them.

Students are driven by compliance with external expectations in that they see themselves constrained by larger things, such as grades. Frank and Gina both speak to this when they describe how the focus on grades was to the detriment of actual learning. Gina writes:

> I had always been more focused on the grade I received rather than the type of learning I was achieving. I had no problem in the past settling for simple surface learning if it meant I got an A in the class. I am no longer able to do this. I have found myself striving to get a deeper understanding about my courses.

Here, Gina admits that she settled for “surface learning” if it would get her an A. Hanna echoes Gina’s sentiment: “. . . it’s becoming more than just getting a grade. It’s about understanding and being able to be critical of the knowledge and information we come to possess.”

Through learning about the process of learning, students were able to shift their interpretation of their own practice of learning. While some focused on grades as the external force pushing them, others described how the quantity of work hindered quality learning: “We sit back and calculate just how much work we have to do and it usually gets done somehow but then something else is always due again. And during the whole ordeal the thought of trying to experience ‘deep learning’ is never ever on our mind” (Frank).

While keeping up with the workload is probably connected to Frank’s desire to maintain good grades, he is beginning to realize that the nature of this work is different from that which results in deep learning. He acknowledges being caught in a system where external expectations create conditions that deprive him of the time and energy required for deep learning. He is simply too busy doing school work to engage in deep learning.

Insights about conditions that foster deeper learning motivated some students to find value in the opportunity for new role enactments that were opened up by my redefinition of the situation. Others clung to their traditional role behaviors, doing what they needed to appease me. However, they maintained those traditional roles by defending and lobbying for the status quo.

Central to understanding this second reaction was the realization that some students clearly preferred the safety of the student role the way they had been reinforced for enacting it throughout the majority of their academic lives. This explanation of students’ dissatisfaction with the course fits well with Berger’s notion that “ecstasy” or stepping outside of normative social expectations, is incompatible with the automatic, internalized actions that make for the smooth operation of institutions. Berger (1963) writes, “The [person]who plays his [or her] roles sincerely, in the sense of unreflected response to unscrutinized expectations, is incapable of ‘ecstasy’—and by the same token, quite safe from the viewpoint of those concerned with protecting the rules” (p. 152).

Keisha concludes that, for her, ecstasy does in fact work in opposition to success in the institution. Those who question or chal-
lenge what traditionally passes for learning are unlikely to be rewarded. “I also find it ironic that such emphasis on ‘deep learning’ as opposed to good grades is being conveyed to Honors students who NEED that high grade to succeed. To us, the grade is necessary; personally, I would be willing to sacrifice deep learning to keep my scholarship” (Keisha). As she points out, Honors students are in a double bind. Questioning norms runs the risk of lowering GPA and losing the financial benefits that are contingent upon grades. But more disturbingly, this quote implies that getting good grades is viewed in opposition to deep learning. Her experience leads her to conclude that she has to choose because it’s just not feasible to have both.

Jammela, about to graduate with an elementary education degree, was one of the most resistant to defining learning in a different way. She entered this class regarding it as just another requirement to reach her goal of graduation. Her written work and class participation often appealed for a more autocratic learning experience. She was extremely frustrated when I told her she needed to participate in structuring her own learning environment. She simply could not see the value in reforming student/teacher roles at this late stage in her education. Jammela writes:

... [A]s my time on this campus is drawing to a close, I would say that I would rather not be here to see too many changes taking place. This may not be the attitude that lends itself to this class, but it has pretty much always been the way I have regarded school, and as enlightening as college may or may not be that is all it will ever be to me, another four years of school, plus two more for my master’s degree. This is a class I have to take; it fulfills a requirement and I am happy to have that filled. It would be nice to be in a class that interests me, but I do realize that not every class can touch every student in the same way. In reality, I hope to succeed in this class by my own standards, in this case a grade that keeps my GPA where it is supposed to be.

Yet, other students such as Carol and Isabella seemed to appreciate that this class involved relearning how to enact the student role in a way that was significantly different from the way that had always worked well for them as Honors students. Contrary to Jammela and Keisha who continued to defer to the externally determined role expectations for Honors students, these students came to find value in the challenge of a new definition of teaching and learning.

