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‘It Relates to My Everyday Life.’ Critical Pedagogy and Student Explanations of Interest in Sociology Course Topics

Educators strive to teach students about being responsible for their own learning, but they often deny the students the freedom of doing so. Although there is some disagreement over the core concepts of sociology, a sample of sociological leaders agree that the top five primary goals of an Introduction to Sociology course are (1) to understand the structural factors in everyday life, (2) to place an issue in a larger context, (3) to identify and explain social inequality, (4) to recognize the difference between empirical and normative statements, and (5) to compare and contrast one’s own experience with those of people in other parts of the United States and the world (Persell, 2010). Furthermore, in 2006, The Task Force on Sociology and General Education identified several general education learning outcomes to which sociology courses contribute, some of which include quantitative literacy, knowledge of society, diversity awareness and understanding, critical thinking, and collaboration and teamwork (Keith et al., 2007; Howard & Zoeller, 2007). From a student perspective, Howard and Zoeller (2007) indicate that students believe that Introduction to Sociology courses contribute to their general educational requirements—primarily critical thinking skills, integration and application of knowledge, and understanding of society and culture.

How do Introduction to Sociology instructors implement the necessary sociology core while keeping students interested and engaged? In any field of study, teachers may struggle to successfully do both. A teacher’s educational philosophy guides how, what, and why they teach topics related to the introductory sociology core. Educational philosophies can be student-focused or centered around the teacher; they can be pragmatic or progressive; they can prioritize the interests of society over the interests of the individual, or the other way around; they can even be a combination of some, or all, of these characteristics. Nevertheless, traditional approaches to education, such as conservative and liberal pedagogies tend to dominate classrooms throughout the country. Lecture is the pervasive teaching strategy; however, instructors also often utilize in-class discussion as well (Grauerholz & Gibson, 2006; Howard & Zoeller, 2007).

Traditionally, teachers have used a banking pedagogy, in which someone in a position of power determines what the students need to know and the teachers are expected to provide the students with that knowledge (Aslan-Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). Throughout history, educators have been solely responsible for teaching, while their pupils have only had the task of learning. Some sociologists contend that this

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one-way approach to pedagogy creates a culture of silence that reinforces power relations and propagates conformity and passivity among the students (Freire, 1974; Martin & Brown, 2013). Furthermore, through the banking concept of education, neither the professor nor the scholar learns as much information as possible.

Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, is relatable to conflict theory because they both challenge the status quo and encourage social change. Banking pedagogy disempowers students and teachers by hindering the students' thinking and preventing them from actively engaging in their pursuit of knowledge (Aslan-Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). However, the less prevalent philosophy of critical pedagogy opposes traditional, teacher-centered perspectives of education in nearly every way, therefore offering the greatest opportunities for student advancement (Widdersheim, 2013).

While all educators face challenges in creating a curriculum that finds a balance between departmental expectations and maintaining student interest, it can be particularly challenging for professors who teach Introduction to Sociology courses. They must teach topics that will be useful to both students majoring in sociology and students of other majors who are taking the course as a general education requirement. Introductory sociology courses may include students majoring in a wide variety of subjects who have many different interests. Under the current system, Introduction to Sociology instructors require students from all majors to study the same subject matter and then test them on the subjects using the same methods of evaluation. While college courses still consist of textbook readings, lectures, and discussions, many postsecondary educational institutions are now emphasizing the need for engaged learning (Bain, 2004). Students are beginning to be encouraged to express their unique thoughts and ideas in creative ways through hands-on classroom activities. Allowing students the option to choose the course content and the teaching style, through methods of critical pedagogy, is the one way to give them true freedom to express their individuality during their education.

Not all students share the same interests and goals, so not all instructors should teach the same topics in the same ways. Teachers who use critical pedagogy strive to give the students an understanding of the connection between what they learn in the classroom and the reality of the outside world, because this teaching method emphasizes hands-on, integrative and inquiry-based learning (Howard & Zoeller, 2007). The process of critical pedagogy gives agency to both the teachers and the students, creating a partnership, which allows students to have more input in their own educations.

Despite the extensive research done on the benefits of giving more power to the students, few practical methods have been found to implement the practice in classrooms (Braa & Callero, 2006). Rather, sociologists tend to discuss critical pedagogy as a general theory that allows for flexible application to different situations (Aslan-Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). Although this method of teaching seems to aid in students' development educationally, as well as personally and emotionally, most sociology teachers are somewhat reluctant to adopt this pedagogy (Sweet, 1998). Catering to the individual wishes of students will cost professors more time and energy. The rewards for students are worth the effort, but professors may not always have the time available to do so. In today's postsecondary education system, educating students is only one of many tasks of college faculty members (Sweet, 1998). Sweet (1998) further indicates that instructors are comfortable nurturing dialogue within the classroom setting, but few abandon traditional grading practices and truly surrender their power to the students. Institutional constraints appear to be the main deterrents; most colleges and universities have rules and practices set in place that may not allow critical pedagogy, as a whole, to be put into practice (Sweet, 1998).

