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Sociology, Teaching, and Reflective Practice: Using Writing to Improve

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Abstract

The scholarly literature on teaching sociology contains relatively little about improving courses from one semester to the next. In this article, I describe a method for continual teaching improvement that is based on writing, the well-established practice of teacher reflection, and classical sociological principles. This method was developed through the analysis of nine semesters of autoethnographic data that I collected in the form of daily reflective notes. The benefits of this sociologically informed reflective practice include grounding evaluations of individual class periods and entire courses in empirical data, becoming more efficient with course preparation, providing one with a stronger sense of mastery as a teacher, and developing as a sociologist by using the classroom as a key site for engaging in praxis. This practice can help teachers refine individual courses, improve as an instructor in an overall sense and more deeply connect sociology to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Keywords

reflection, scholarship of teaching and learning, sociology of the classroom, course assessment

How do we, as instructors, systematically improve specific aspects of our courses from one semester to the next? How do we improve as instructors overall? And how can we use writing to develop as teachers and scholars? Although some scholars have examined the utility of student evaluations and peer reviews as means to improving courses (Gallagher 2000; Greenwood and Howard 2011; Lewis and Benson 2005; Sullivan 1995), a search of the literature, including the archives of *Teaching Sociology*, did not produce any articles on these questions specific to sociology. I asked these questions of many colleagues at different types of institutions, and most were surprised by my query. Some instructors cited instances of using findings from the scholarship of teaching and learning to improve their teaching or described doing occasional course assessments. However, not one instructor used a *systematic* method for improvement or collecting data on teaching effectiveness. Many asserted that teaching improvement simply comes with experience. Although these conversations do not constitute a representative sample, I believe that they, along with the lack of extant research, suggest a gap in the current scholarship on teaching and learning in sociology.

I began to write postclass reflective notes as a teaching assistant. At the time, I was unaware of the field of the scholarship of teaching and learning, so my notes were guided by the pragmatic goal of being prepared for the next step of my career. I noted what I found particularly effective or ineffective about my professors' classroom teaching.

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Later, when I taught my first course as a graduate student, my writing was focused on information that would help me the next time I taught the course. My approach grew more rigorous after I was introduced to the scholarship of teaching and learning at the ASA Section on Teaching and Learning's preconference workshop in August 2007. My workshop colleagues noted that they did not use a similar practice but were enthusiastic about my method. From there, I moved beyond the basic practice of teacher reflection and began to approach my classes and note-taking more sociologically by applying core insights from classic works by Mills (1959) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934; Reynolds 2003).

In this paper, I describe a method for continual teaching improvement that draws from the higher education literature on reflection in K–12 teacher training and is grounded in classic sociological theory. I developed the method using autoethnographic data collected in the form of daily reflective notes. The notes were written after every class I have taught at a Midwestern research university over a period of four and one-half years. This reflective practice enables me to assess the effectiveness of classes, become more efficient and precise with my course preparations, have a stronger sense of mastery as a teacher, and more deeply understand the relevance of sociology for the scholarship of teaching and learning. First, I briefly describe the history and practice of teacher reflection. Next, I discuss how this approach benefits from the application of sociological theory. Following that, I describe my data and methods and detail the proposed method for reflection and improvement. Then, I explain the benefits of this practice and conclude with some thoughts about its significance.

THE PRACTICE OF TEACHER REFLECTION

Teacher reflection is a well-established method for improvement in K–12 teacher education. The literature on this practice is vast, and a full review is outside of the scope of this paper. What follows is a brief discussion of the history, definition, goals, and methods of the practice. For excellent overviews, see Brookfield (1995), Cole and Knowles (2000), Fendler (2003), and Larrivee (2006).

Teacher reflection is defined in a variety of ways. Generally speaking, it refers to the practice of examining one's teaching in an analytical, critical way, with an eye toward improving and guiding future efforts (Brookfield 1995; Fendler 2003; Larrivee 2006). More specifically, the following are two conceptualizations that I find helpful. Lasley (1992:24) defines teacher reflection as the capacity to "think creatively, imaginatively, and at times, self-critically about classroom practice." Cole and Knowles (2000:2) conceptualize reflection as "an ongoing process of examining and refining practice, variously focused on the personal, pedagogical, curricular, intellectual, societal, and/or ethical contexts associated with professional work."

