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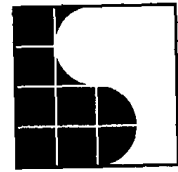


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Incorporating Writing into the Mass Class: An Alternative Model for Quiz/Discussion Sections

DEENESH SOHONI

One of the main disjunctions that exists in undergraduate education within the discipline of sociology is the increased stress we now place on the importance of writing, and the inadequacy of the training we provide our students to become better writers. The call for improved student writing ranges from professors surprised and dismayed with reading student essays, which they consider to be inadequate to the complexity of course material, to those who see the task of sociology as providing a general liberal education, with writing an important skill for the development of a well rounded member of society. Although greater and greater attention is being paid to the role of writing in a college education, little has been written specifically about the role of writing within the discipline of sociology, or how to incorporate the teaching of writing within the context of sociology classes. In this paper, I give an overview of the case to be made for incorporating writing in the sociology curriculum, as well as why and how it could be included in the "mass class" that typically is the first contact students will have with the field of sociology. I argue that not only is the addition of writing not incompatible with the mass class, but that it can serve as a powerful pedagogical tool in enhancing student learning within this environment.

While few sociology instructors question the importance of training students to become good writers, what is less clear is how much of that role should be undertaken within the discipline of sociology. Some would argue that the responsibility of teaching sociology lies with sociology instructors, while that of teaching writing with English composition instructors. The argument here is not that sociology should try to take on the role of the English department, but that writing instruction within the field of sociology can meet needs that cannot be adequately addressed outside the discipline.

FUNCTIONS OF WRITING FOR SOCIOLOGY

There are two basic functions that writing serves for sociology, the first specific to the discipline, the second common to all the social sciences. Specific to sociology, writing can help students become more engaged with the discipline. D'Antonio explains sociology's inability to recruit top undergraduates as being due in part to students not perceiving its subject matter as intellectually challenging. Part of the problem, he argues, lies with the dual role sociology plays in undergraduate education. On one hand, it is expected to give students a general understanding of the impact sociological knowledge can have for society, while on the other, it is also supposed to encourage those who have the interest and ability to continue in the field. Some have argued that with mass classes the shift of emphasis has gone to the former at the expense of the latter. I would argue that, even worse, the present state of introductory classes threatens the role of sociology in helping students learn how to critically analyze social phenomena.

Mass classes in sociology are usually survey courses, and by definition are intended to cover a wide range of material. Although these classes give a good overview of a given subject, this is done at the expense of a deeper analysis of any specific subtopic. But by emphasizing general coverage of material, whether in terms of substantive issues, or even theoretical frameworks, these classes are typically less successful in making students think about the linkages between theory and how social issues are examined, and in teaching students how to evaluate the impact of changes in one area of society on other aspects of society (see Calhoun 1992, for a comparison with how introductory classes are taught in other social science fields). This encourages stu-

dents to see the material as unrelated sets of information to be memorized, an idea reinforced by the typical exams given in these classes. For the majority of students this means their early contact with sociology teaches them not how sociologists try to understand the world, but instead sociology as a set of theories/tools to be learned, or as a set of topics about which certain information needs to be memorized. For the best students, this rightfully leaves them questioning the intellectual capabilities of the discipline.

Although some small liberal arts colleges can still maintain the more intensive and personalized educational style that allows students to become engaged in course material, the current state of higher education makes it unlikely that large institutions will return to small classes. The solution, therefore, is to find alternative ways to create the environment fostered by small classes. Quiz and discussion sections are an attempt to do just this, but typically these sections are used to review, or at best clarify points made in lectures, rather than to get students to understand the complex linkages that sociology seeks to identify. Incorporating writing assignments into these sections, when done properly, can help students use writing to understand the processes that underpin sociological research. The variety of ways that this can be done allows students to take a more active role in experiencing sociology, allowing them to see the challenges and possibilities of sociology first hand.

The second function that writing can serve is to help students develop "social science reasoning," a task also applicable to the other social sciences. Whereas the humanities focus on critical interpretation, and the natural sciences on preciseness and replicability, the social sciences characteristically combine both. This requires students to learn how to evaluate information, to organize and present arguments, as well as make critical evaluations of different sociological perspectives. With the shift in the social sciences to large introductory classes (see D'Antonio 1992, for a detailed explanation of this phenomena), the amount of writing that is required has drastically declined and multiple choice tests tend to replace writing as the way students are evaluated. But the change in form of evaluation means much more, because unlike multiple choice tests or

even short answer exams, which merely test students' ability to memorize facts and/or to use techniques they have learned, writing forces students to sift through material studied to evaluate what is important, to show relationships between ideas, and to construct and defend arguments. Or utilizing Blooms taxonomy of cognitive processes, it can be said that while multiple choice and short answer exams evaluate students' ability to recall and apply information, writing is better suited to help students develop higher order cognitive processes such as their ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate material.