The time-consuming nature of the critical pedagogical teaching style, as well as the standards of productivity required by most colleges and universities, cause teachers to face tough decisions concerning educational philosophy and career advancement. Do professors sacrifice tenure and publication success

to devote all of their time and energy toward student development, or do the students suffer in another traditional classroom setting so that the professor can ensure his or her job security? This is a difficult question that a number of sociology professors likely struggle with while composing their curriculum for each semester. Sweet (1998) offers a suggestion that may help satisfy the needs of everyone: work within the confines imposed by the institution, but also get student input on some of the shortcomings. This will help satisfy the officials of the college or university, while allowing the students to openly discuss institutional constraints placed on the professors and how that may influence the subjects they learn and the methods used to teach them.

Reflecting on the balance between institutional demands and critical pedagogy, the current study explores student interest of subject areas within Introduction to Sociology courses. It seeks to answer the question: if sociology instructors gave students the power to choose, what topics would the course content include? It is important to note that Introduction to Sociology courses often include non-major students, who may not feel that sociology topics are important or that they relate to their future careers. Thus, this study, which is an example of critical pedagogy implemented within an introductory sociology course, explores the relationship between students and subject-area interest. By implementing the methods used in this study into introductory sociology classes, students will likely be granted more power and control over course content and professors can also gain an understanding of general student interests pertaining to their course.

Data and Methods

This study evaluated the topics students would pick if instructors in these courses implemented a more critical pedagogical approach in the classroom. It is common for instructors to have the power to decide what topics may not be covered in order to focus on his or her preferred concepts in more detail during the term. In order to give some of the power back to the students and allow them more control over their

own learning, a questionnaire about sociological course topics was administered at the first class meeting, before the students had a chance to interact with the instructor in any meaningful way.

The current study was conducted using a sample of students in Introduction to Sociology courses at a mid-sized community college in the southeast. To encourage participation and to minimize questionnaire items, we did not collect demographic data in the survey. To give the reader an idea of the overall population characteristics, the majority of the college's student population was part-time, and the students came from a wide variety of ethnic groups: 35% were Caucasian, 31% were Hispanic, and 17% were African-American. The average age of students at this institution is 24, which is somewhat older than most traditional colleges and universities. All Introduction to Sociology courses at this institution are capped at 32 students.

During the first day of face-to-face Introduction to Sociology courses, students were asked to participate in a survey, which assessed their level of interest in potential course topics. A list of topics was provided in case students did not have any idea of the types of topics that might be included in an introductory sociology course. The questionnaire asked participants to rate their level of interest in 21 different sociology topics (e.g. global stratification, culture, and religion) using a Likert scale from zero to four: (0) not interested, (1) slightly interested, (2) neutral, (3) interested, and (4) very interested. Afterwards, participants were asked to pick three topics that they were most interested in learning about during the term. In an open-ended question, they were asked: "Based off the three you selected, why do you think you are interested in those topics?" They were then asked to identify three topics that they were not interested in learning about and asked to explain why they may not be interested in those areas.

After collecting questionnaire data, a quantitative codebook was developed to guide coding. Two of the authors independently read each open-ended response and created recurring themes based off his or her interpretation of the students' explanations of interest. Three authors

then collaborated to create the final agreed upon themes that seemed the most prevalent throughout participant responses. Ultimately, open-ended responses were organized into themes, such as “relevant to participant personally,” “controversial,” and “large societal influence.” All responses were then coded as no (0) or yes (1) based on whether or not the statement contained that theme. Responses that were left blank were coded as no response (2). Based off the coding scheme, each response could possess multiple themes. Allowing for multiple themes was necessary because sometimes a student’s response contained a variety of interests and different reasons for being interested in those topics. For example, the response “I’m an animal major, so the socialization of animals is important in my field. Environment is what drives my passions. I want to conserve and educate. I am gay so sex and gender intrigues me, because I can feel the social ‘disdain’ in public.” was coded as: “passionate,” “relevant to participant personally,” and “relevant to participant’s future life experiences/major/career.” After the initial coding was completed, two authors double-coded about five percent of the responses to verify inter-coder reliability and ensure there were no discrepancies in coding.

Results

The final sample size consisted of 191 students, who gave varying responses describing their interest in sociology topics. A majority of the students in our study were Undecided (N=37), followed by Medical (N=28) and General Studies (N=24) majors. We expected to have the most majors in our sample from the Undecided and General Studies categories because the community college where the data was collected from is one of the largest sources of transfer students to traditional universities in the area.