John Dewey's work is generally recognized as the first major influence on teacher reflection in education. His seminal *How We Think* (Dewey 1933) stressed the promise of reflective thinking for education by contrasting it to routine action that is impulsive, habitual, and unquestioning of assumptions. In the 1980s, teacher reflection gained widespread acceptance in the United States after Schön (1983, 1987), who drew on sociologist Everett Hughes's research on professions, and promoted the practice as a way to raise the professional status of teachers beyond the level of mere technician. Schön (1983, 1987) argued that reflective teachers learn continually and in more profound ways. Teacher reflection has become such an accepted and popular practice that it has inspired roughly three decades of commentaries, how-to manuals, classifications of reflective practice, meta-analyses, and critiques (Fendler 2003).

Reflection can be used to assess many aspects and levels of one's teaching, including specific classroom practices, behaviors, incidents, and assignments; learning goals and outcomes; and discrepancies between the instructor's beliefs and values (Brookfield 1995; Farrell 2004; Killion and Todnem 1991; Larrivee 2006). Furthermore, reflection can be accomplished via a variety of methods, including teaching logs and journal writing (Holly 1989), course portfolios (Cerbin 1994), lesson studies (Cerbin and Kopp 2006), autobiographical teacher narratives, examinations of critical incidents, support groups, and action research (Brookfield 1995; Larrivee 2006).

Brookfield (1995), whose work was influential in the development of my model, argued for expanding the sources of data for reflection. His proposed method brings together "four distinct, though interconnecting lenses": a teacher's own reflections, along with feedback from students, peers and colleagues, and the relevant research literature (Brookfield 1995:xiii). McKinney (2007) also stresses the importance of applying the scholarship of teaching and learning to one's teaching. These lenses allow instructors to "hunt assumptions" about our teaching and the beliefs and paradigms that we bring to the classroom, particularly where society's power dynamics and inequalities may be replicated within the classroom. For example, Brookfield (1995:5) examines an assumption that many college instructors would share: "It's common sense that students like group discussion because they feel involved and respected in such a setting. Discussion methods build on principles of participatory, active learning." Brookfield (1995) notes that although there are obviously advantages to this pedagogical tool, there are also disadvantages that become clear once one reflectively and critically challenges this practice: Discussion groups may reflect the power dynamics and inequalities of the larger society and provide a platform for some students to dominate others. Thus, by drawing on reflective notes, as well as feedback from peers, students, and the relevant literature, particularly in the scholarship of teaching and learning, we can gain insight into the effectiveness of our teaching approaches and practices, particularly in regard to power and in accepting assumptions that may actually work against us.

APPLYING SOCIOLOGY TO TEACHER REFLECTION

For the most part, the educational literature on teaching reflection focuses on the teacher's autobiography and pedagogical choices and on events that occur inside the classroom, such as problem students or difficult incidents. For example, one typology of teacher reflection examines three dimensions of reflection, along with the types of guiding questions that should be asked with each: (1) descriptive ("What is happening? Does any of this relate to my stated goals?"); (2) comparative ("What are alternative views of what is happening? How can I improve what's not working?"); and (3) critical ("What does this matter reveal about the moral and political dimension of schooling?") (Jay and Johnson 2002). There is debate over whether reflection should consider the effects of forces in the broader school and local communities (Larrivee 2006). Yet, as my note-taking progressed and my method developed, the influence of factors outside of the classroom was clear. The weather, the time of the semester, and national events (e.g., the 2008 presidential election), among many others, affected the success of entire classes or portions of lectures. As such, the methods and questions described in the teacher reflection literature seemed too narrow.

I began to apply classic sociological theory to the literature on teacher reflection beginning, most obviously, by placing my reflective practice within the sociological imagination. I drew from Mills (1959:6) in two ways. First, I thought about my courses in terms of "history and biography and the relations between the two within society." Our classes do not occur in a vacuum, and yet the practice of teacher reflection is not regularly extended to forces outside of the classroom, and even when it is, it is confined to the school or local communities. As sociologists, we know that is important to consider the connections between our experiences and the broader social context. Second, I used Mills's (1959:8) distinction between "personal troubles of milieu" and "public issues of social structure" as a frame for distinguishing between classroom problems that seemed to be tied to the individual class—that is, incidents that seem random or attributable to "a bad day"—and ones that seem more related to the structure of the subject, the course, or, possibly, the institution.