This function of writing can also be seen as preparing students for a type of writing that they are likely to engage in after graduation. Most students in sociology will not continue on into academic careers, but many will work in fields that will ask them to be able to present information on topics in written form. Examples of this type of writing include research reports, policy recommendations and program evaluations. Here the emphasis is not on a particular writing style, but the presentation and evaluation of information in written form, the same type of skills that can be developed in sociology classes. Although sociology instructors, influenced in part by the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement, have become more aware of the importance of writing to these skills, the development of writing skills is still typically relegated to the English department.

INCORPORATING WRITING IN THE MASS CLASS

For most students large introductory classes are the first contact they will have with sociology, and in many cases the first exposure they have to expectations for students at the university level. These classes are therefore critical in socializing students in terms of academic expectations within the university, as well as shaping their views of sociology. In terms of writing, first year students are making the shift from high school writing, where form, organization, and style take precedence over content and critical thinking. These mass classes also determine how sociology is viewed by students. The typical introductory

class in sociology can be criticized both for not helping students begin the process of becoming better writers, and for not giving students sociology in its best light.

Although a literature is starting to develop on the importance of writing to thinking, little has been written about why and how writing should be incorporated into the curriculum of the mass class. Sociology instructors of mass classes are not unaware of the problems of teaching mass classes and, given the present impetus to include more writing in all social science disciplines, many have attempted to incorporate writing into their courses. I would argue that the majority of these attempts have not had the success their creators envisioned, mainly due to the way writing assignments have been structured, and their inadequacy in actually teaching students how to develop writing skills.

The typical attempt to include writing into mass classes has been to include one research paper during the course of a school term, or to have students write short papers on several topics. The result is, not surprisingly, superficial papers for superficial questions, and superficial papers for more complex questions. The expectation that students already should know how to write "sociological" papers leads to the consequence that less skilled writers are penalized for not knowing how to do something that they have never really learned, and more skilled writers get rewarded for their writing style, even if it is not really suited to sociological reasoning.

Students whose writing does not meet expectations get little feedback on how they can improve their writing. Even diligent instructors who take the time to make lots of comments find their efforts wasted, for students do not get practice nor reinforcement in utilizing these suggestions. More skilled writers soon find that most anything they produce will receive a good grade, and are even less likely to get helpful suggestions to improve their writing. The solution to helping our students improve their writing, as well as getting them to engage in more sophisticated thinking, lies in the better use of often underutilized resources in mass classes, the teaching assistant and the quiz/discussion section.

The usual form of the quiz/discussion section for mass classes is either for teaching assistants to review and discuss material presented by professors

in lecture, or to cover new material that expands on material covered in class. In the first case, the role of the graduate teaching assistant is limited to repeating what the professor has covered, with students writing down what they missed or didn't understand in class. In the second case, students who are already feeling overwhelmed by the amount of material they are required to know, get additional material, with little training in how to connect disparate ideas. Even the best organized sections, where the teaching assistant is able to get students to discuss and think more deeply about course material, usually involve only a subset of the total students. In addition, given the time limits of these sections, discussions don't force the students to analyze and integrate material, nor allow them time to develop their own ideas in ways that writing can enable.

The "Writing Section"

An alternative to the quiz/discussion section, which can help sociology students develop writing skills, as well as complement the large lecture format of the mass class, is the development of the writing section. The key, however, is not to merely require more writing, but to use writing as the organizing framework for the section. The aim of this type of section is twofold; first to help students become better writers, and second to help them gain a greater understanding and appreciation of what sociologists do and how and why they do it.

Two key and interconnected tenets that have been developed in the more general setting of Writing Across the Curriculum programs are: first, that writing needs to be understood and taught as a process, and second, that writing is a valuable tool in exploring and thinking about topics. These two ideas form the basis of how a writing section can be created for mass classes in sociology.

As previously discussed, mass classes are often forced to forego depth in order to gain greater coverage of material. It is here where the writing section can serve to complement the mass course. Choosing two or three key concepts that the professor considers important, the writing section instructor can utilize these as a means to develop student writing, with the writing assignments in turn used to im-

prove and develop skills important for the class. By working through each of these assignments, students have time to develop, test, and present their understanding of material, and most importantly get feedback throughout the process.