Overall students were the most interested in learning

about culture, deviance, race, and gender. Each of these topics had a mean score of 3.33 or above on our four-point scale. In contrast, students were the least interested in bureaucracy, the elderly and aging, urbanization, and the economy (mean scores of less than 2.65 for each topic). Not all student participants answered the open-ended questions regarding the reasoning behind their interest and disinterest in topics. Fifteen percent of students did not respond with an explanation for their interest and approximately 24 percent of student participants did not answer the question of why they were not interested.

Of students that explained the reasoning behind their interest, the most prominent theme was “satisfying a curiosity” (see Table 1). Approximately 38 percent of students claimed that their topic preferences were based on specific curiosities; for example, one student wrote, “I enjoy learning about how others live and what they believe is okay.” Student interest was also greatly dependent upon personal relevance to participant; 20 percent of participants responded that they were interested in specific topics because the topics related to them

Table 1. Student Explanation for Interest by Theme¹

Interested Themes	N	Percent
To satisfy a curiosity or interest	72	37.7
Other (very specific answer)	42	22
Relevant to participant personally	38	19.9
Relevant to participant’s future life experiences/major/career	22	11.5
Controversial/multiple perspectives	17	8.9
Relevant to current issues	15	7.9
Large societal influence	15	7.9
Familiarity with topic	14	7.3
Passionate about	13	6.8
Interest without explanation or insight	12	6.3
Religious beliefs	8	4.2
Essential topic everyone needs to be aware of	7	3.7
Important to future generations	6	3.1
Not discussed often/unmentioned topics	3	1.6
Nonsense Response	2	1

¹ Note: 29 respondents did not provide a reason for interest.

personally. As one student explained, “As a gay man, sex and gender always interests me. Why do people call things gay that they dislike?” Aside from personal relevance, approximately 12 percent of students chose topics that they believed to correspond with their future life experiences and careers, which was often based on their college majors. One participant wrote, “I believe they will help prepare me for what and who I have to work with or help in the future.”

Frequently, responses included material that did not fall into a constructed theme yet may have captured other themes that we did not classify; therefore, these responses were coded as “other.” For example, part of a student response categorized as “other” reads, “Are we forgetting about the elderly?” For obvious reasons, this vague statement is difficult to classify and thus fit into our “other” theme. As this was a very broad theme, it ranked the second most common in both the interested (22 percent) and not interested (17 percent) categories. However, because we did not limit ourselves to classifying each response to only one theme, statements classified as “other” may also have been categorized under additional themes. The quote from the student above regarding the elderly also had one additional sentence, which stated, “I want to learn about how other countries feel about liking the same sex.” This part of the student response was coded under the “to satisfy a curiosity or interest” theme. Therefore, the student’s entire response was coded as both “to satisfy a curiosity or interest” and “other.”

Overall, students did not clarify why they were disinterested in course topics to the same degree of specificity that they used when explaining why they would be interested. Similar to the interested responses, our results showed that the greatest number of respondents indicated that they were not interested in the topics because they were just generally disinterested. Approximately 27 percent of respondents claimed that they were not interested in the topics without describing a specific reason that would allow us to categorize their response in any meaningful way besides “not interested;” for instance, “Just not interested” was one of the responses coded as this theme.

Unimportance to the student was another determining factor for disinterest, with 14 percent of respondents indicating that they were not interested because the topics were unimportant to them or they simply did not care about them. Students indicated this by writing responses like, “Because they have less impact on my life when compared to the rest of the topics” or “Bureaucracy and Formal Organizations [are] not important to me.” Additionally, nearly 8 percent of respondents indicated that they were not interested in the topics because they found them to be boring or not thought provoking. One student responded, “They don’t really grasp my attention and don’t feel their [sic] very important.”

One theme that was found that explained both interest and disinterest was the level of controversy of the topic. This was particularly true if the topic centered on personal or religious beliefs. As an educator, one topic that comes to mind would be a class discussion on an issue such as abortion. A discussion on abortion could easily fit into many different topics within an introductory sociology course, such as gender, family, race, social class, or global stratification. Controversial topics, with no clear right or wrong answer, seemed to create the greatest split in interest and disinterest among students. For example, one student explained his or her interest was due to the grey area of the topics; “they seemingly have no right answer.” In contrast, another student wrote a similar response to explain his or her lack of interest as, “those always lead to arguments, because everyone has an opinion, that’s fine, but they don’t like everyone else’s [sic].”