I also used symbolic interactionism to frame and refine my method. According to this theory, people work together to define situations and how to respond appropriately to them (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934; T. Reynolds 2003). For example, scholars have recently used this theoretical framework to analyze the experiences of feminists teaching sociology courses in men's and women's prisons (Parrotta and Thompson 2011) and to examine the impact of situational definitions on college students' drinking routines (Vander Ven 2011). Likewise, it is worth examining the definitions that

various groups bring to the classroom. Consider the clash of definitions of the situation that commonly occurs on the first day of class: Many students assume they will be given the syllabus and dismissed early, whereas many instructors recognize the importance of a well-executed, full first day of class and run the class accordingly (Brouillette and Turner 1992; Dorn 1987; Higgins 1999; Winston 2007). Similar situations are commonplace throughout a semester. For example, I may plan a weighty topic such as racial inequality for the day before Thanksgiving break, whereas students assume that we will not cover anything serious because of the impending holiday. Students and teachers frequently clash over differing definitions of the appropriate workload for a course (e.g., I frequently receive complaints from students about assigning a paper to a large-section Introduction to Sociology course) or the quality of work necessary to earn an A. Further, symbolic interaction emphasizes the importance of taking the role of others and understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the other (Mead 1934). My reflective practice benefited from taking the role of students in general, as well as more specific student roles. For instance, how might a particular class be viewed differently by a member of the honors college versus a struggling first-year student?

In the remainder of the paper, I discuss more specifically how I use sociological principles to compile and analyze my reflective notes, refine my reflective practice, and ultimately, improve my courses and my effectiveness as a teacher.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this paper are reflective notes that I wrote after each class period in sociology courses that I taught over a four and one-half year period at a large, public research university located in the Midwest. This department grants bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. My sample includes 14 undergraduate courses over nine semesters beginning in August 2007, including Introduction to Sociology, Race and Ethnic Studies, Inequality in Societies, Culture and Society, and a Sociology of Music course for first-year students. The courses were open to all students at the university, with the exception of Sociology of Music, which was limited to first-year students. The race, inequality, and culture courses required Introduction to Sociology as a prerequisite. The notes for these 14 courses total nearly 43,000 words.

I took the majority of the notes directly after each class period, generally in a 10- to 15-minute period of writing. Unless unusual circumstances arose, I blocked out this time in my schedule. When I was not able to write immediately after class, as was the case with back-to-back classes, I jotted brief comments on my lecture notes to use as prompts for full notes later in the day. This is a common practice for ethnographers in the field (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Lofland et al. 2006) and one at which I became skilled while conducting a two-year ethnographic study of a major corporation. The key with such a practice is to try to write the full notes as soon as possible, before one's memory fades.

Early on, I used the list of variables described below as a writing prompt (see the appendix for an outline); over time, the list became second nature. The entries vary from a length of roughly 125 words, when a particular class plan or topic has gone well over multiple sessions and there is little to write about or improve upon, to 400 to 500 words when a class needs revision or is possibly representative of a larger trend or problem. Although I try to keep the notes brief, context and specific details are important. I learned early on that some of my observations did not make sense the following semester without enough description.

During my first year on the tenure track, my focus was practical. All of my courses were new preparations, and I simply wanted to know what worked in each class day from one semester to the next. In my second year, while participating in a yearlong learning community for pretenure instructors who engaged with the scholarship of teaching and learning, I became more critical and reflective in my notes. I was introduced to Brookfield's (1995) important work and also began to think about my notes more sociologically. My objectives grew: I wanted to analyze my courses broadly (i.e., improving entire courses, and improving as an instructor overall) and narrowly (i.e., evaluating specific examples, class exercises, assignments, and segments of lectures and class periods), while

also working to refine the reflective practice that I was developing.

I also drew from autoethnography, a form of qualitative research in which the researcher is an object of study, reflects on his or her personal experiences, and connects them to broader cultural, social, and political contexts (Anderson 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2000). Duarte (2007) and Boyd (2008) have successfully applied this method to the scholarship of teaching and learning. I analyzed my data using the basic techniques of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). After the first year of note-taking, I coded my data for categories and emerging themes. At the end of each semester, I compared my latest notes with the previous data to revise the list of themes that guided my reflections. Consequently, these themes are both a priori (i.e., the current state of the method when I am taking notes during a course) and emergent (i.e., themes that emerge when I review notes at the end of each semester) and result from analyzing notes across all courses.

DESCRIBING THE METHOD

I developed the reflective method that is described here through both daily note-taking and the practice of reflecting on my notes after every semester. The questions and variables that are listed below are intended to be used as a guide for reflection. Although I rarely include every variable in the notes for a class period, I at least consider whether a factor had an influence on the day's class. Newly prepared courses or class topics generally result in longer notes; individual classes that have been consistently effective over time result in shorter notes. The following is the current state of the themes and variables that I consider when evaluating a class. My notes for each class are divided into the following three broad themes.