At this point, a more specific example from my own experiences (as an instructor in the University of Washington Interdisciplinary Writing Program) may prove useful to illustrate how this is actually done in a writing section. For example, in an introductory class on the sociology of deviance an instructor may be interested in having students distinguish between consensus and conflict perspectives of deviance. Typically students have far less problems understanding theories that fall under the consensus perspective in relation to those that fall under the conflict perspective. One writing assignment that can help students gain an understanding of the conflict perspective is to have them pick a deviant behavior they are interested in studying (e.g., spousal abuse, gambling, drug use), and trace when and how these things became illegal. When I have given this type of assignment, I also have the students read Blumer's essay on "Social Problems as Collective Behavior." This helps students frame their papers less as the history of when things became illegal, and more as an analysis of how the interaction between different interest groups leads to how society comes to define certain behaviors as deviant.

The students' first step in writing this paper is to gather information on their topics. I use this first assignment to help students learn how to access different databases available at the library (something with which most students are unfamiliar), and discuss the relative strengths and merits of different sources of information. At many universities, the course instructors can get librarians to help with this orientation.

In class, I use one or two of the student topics to illustrate that many of the things students consider deviant were at some time not considered deviant, and in fact may have been considered normal behavior (e.g., the physical punishment of children). Students then discuss what changes they think occurred in society to make a given behavior less acceptable (historical changes), and whether there were factions within society that had different beliefs on what needed to be done, and what power each group

had to influence public policy in regards to the given behavior (conflict perspective).

Students are then grouped by similar topic, and work together sharing sources and references they found, and working on creating outlines for their individual papers. The students' first draft often focuses on the history of how certain behaviors became illegal, and in conferences with the students I try to get them to recognize the connections between historical conditions, and the relative success in the mobilization efforts of different groups in influencing what came to be (or did not come to be) considered deviant. Their papers are described as a means for them to analyze and articulate these relationships. The final draft, which is the version they are graded on, allows students to incorporate input from their peers and the instructor.

Working through each of the assigned papers takes three to four weeks, during which period students practice research skills (gathering and evaluating data), and writing skills (organizing and presenting information to support their interpretation of the data). In doing so they also get to see writing as a process, which though practiced by sociologists, is seldom taught this way. Finally, this type of writing assignment forces students to use sociological knowledge to interpret events they find interesting, rather than passively memorize information. An important aspect of how writing assignments are constructed is that they allow for a clear linkage to the mass lecture class, taking key themes from the lectures as the basis for more in depth analysis.

Another example of how a writing assignment can be used to complement mass lectures is through its ability to link course material to practical considerations relevant to students. For instance, students can be given an assignment where they are asked to develop a hypothetical measure to deal with a particular problem based on a theoretical model they have learned. Students can then be asked a variety of questions ranging from whether the theoretical model seems to be useful in explaining the particular behavior, to an analysis of whether present policies are compatible with what the theoretical models would suggest. By working through one particular theory more fully in the writing section, students start to analyze other theoretical models presented in the mass class with a more critical eye.

The writing section can thus serve as an important complement to the mass class. In terms of writing, students actually practice the type of writing required for the social sciences, and most importantly get feedback and reinforcement to improve their writing. In terms of subject material, the writing section allows students to study a few key topics or concepts from the mass class in greater depth, to develop the capability to recognize and present relationships between ideas, and to examine course material critically.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are obviously important practical considerations that need to be taken into account before writing sections are implemented. One question raised earlier, is why not leave the role of teaching this type of writing to the English department, in particular "Writing Across the Curriculum" programs. Here it is important to distinguish between two roles of language: first, as a means of communication, and second, as a means of generating knowledge. In this case the question can be re-framed as whether sociology should serve as a tool to help students become better writers, or whether writing should serve as a tool to help students gain a better understanding of sociology. These two goals are not mutually exclusive, but for sociology itself the emphasis would seem to be on the latter. Although WAC programs are effective at helping students improve their writing, I would argue that they are not the most effective way to fulfill the two functions that sociology writing can serve described earlier. If we wish students to become more engaged in the subject matter of sociology, to understand how sociologists see the world, and to gain a deeper understanding of subject material, it is important that subject matter be taught by an expert in the field of sociology versus an expert in the field of writing. In addition, writing as taught by sociologists has greater potential in helping students develop skills in social science reasoning and critical thinking (e.g., linking theory to empirical evidence, examining the context of knowledge), than by someone not trained in this type of tradition. By giving up its role in teaching writing, sociology is abdicating its responsibility in

the general area of social science writing, while at the same time losing a resource that could be used to engage and challenge students in our field.