Carol’s essay resonates with Berger’s (1963) prediction that “[t]o attain a greater measure of awareness and with it freedom, entails a certain amount of suffering and even risk” (p. 175). She explains, “I feel that the problem with this class is some students do not want to approach this novel experience and would prefer to complain about it instead. I too feel that the instructor had high expectations about the Honors students as a group. The only thing I can say is that it is not as selective as one would think and that it is not that difficult to maintain a qualifying GPA when your classes are simple and unchallenging.” Isabella also acknowledges the work involved in rethinking the nature of learning and, like Carol, finds the effort worthwhile. “This course has made me evaluate my own motives and assumptions about education. ... [A]s a group, Honors students seem to prefer a variety of general, mediocre learning experiences which provide them with the ever important A, a title, and scholarship” (Isabella).

Carol and Isabella speak about the opportunities opened up for them by my redefinition of the situation. Nina was the only student whose essays revealed the perception that there were opportunities for my growth too. “Attempting to turn teaching and learning into a scholarship is an important step toward allowing and encouraging teachers to be able to learn about themselves, and to, in turn, guide students toward learning deeply” (Nina).

In planning this course I made a choice to redefine my role, moving away from the “banking model” (Freire 1970) towards a more collaborative model of learning that I
expected students to welcome. Some students did not embrace this opportunity with the enthusiasm I anticipated. In fact, some students were part of the institutional coalition of “universe maintenance specialists” ready to sanction my breaching of norms. Sociology provides several possible explanations of this phenomenon.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My enthusiasm for designing and teaching this class was based largely on the fact that I believed that the Honors students represented the most intellectually talented students on our campus, and as such would welcome a new approach to learning. I anticipated that disrupting the expectation for teacher behaviors would enable these capable students to take their learning to even higher levels. Some students seemed inclined to accommodate me on my new definition of the classroom, joining me in a different enactment of the student/teacher roles. But I was troubled by what seemed to me a significant segment of the class that remained vested in the traditional roles determined to justify and find value in the status quo. This reflection applies some basic sociological principles to identify factors that contributed to this troubling situation.

While I anticipated positive reactions from disrupting role expectations, some students responded with stress, confusion, and exasperation. From a sociological perspective this is an entirely understandable and sensible response. First, I underestimated the power of the normative student and teacher behaviors operating in the wider institutional context. Rather than seeing this as an opportunity for change, some students resented the investment needed to comply with my idiosyncratic expectations. Students take comfort in being able to predict what will be required of them by college teachers. Fixed role expectations make our life easier and more comfortable. It is a lot of work and an inconvenience to students when what occurs in a single class is significantly out of step with the expectations encountered throughout the majority of the institution.

Second, while I assumed Honors students would be the most receptive to my disruption of norms, I found that their status made them especially invested in maintaining the status quo. Honors students are granted that designation specifically because they are skilled at understanding and enacting/exploiting the institutional and normative student role. The scholarship funds they receive are dependent on maintaining high grades. Many of these students are working 30-hour weeks and carrying a full-time student load, increasing their desire to be able to rely on assumptions about which classroom behaviors will lead to success. Far from being a problem for most of these students, knowing what to expect from a professor and what was expected of them was instead something they relied upon. This routine they have learned to rely on grants them the comfort of being passive receivers of knowledge from the “expert teacher” (Friere 1970). The fracturing of the routinization of education is thus a viable explanation for the dissatisfaction I experienced.

There is of course a third possible sociological interpretation of the differences in student definition of the situation. Conceivably the students who enacted new roles compatible with my definition of the situation may have done so because they were the most skilled at doing whatever it took to get the grade. Was the change in behavior only surface compliance, just another example of the skills of these students to play the system? I attempted to create a context through the reading, writing, and discussions for this class that would foster a role transformation. It is possible that students told me what I wanted to hear and acted in ways they assumed would meet my expectations without really buying into the value of challenging traditional roles. I have no way of testing this hypothesis. However, the three students who contacted me after the course was completed and grades were fi-
nalized provide hope that this was not the case.