Theme 1: General Assessment and Contextual Variables

First, I evaluate the class in a general sense and discuss any contextual or environmental variables that might have affected the class. The notes for each class begin with a header that includes the date, how far into the semester we are, the main topic for the day, and the assigned readings: for example, *Week 4, Day 2: Second Half of Conley (2011) Chapter 3—Culture and Media*. Next, I briefly evaluate the class in an overall sense. A comment as succinct as "very good class" helps set the tone for the remainder of the reflective notes. Following that, I describe contextual and environmental variables that affected the class. The main benefit of considering these variables is to not overcorrect—that is, a lackluster class may be due more to factors outside of your control than to your preparation or class management. (On some days, it seems as though some spectacular combination of C. Wright Mills and Lady Gaga could not reach many students.) Alternately, a class that has gone well several semesters in a row, regardless of varying contextual factors, may not need any revising. The sociological perspective is key here, enabling one to distinguish between more structural course issues ("public issues of social structure") and the occasional mediocre class period ("personal troubles of milieu"). The following are some common influences and examples of each.

(a) Environmental variables

- Class attendance. Unusually low attendance may lessen the energy level in the room or make students wonder why they are present when most of their peers are not.
- Weather. Gray, rainy days or cold, snowy weather may depress the class vibe. Especially nice, sunny days can leave students either overly distracted ("I can't wait to get outside!") or energized if the weather has been especially bad in recent days.
- Room factors. I generally teach in an old building and have had a handful of class days negatively affected by stuffy, hot rooms. The physical arrangement of a room—for example, a room that is too large or small for the number of students or includes physical barriers that inhibit my ability to roam around the room—can also be a major factor. My least effective Introduction to Sociology course took place in an auditorium that was far too large for the class and made it

physically difficult for me to engage with students.

(b) Temporal variables

- Present time in the semester. Students are often apprehensive before upcoming midterm examinations or suffer emotional letdowns afterward. Furthermore, it is often evident when students begin to lose energy and focus near the end of a semester.
- Calendar or campus dates. A class may be affected simply by being just before or after a holiday (classes just before Thanksgiving can be especially difficult), during a major campus event (St. Patrick's Day turns into a daylong drinking fest for students on many campuses), or around the release of a new popular culture product (the release of the "Call of Duty: Black Ops" video game led to significant student absences in one class day).

(c) Instructor's mental state.

Although we strive to block out personal issues while teaching, it is clear that one's mood can occasionally affect a class or your perception of it. I once taught a class just five minutes after learning that my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. I have also taught classes shortly after receiving especially good news and suspected that my positive mood affected my perception of how effective the class was. Similar to students, instructors can wear down physically and emotionally near the end of a long semester. It helps to have a sense of humor when writing your notes. Discovering humorous comments that you left for yourself in a previous semester can be a nice source of relief during a busy academic year and can help you take bad days in stride.

Theme 2: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Class

Although I briefly describe the class in general terms in the previous section, this segment of reflection is focused on, but not limited to, four key questions. First, did the class meet the learning objectives for the day? This can be measured in a variety of ways. In my large-enrollment classes (generally 50 or more students), I use a classroom response system ("clickers") to ask summary questions at the end of every class and will note the general patterns and percentages found in the students' responses. For smaller classes, I judge the students' grasp of the key points by the quality of the discussion or by a "one-minute paper" approach that is commonly used by instructors (Stead 2005). Related to this is the question of whether the depth and length of my class plan was appropriate. Did we cover too much or too little material for the class period?

Second, was the balance of lecture, discussion, and class activities appropriate for the day's topic? Lower-division courses with large enrollments are often more suited to lectures, whereas courses with lower enrollments facilitate more discussion and the use of in-class activities and assignments. However, even with these two extremes, certain topics are more suitable for one approach or the other. This aspect of reflection helps me find the right balance between keeping students engaged with the material and lecturing to clarify unfamiliar topics or uncertain concepts. Here, I often note the surprises, such as class periods that I expect to be lecture-heavy but pleasantly evolve into quality discussions or classes in which I am disappointed by the lack of student interest and have to resort to lecturing to carry the day. In this section, I also include notes on class participation. For example, what percentage of the students participated? Were the students who talked the usual suspects—the "alpha dogs" of the class (Lewes 2009)—or did other students contribute more than usual? Do certain segments of the class seem to be more tuned in than others (e.g., majors vs. nonmajors)?

Third, did the class meet my expectations? Here, I generally note exceptions such as class periods when a class or topic goes much better or worse than I expected. For example, my expectations for a particular day might be lowered if the topic is one that students often struggle with (e.g., I find that students in Introduction to Sociology have a very difficult time comprehending hegemony) or the class is affected by one of the environmental or temporal variables (e.g., the day before a

major holiday). This could also include classes in which my high expectations are not met. For example, I may be disappointed by students' lack of preparation, by a class topic that usually generates enthusiasm and discussion but falls flat, or by my inability to guide a class in a specific direction. Symbolic interactionism is especially helpful here. Were my expectations for the class reasonable given the contextual variables described earlier? Did my definition of the situation seem to clash with the students' version? Taking the role of the students is important in this regard, as a check against my possibly flawed expectations. Overall, this question is generally more helpful for course preparations or class topics that are new, but it can also serve as a wake-up call for established class plans that have grown stale.