A related question is what impact the creation of writing sections will have on teaching assistants. A natural concern is the amount of work this will entail for those teaching writing sections. Correcting papers and providing adequate feedback for students is obviously labor intensive, and would require changing how sections are presently designed. For teaching assistants to properly take on the role of writing instructor, class sizes could not exceed certain limits. For instance, at the University of Washington and at the University of California Santa Barbara interdisciplinary writing classes are limited to twenty students. This would clearly require sociology departments to evaluate whether writing is important enough to justify a redistribution of resources. I have already made a case for why writing sections benefit undergraduates, but I would also argue it benefits graduate students and professors as well.

For graduate students a common experience in leading sections for mass classes is explaining or expanding on material covered during the lecture. Since so much material needs to be covered in sections, graduate students often feel that extra time spent on trying to take topics seriously takes time away from material that needs to be covered for exams. And even when time is spent focusing on a single topic in greater depth, the more complex knowledge and understanding of material students may gain cannot be properly evaluated in the types of tests given. For both students and graduate student instructors the structure of the class reinforces the superficial treatment of course material. Writing sections, on the other hand, would allow graduate students to cover a few topics intensively, allowing them to see and understand the common difficulties students have with sociology, as well as feel the excitement when their students can make and show complex connections between ideas possible through writing.

For professors the benefits of having writing sections may be less directly obvious. On one hand, they will need to be more careful in preparing class material, since material they cover too quickly cannot be "made-up" in sections. On the other hand, they are more likely to have students who are both

engaged in course material and likely to participate in the lecture class when the opportunity presents itself. Finally, in the long run professors may have the pleasant experience of reading well written papers when their students progress to more advanced sociology classes.

Another concern with having graduate students teaching writing sections is whether they have the training to teach writing properly. Although some training may be necessary, students who get into graduate school are usually the ones who have successfully mastered the type of writing necessary to do well in sociology classes. In addition, the stress within these sections is not on teaching the formal properties of writing, but instead on creating an environment in which writing is seen as intrinsic to learning and understanding sociological concepts. Having a short training period, where graduate students identify and make more explicit what constitutes good sociology writing, would therefore be the basis of training. Other skills, such as giving students proper feedback, and constructing challenging assignments could also be included in an orientation.

Although the importance of including writing in the mass class justifies the creation of writing sections, it may not be possible or feasible to implement this plan all at once. For this reason, two initial ways to implement more writing into the mass class are described. The first way to help students develop their writing is by including one major research paper in the discussion/quiz section. As suggested throughout this paper, the key to using a research paper to help students improve their writing would be to make sure that students get to work through the paper; getting help with how to gather and evaluate data, presenting outlines of their paper, and writing a rough draft before submitting a final draft.

The second option would be to create special writing sections for students desiring to improve their writing, taught by graduate students interested in incorporating writing in their teaching (see Stoecker et al. 1993 for an example of this approach). Students could get extra credit for enrolling in the class, for instance having it meet a departmental writing requirement.

CONCLUSION

Writing is increasingly becoming recognized as a vital part of the undergraduate education. Paradoxically, despite the recognition that writing is crucial to understanding and thinking about subject matter, the solutions being proposed to improve writing focus on recreating the link between writing and subject material outside rather than within the domain of the discipline. At larger universities, the shift to large mass classes has led to a corresponding decline in the amount of writing required by students. For sociology departments at larger institutions, this often means that first year classes require little or no writing. This has had a two-fold effect: that students get no practice writing for the discipline, with the concurrent lack of deeper analysis of course material. To remedy this problem, universities have developed "Writing Across the Discipline" and other related programs, but these are only partial remedies to the decline of undergraduate writing within the discipline. Although it can be argued that these writing programs serve as general writing classes until students choose their majors and begin taking advanced classes that require writing, this does not remedy the loss of writing as a means to think and learn about the discipline, unless we argue that people outside the discipline are better able to get students to think about sociology.

Having worked in interdisciplinary writing programs at two different universities, I would say that they are very useful in helping students become better writers. The goal of this paper is not to suggest that these programs do not serve an important purpose, but that sociology should participate in this trend by drawing on its own unique resources. The writing section described above can prove valuable to sociology in a variety of ways. For students "passing through" the discipline, it may provide the only chance to have them add depth to their view of sociology, perhaps remedying the status sociology has at present. For those who continue on with sociology it aids in their development as writers and thinkers, a valuable contribution to our undergraduate training.