State College has an annual two-day conference during which students are selected to present their original work. Two students contacted me the semester following this class about presenting their SOTL projects at this all-campus event. One student just wanted me to know how proud she was of the work she had done in our class. She described the project as particularly meaningful because it grew out of personal insights regarding her own learning and a greater awareness about how the institutional culture influenced her experience of higher education. The other student was seeking my mentorship in putting together a submission and subsequent presentation based on the work she did in our class. During our work together she talked quite candidly about how difficult, yet rewarding, it had been for her to complete the class. Finally, I offer the email in appendix C received at the end of the semester after assessment was finalized. The agency for her learning described by this student epitomizes the role behaviors I was hoping to develop.

Sociological theorizing helped me understand why some students adjusted to my role disruption (and helped create new norms to guide their learning), while others clung to traditional expectations and resisted my unconventional interpretation of the situation. The resistant students also took comfort knowing they would soon return to the security that the wider institutional norms provided.

We spend a lot of time and energy guiding students toward an understanding of the sociological constructs. Whether we call it the sociological imagination, thinking like a sociologist, or the sociological perspective, it is the dominant feature of most introductory textbooks and classes. In many programs, an indicator of a senior student’s success is the degree to which he or she can demonstrate the application of sociological analysis to previously unexamined aspects of social life. As teachers and mentors, we model this ability for our students in our teaching and writing, but few of us use these tools to better understand what transpires in our classrooms. While many of us see teaching as a distraction from our real sociological work, it is also possible to regard teaching as the perfect opportunity to use our sociological know-how to question the unconscious day-to-day reality that is our workplace. Such investigations can reveal our miscalculations or interpretive errors. More importantly, they also provide the insights and understanding necessary to make the activity integral to most of our careers more intentional and consequential.

APPENDIX A.
ABBREVIATED SYLLABUS

PURPOSE OF THE COURSE:
Through this class, students join the professor and other interested members of the campus community in exploring and conducting scholarship on teaching and learning (SOTL). In order to be competent SOTL participants, students will explore a range of social science theories relevant to higher education, including organizational culture, organizational change, and adult learning. Students use this knowledge to undertake Action Projects to better understand the learning environment at State College, to share that understanding with others, and to use the evidence gathered through Action Projects to design strategies to strengthen the learning environment.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:
Students will:
- become familiar with selected literature on higher education, institutional culture, and organizational change;
- use an inter-disciplinary perspective to explore the connections between teaching and learning;
- develop a general understanding of social science research methods and techniques;
• use selected social science methods and techniques to address research questions that have personal and local relevance;
• pair the results of original investigation, with knowledge from existing studies, to design strategies for strengthening the learning culture at State College;
• become active informed contributors to initiatives to enhancing the learning environment at State College.

COURSE CONTENT:
Three weeks on contributions to understanding human learning from psychology, anthropology, and sociology.
Four weeks on social science field work techniques.
Seven weeks on issues in higher education, including the social functions of higher education, institutional culture and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

COURSE FORMAT:
Thinking/Learning Workshops
These are class sessions structured by the professor to introduce new content.

Individual Writing/Responses to Classmates Writing
Four Essays: 15% of Course Grade
Topics for these essays discussed in class. They involve thinking about the material presented in class. Essays are posted on the class Web site.

Six Letters to Classmates Commenting on Their Essays: 15% Course Grade
As soon as a student’s essay is posted, he or she has access to all of the essays and selects two to provide a written response to.
[Note: This arrangement was determined by the class. Students’ decided that the challenge to write something provocative enough to warrant comment was more desirable than the equity in the amount of feed-back provided by assigning essays to respond to.]

Open-Ended Seminars
Seminar days are an opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of the ideas introduced in some commonly experienced (homework reading, movie, lecture, etc.) aspect of the class. Students determine how this will happen. In preparation for these sessions, every student in the class develops written questions arising out of thinking about the class material. These might include questions, deserving of the efforts of the class to increase understanding by inquiring together into meaning of some aspect of class material. On seminar days, designated student co-leaders begin the class by asking classmates to share the questions they developed after reading the material. The co-leaders then work with the class to determine the order, and the manner in which, the group wishes to address these questions.