Theme 3: Revisions for the Future

The last section of my reflective notes documents aspects of the class that I felt were especially effective or were not based on my evaluation of the class, a comparison of the class period to previous iterations in the notes, and, often, student feedback. This section includes individual sections of the lecture, in-class assignments, discussion topics, examples (particularly helpful examples that were raised by students or ones that I thought of spontaneously and did not have in my notes), and video clips (too long or short, or not on target?). In doing so, I highlight changes that I want to consider for the next time I teach this particular class day. It is important to note the rationale behind impromptu decisions and the reasons why I felt that a particular segment of the class was not effective. For example, early in my practice, I occasionally jotted a note such as "Show less of Smith film." When I taught the class a year later, I could not recall why this particular clip did not work as planned, so I had to review the entire movie again. This cost me time that would have been saved with a bit more detail in my notes, such as "Only show the first 20 minutes of the Smith film, as the rest veers off-topic."

I also note major course changes here. At the top of each course's file is a section for more significant changes that I intend to consider when I teach the course again. Consolidating major changes at the top makes my course revision process more efficient. I group these changes by course topics and content; policies; examination-specific issues; and pedagogical issues specific to particular classes, such as classes that include clickers or research papers. Examples of these larger changes include dropping or adding entire topics or class days; revising the readings for particular classes (especially helpful when a new reading has proven to be ineffective); thoughts about a unit or section of a course as a whole, rather than the individual classes; common themes of student feedback that have accumulated throughout the course; comments on assignments and examination performance; and changes in approach to particular methods (e.g., deciding that in a particular course, following film clips with a brief writing exercise seems to be a useful approach). For example, broad changes I suggested for the next iteration of my Introduction to Sociology course included revising my policies on attendance and clicker points and revamping my week on race. After examinations, I often note changes that need to be made, especially if a certain concept was clearly misunderstood by a large percentage of the class.

Using the Notes to Plan

Although I keep the data for each iteration of a course in a separate file for archival purposes (e.g., Culture and Society, Spring 2010), the notes build over time and the most recent version is the up-to-date master record of that course. That is, the second time I teach a course, I refer to the original notes, and update them as I go along. If something worked in one semester, but not the other, I will note this—otherwise, the new notes reflect the current state of the course. The process continues for each iteration of the course. Textbooks revisions are a helpful comparison: That is, the ninth edition is generally a slightly updated version of the eighth edition. Likewise, the current notes are always an updated version of the previous set of notes.

When I plan a course for a new semester, I first consult the notes on the major course changes at the top of the file, which were described in the previous section, and then scan the notes for each

class period. As I plan each class period throughout the semester, I consult the master file for the state of that class. There is a continuum of possibilities. On one extreme are classes that have worked well several times in a row and need no tweaking. On the other end are classes that I frequently struggle with and that require a new approach. Generally, classes are somewhere in between—most things work, but a few aspects need to be revised. When I update my notes for a class period after it is over, the notes again reflect the new state of the class. Importantly, once I have taught a course a few times, the time required to update each class period decreases. At the end of each semester, I review the notes for the entire course and make any necessary final comments.

AN EXAMPLE OF CLASS NOTES

The following notes illustrate the method described above and are drawn from an upper-division Culture and Society course that I taught for the first time in spring 2011. These notes serve as a good example as they cover a variety of the issues and questions addressed earlier. The textbook referred to is *Mix It Up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society* by David Grazian (2010).

Week 8, Day 2: Grazian, Chapter 7. Beginning of a New Unit on Cultural Boundaries and Cultural Capital.