Question for Seminar Group: 10% of Course Grade
Bring two typed copies to class, one to hand in at the beginning of class and one to work from during class. Questions should provide evidence of analytic thinking about the articles addressing issues such as:
What is the main idea of this piece?
What information or experience is being used to support this idea?
What assumptions are being made?
What are the implications of thinking this way?
What are alternative ways of thinking about this?
What questions are raised by this idea?

Co-Leading Seminar Group: 5% of Course Grade
Once during the semester, students co-lead the open ended seminar group. These seminars are an opportunity for students to determine how to best structure a class period to advance their learning. Seminar topics grow out of readings or issues related to action projects.

Research/Writing Groups
A substantial component of this class involves working in research groups. Research groups are ex-
pected to do a significant portion of their work outside of class, but there will also be days that focus on projects during class time. This is particularly important in the beginning and end of the semester. In the early stages, coordination within and between groups is necessary to identify and address issues in project design and implementation. Near the end of the semester, class time is used to hear the findings of other groups and see how results do or do not fit together.

**Action Project: 35% of Course Grade**

This project is based on the social science methodology outlined in the *Rapid Assessment Process* text. This technique involves small teams undertaking research design, data collection, and analysis. The goal of these studies is to create a product that captures the insight and perspective of participants at State College. This involves conducting field work to produce a report on the learning culture on campus. Each team determines the primary focus of their study and selects the social science techniques (interviews, observations, focus groups, artifact analysis, etc.) most suitable for their purpose. The paper is assessed on its demonstration of understanding the connections between the material covered in class and readings, as well as perceptions, analysis and writing skills.

**Exams**

Two Tests: 20% of Course Grade
Tests involve multiple choice, short answer, essay, and application questions.

**Required Reading**


Additional reading from several academic journals that cover the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, such as MountainRise [http://mountainrise.wcu.edu/](http://mountainrise.wcu.edu/) and Inventio [http://www.doit.gmu.edu/inventio/](http://www.doit.gmu.edu/inventio/).

**APPENDIX B.**

**GUIDELINES FOR ESSAY THREE**

In this essay you must answer the first question below. Once you have addressed that question you may choose any or all of the remaining questions to write about.

How have your experiences in this class affected your perspectives about higher education and social science? Provide an example.
What have you found to be the most valuable part of this course? Why?
What troubles you the most about this course?
How have the teaching methods used in this course helped or hindered your learning?
What bearing has writing in this class had on your interactions with your instructor and peers, both inside and outside of class?
What are your reactions to the value of the reading materials?
In what ways has the instructor contributed to or distracted from your learning in this course?
Do you have any additional comments or observations about this class?

**APPENDIX C.**

**UNSOLICITED E-MAIL SENT AFTER THE COURSE WAS FINISHED FROM STUDENT WHO WANTED TO DROP THE COURSE IN THE SECOND WEEK**

Hi Dr. Albers-

... I think you have succeeded in making us all actually THINK more than we ever do in classes where we are constantly memorizing facts for tests. Yours is the only class that I actually WANT to come to this semester, and it has actually made me think a lot about tying your class into my major some-
how. See, I am an English major and want to eventually write books and be a motivational speaker. It would be awesome to go around speaking at high schools to students and/or faculty about a lot of the issues we have talked about in your class. Something needs to change regarding the way our society treats higher education. Speaking about things we have learned in your class could just help start a change. Sometimes I feel like one person couldn't possibly change society, but change always has to start somewhere right? So anyway, I just wanted you to know that I am ashamed of the comments I made to you before about contemplating dropping the class and my frustration with my grade. The last thing I want to be is one of the "game-playing", "grade-oriented" students I have read about. Your class is the only one that I actually talk about when I leave the classroom, and has been very interesting and has stimulated my thinking on several different levels. . . (Lashandra).

REFERENCES


Cheryl Albers, associate professor at Buffalo State, teaches sociology courses focused on family, childhood, youth, aging, and social problems. She has recently published articles in *Journal of Learning Community Research, International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Planning for Higher Education and Teaching Sociology*. She has just completed a three year term as the coordinator of an international CASTL leadership group exploring ways to integrate support for the scholarship of teaching and learning into institutional culture.