- First class after midterm exam. Day started off badly—went to library to get "People Like Us" only to discover that videos must be reserved online for the moment because of the library transition. Fortunately, about three-fourths of what I wanted to show is on YouTube, which I discovered last night, so the class was saved.
    - Next time: Think about if it's worth the trouble of getting the video. The sections on YouTube covered a lot of ground and maybe most of what I wanted to show. I need to revisit the teacher's video guide, but the only thing I can think of that was left out was the section on "The Trouble With Tofu" about the grocery store controversy in Vermont.
- They were wound up before class started. More preclass chatter than I can remember all semester. I joked about it when we started, and a few responded that they were excited "because it's almost warm." Also, it was after an exam, and it was sunny out (still cold), so that might have something to do with their elevated mood.
- Very good class overall. Prompted by Mark's question, I started out with an impromptu discussion about Charlie Sheen and the evolving cultural scripts of celebrity scandal/crash.
    - From the early 1960s to the early 2000s, the steps in a common script were: caught in or arrest for an act of deviance, apology/press release, rehab/Betty Ford Clinic, tearful apology weeks later (and maybe find god and new focus on work, family, etc.) on *Oprah/60 Minutes/Today/*etc. Now: mock and embrace the scandal—Sheen, Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, etc.
    - Consider adding as a subtopic next time.
- Showed about 35–40 minutes of movie on YouTube. Per usual, I had them write questions during. Very good discussion afterwards.
    - Next: Consider showing in shorter segments and have a discussion along the way about how the readings apply? Although the discussion was solid, there is so much material in that 40 minutes of film that I think they're missing some good examples.
- Had much to discuss at the end and could have kept going. Can probably get to additional material next time—the Sheen/scandal discussion took up approximately 15–20 minutes.

- Sensed that fewer of them read everything for today. A few students laughed nervously when I suggested that they might not have read because of the exam. First time it has seemed obvious all semester.
- No major changes for next time: solid class and plan. Added later while grading the final exam: many missed the subtleties of cultural capital, especially its exclusionary nature. Remember this for the next time.

This entry is somewhat longer than most. It was a new course wherein every class was newly prepared, which resulted in more thorough notes. I included the detail about changing plans because of the library mishap for contextual reasons but also for the insight it gave me into possibly changing my approach with the video in the future. Also, prompted by a student's question at the beginning of class, I decided spontaneously to discuss the Charlie Sheen story that was then dominating the news ("Winning! Tiger blood!") and relate it to course themes. This was an unexpected but successful part of the class, so it merited being in my notes. Thus, the level of detail is important. I explained two changes that I should consider making regarding the video that I showed on that day and also gave an outline for an extemporaneous class topic that might be worth including in my plan in the future.

Without reflection, it would have been easy to think of the class as a success and move on. However, viewing the class in sociological terms helped me understand how and why the class was successful. Applying a symbolic interactionist framework, particularly in terms of the definition and context of the situation, put the success of the class into perspective. Both the students and I had reasons to be in poor spirits: for them, it was the first class after a difficult midterm examination, and I was annoyed that my plans were disrupted by the library. If the class had gone poorly and I was not able to get a clear reason for it from the students, I would have had some contextual clues as to why. However, the class was positive and productive, and although it would be nice to attribute this to my performance in the classroom, I know that the students' elevated mood was due in part to the combination of the nicer weather and the relief of having the first examination behind them. Repeatedly seeing situations such as this in my notes has taught me to make the definition of the situation more explicit in certain situations. For example, I might tell a class that I am aware they are tired from being so deep into the semester. I will let them know how I feel as well and suggest that we work together to make a particular class period or subject matter more engaging. Students generally appreciate this sense of transparency and of all of us "being in this together."

BENEFITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Improving as a Teacher

Reflective practice yields several primary benefits for my teaching. First, I have become a more confident, skilled teacher through this practice. I have improved specific aspects of lectures and class assignments, refined my course preparations, and polished certain techniques. In my data, there are numerous instances where I used previous notes to revise my approach to a particular concept, broader topic, or assignment and observed that the revision led to increased student comprehension in the next class.

For example, my notes indicated that an Introduction to Sociology class on social networks and social capital fell flat two semesters in a row and led to disappointing student comprehension in both clicker answers and examination performance. Students seemed to understand the basic concepts but did not have a deeper grasp of the material. Based on my notes, I revised the class plan and added material on the six degrees of separation (Milgram 1967) and *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2001) and included a Web site that demonstrates how nearly every actor in Hollywood history is within six steps of the actor Kevin Bacon (P. Reynolds and Tjaden 2011). Since that change, the students have responded more positively to the material in discussions and assessments. Analyzing my notes led me to a similar breakthrough recently in explaining Bourdieu's (1984 [1979]; 2002 [1986]) concept of habitus. My teaching improvements

tend to be in line with these examples: That is, incremental, focused tweaks that help me enhance my classes and my overall performance rather than major "eureka!" moments that change my teaching in a dramatic way. This does not, however, rule out the possibility that major changes can occur as a result of this method.

The cumulative effect over time of incorporating reflective practice is that I have increased my sense of mastery as a teacher. This, in turn, has likely had a positive effect on student learning through my improved effectiveness as a teacher. Research across a wide range of contexts finds that high levels of mastery and self-efficacy are associated with a variety of positive outcomes including goal attainment, achievement of occupational expectations, and academic achievement (Gecas 1989; J. Reynolds et al. 2007; C. Ross and Mirowsky 2006). In the K–12 literature, self-efficacy is positively linked to students' academic and cognitive achievements (Ashton and Webb 1986; Caprara et al. 2006; Muijs and Reynolds 2002; J. Ross 1992). Taken together, this research suggests that students in my courses benefit from my increased sense of mastery in the classroom. Although I have no systematic data on student learning outcomes in my courses other than the grades and feedback I give to students, the qualitative and quantitative data from my student evaluations—both the formal university-administered evaluations and my own evaluations that I administer separately—indicate that students find my classes to be consistently challenging and valuable in terms of learning about sociology; my quantitative evaluation scores are always among the best in my department. I often share information from my notes with students and let them know that I have chosen to cover a topic a certain way—or do not cover a particular topic at all—because of my experience in previous semesters.

Improving Course Preparation Skills

Second, this practice has enabled me to become more efficient and precise with my course preparation. Planning becomes grounded in empirical data (reflective notes and my analysis of them) as opposed to one's often faulty memory because course-related issues are recorded when they happen instead of trying to remember them months later. The real power of this method comes from its iterative, accumulative nature. Presemester preparation becomes more efficient because the major changes are noted right at the top—ideally, with the context and rationale behind those changes explained. Daily preparation also becomes more efficient because you have a record of how successful that particular day was the last time you taught it, as well any specific revisions you wished to make. This is significant given that preparing for classes can often consume as much time as you allow it to. A key to success in higher education, especially for newer professors, is to learn how to balance effectively the competing demands of teaching, research, and service, which vary depending on the type of institution at which one is employed (Boice 1992). Reflective practice allows one to quickly focus on the elements of a class or course that need to be revised. An additional benefit is that more efficient course preparation allows me to spend more of my teaching-related time with students outside of class.

This reflective approach is also valuable when I am teaching a course or particular course topic after a considerable gap in time. I recently added a weeklong topic to my Introduction to Sociology course that I have not taught in nearly two years. Fortunately, my reflective notes simplified my preparation for this topic. The same benefit holds true when returning to courses that one has not taught in some time due to scheduling issues, sabbaticals, or other work-related interruptions. I will soon teach a course that I have not taught in three years—my file of reflective notes on this course will certainly ease my return to it.

By grounding one's course preparation in actual data and by noting the contextual factors that affect classes, one reduces the risk of overcorrecting when an individual class or an entire course is affected by factors outside of one's control. For example, I have taught Introduction to Sociology several times and feel that my plan is sound and not in need of much revision. Yet, a recent semester turned out to be my worst experience with the course. Although I felt that the course was successful overall and the student evaluations were again very positive, my data indicated far more instances of distracted students and low class participation than I typically find. I had been moved to a new classroom, a large auditorium that allowed stu-

dents (roughly 200–225 students on average) to spread out more and restricted how much I could control the vibe of each class day. Because I had several semesters of data on this course, I was confident that the semester was negatively affected by the room change and the various ways in which the auditorium affected the class environment and not by flaws in my planning or performance. This semester, in a different classroom, my data indicate that the class environment and level of student engagement have returned to the usual levels.

Improving as a Sociologist

Last, regularly writing notes to develop a reflective practice has helped me grow as a sociologist. Habitually viewing my teaching activities through a variety of sociological perspectives facilitates my use of the classroom as a key site for engaging in praxis. A core part of my research agenda is the study of micro-level and everyday processes that lead to the reproduction of inequality. Working at a university in a struggling Rust Belt region, where nearly half of our undergraduates are first-generation college students, enables me to examine processes and concepts—such as the use of cultural capital and the impact of interracial interactions—on a daily basis.

Over the past five years, I have taught nearly 1,000 students, which has resulted in an incredible number of scenarios, interactions, and contexts with which to examine, test, and reflect upon sociological principles. Although I do not conduct actual research on my students, the classroom has become an invaluable laboratory for exploring my interests in everyday inequality. Thus, I can deepen my understanding of the reproduction of inequality while simultaneously working to ameliorate it through a focus on quality teaching and learning. Note-taking and reflective practice inform my research agenda, which, in turn, informs my teaching. This has created an ongoing cycle of praxis that, I am confident, has made me a better sociologist, teacher, and mentor.

MAKING TIME TO WRITE

The time commitment that I described may seem onerous to some readers. Instructors with heavy teaching loads, adjuncts who teach at multiple institutions, and new faculty members who must balance multiple course preparations with research and service responsibilities might struggle to make time for a reflective practice based on daily writing. However, the method described here is flexible—it continues to evolve for me as well—and can easily be adapted to one's teaching load and institutional priorities.

I suggest that readers use this approach as a guide for developing their own method of reflective practice and teaching improvement. A teacher with a heavy course load could focus her note-taking on just one or two courses per semester—while considering that the contextual variables might apply across courses—or, perhaps, could write brief notes for all classes. For teachers with major time constraints, the key is not to follow this method faithfully but to focus on developing a reflective, writing-based practice that works for them. In this case, do not "let the perfect be the enemy of the good." Although I occasionally find it difficult to make time for my practice, I find, overwhelmingly, that the investment is well spent and pays dividends, as my course preparation becomes more targeted and efficient, and my sense of teaching mastery grows.

CONCLUSION

In 2008, I attended the Lilly Conference on College Teaching at Miami University. In his keynote address, noted teaching and learning scholar Dee Fink (2008) described how JetBlue Airlines had "homesourced" their reservation work to people working part-time out of their homes. Fink noted that JetBlue required their at-home workers to spend a minimum of four hours every month in professional training and keeping up with changes in the company. Fink remarked, "Is not college teaching at least as complex as making reservations for an airline?" and asked how many members of the audience had colleagues who spent that much time improving their teaching. Fewer than 10 people, in a crowd of several hundred, raised their hands.

It is crucial for teachers to question regularly, reflect upon, and improve their teaching practices. Yet, in my review of the extant literature, and in

conversations with a number of colleagues from around the country, I found little evidence to suggest that most sociology instructors routinely engage in such a process. I believe that readers will find the time commitment worthwhile, especially as the benefits of this practice accrue over time. Furthermore, this practice should be combined with other sources that offer insight into one's teaching practices, including feedback from students (midterm evaluations, course evaluations, and examination performance), colleagues (peer reviews or sharing reflective notes), and the research literature (Brookfield 1995). McKinney (2003, 2004, 2007) and McKinney and Jarvis (2009) also provide important insight into applying the scholarship of teaching and learning to one's teaching.

Noted researchers in the scholarship of teaching and learning have interviewed excellent teachers to uncover the secrets to their success, both in sociology (Persell, Pfeiffer, and Syed 2007, 2008; Rau 1993) and in the broader realm of higher education (Bain 2004). This work reveals award-winning teachers' thoughts on a variety of subjects such as preparing to teach, conducting class, teaching critical thinking, and, in sociology, approaching foundational concepts such as the sociological imagination, the social construction of reality, and structural inequality. McKinney (1988) used her personal experience and data from interviews with a dozen sociology professors recognized for teaching excellence to highlight five components of quality teaching: fairness, application, challenge, entertainment, and service. In closing, I suggest that a worthy addition to that list is a method for continual, routine improvement based on empirical data that are gathered through a disciplined writing routine. This reflective, writing-based practice can help readers develop and grow as teachers and, by viewing the classroom through sociological perspectives, as sociologists as well.

APPENDIX

The following list of questions and factors is extracted from the article and is meant to serve as a helpful guide for structuring your reflective practice.

- Header: Include date, the point of the semester (e.g., tenth week), the main topic for the day, and the assigned readings. For example: *Week 4, Day 2: Second Half of Conley Chapter 3—Culture and Media*.

1. General assessment and contextual variables.
    a. Evaluate the class in a general, overall sense.
    b. Contextual variables:
        i. Environmental variables: class attendance, weather, room factors.
        ii. Temporal variables: present time in the semester (e.g., the week before midterm examinations), calendar and campus dates or holidays.
        iii. My (instructor's) mental state.
2. Evaluating the effectiveness of the class.
    a. Did the class meet the learning objectives for the day?
    b. Was the depth and length of my class plan was appropriate?
    c. Was the balance of lecture, discussion, and class activities appropriate for the day's topic? Include notes on class participation.
    d. Did the class meet my expectations?
3. Revisions for the future.
    a. Highlight changes that I want to consider for the next time I teach this particular class day. This includes
        i. individual sections of the lecture
        ii. in-class assignments
        iii. discussion topics
        iv. examples (including helpful examples that were raised by students or that I thought of spontaneously during class)
        v. video clips (too long or short, or not on target?)
    b. Note the rationale behind class decisions and the reasons why I felt that a particular segment of the class was not effective.
4. Significant course changes (noted at the top of the file)
    a. Group significant changes by
        i. course topics and content
        ii. policies

iii. examination-specific issues
iv. pedagogical issues specific to particular classes (e.g., clickers or research papers)

b. Examples include
i. dropping or adding entire topics or class days
ii. revising the readings for particular classes
iii. thoughts about a unit or section of a course as a whole, rather than the individual classes
iv. common themes of student feedback that have accumulated throughout the course
v. comments on assignments and examination performance
vi. changes in approach to particular methods

NOTES

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BIO

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