Discussion

We found that most students were interested in specific sociology topics for reasons that would be coded under “to satisfy a curiosity or interest.” We coded these separately from the student responses that were viewed as “interest—without explanation or insight” because these students simply said that they were interested in the topics because they were interesting topics. Since general interest or curiosity is such a major factor in topic selection, course content could

vary significantly from class to class, constantly changing over time. Relevant topics students see on Facebook or other social media networks may make students feel more interested in sociological material. Of course, a lack of interest among some students is likely to occur no matter the course topic. Some students may also try to avoid certain important concepts if they find them boring.

Oftentimes, there is more material to include in an introductory course than time to do so adequately. Educators are usually the ones who determine which chapters or concepts will be cut from the curriculum. Using critical pedagogy is just a different way to address this problem that many instructors face when deciding what material to include beyond core concepts. When critical pedagogy is utilized, educators would be able to focus their teaching on topics students feel are relevant to their everyday lives. They may also be able to structure their classes to include topics that are at least slightly of interest to all of their current students, depending upon the specific interests of their students. Additionally, updating course curriculum based off student interest in topics could be conducted in any class size. This could be done through a variety of methods we did not use in our study, including the use of online methods to allow for automatic tallying of the results so students could see survey results by the next class meeting.

In addition to topics they find generally interesting, people tend to show more interest in sociological topics that are relevant to their current lives and their futures. The results from our study showed that “relevance to participant’s future” was a major factor for student interest, but not for disinterest. For the most part, students were most interested in topics because they found them to be relevant to themselves and their futures, but they were not directly opposed to learning about topics that were not related to their futures. However, if a participant considered a topic to be “unimportant” to them, it was a major factor in determining disinterest. Thus, theoretically, the student attitudes could be reflected in student effort. Since student interest increases for topics related to the students’ futures, teachers should consider

restructuring their courses to include material relevant to common student majors indicated by the surveys conducted each semester, thus encouraging interest in the course curriculum.

Another recurring reason for disinterest is that students find topics to be boring or not thought-provoking. The prevalence of the theme “boring/not thought-provoking” among not interested responses indicates that students clearly have a desire to learn and be stimulated by course material. Topics students view as boring could influence their motivation to learn the course material. For example, it is not surprising that a chapter on research methods would rank lower in student interest than a chapter on deviant behavior. However, the core concepts of sociological research methods could be spread out and covered within a variety of other chapters such as deviance or gender. This means that the material is not lumped together in one chapter that students may find “boring,” but it still allows instructors to include the core concepts into the introductory course. Certain topics are fundamental to an introductory sociology course and educators still need to teach them, regardless of student disinterest. It is impractical to only include the topics that interest students and exclude the drier topics that may contain vital information; therefore, teachers should incorporate the core topics into a wide variety of chapters, especially into those that evoke the most student interest.

Since interest and disinterest vary so greatly from student to student, the use of this survey, and critical pedagogy in general, is important for determining course material relevant to student interest, thereby increasing student engagement, participation, and potentially student success. This approach gives agency to both the teachers and the students, and creates a partnership among them, which allows the students to have more input in their education. This survey is an easy way for students to reap the benefits of critical pedagogy without costing professors large amounts of time and energy, making it a viable option for teachers who want to use a critical approach but face institutional constraints. While this study focuses on Introduction to Sociology courses, a similar process within

introductory courses in other disciplines can be utilized to allow students to exert greater control over their own learning.

As with all studies, the researchers encountered some unavoidable limitations. A major limitation of this study was the lack of detailed responses and sometimes-tautological reasoning students provided for open-ended questions about their interests and disinterests. Many students essentially said they were interested or disinterested because they were “interested” or “uninterested” without connecting their reasoning to their personal lives, careers, or other factors. This problem did allow one author to have a teachable moment by explaining the lack of detailed responses with her class as a major downside to open-ended questions in research. One of the authors of the current study feels our questionnaire could be refined to include close-ended questions with our themes as choices for why a student is interested or disinterested in a topic. Utilizing pre-constructed themes would clarify the respondents’ reasoning for interest and noninterest in topics; however, removing open-ended questions would limit the variety and detail of student responses. In order to allow participants the same freedom to express their thoughts, we could still include a space for “other” where students can write in their own reasons.

Another limitation with the study was that only one of the participating professors actually changed the course content based on the results of the survey. All other professors let their students participate in the survey, but did not make any syllabus changes based on the findings. As a result, we were unable to conduct pre- and post-tests, which would have allowed for a stronger statistical analysis. If more instructors did change their topics based on class data, we may determine whether or not the students noticed when the course content was altered to coincide with their preferences. We would also be able to compare an experimental group to a control group to see if these changes influenced student grades or satisfaction with the course. At this point, all we have is anecdotal evidence of students noticing the shift in power, which allowed them to help choose course topics.

For example, one participant – who was in the sample of courses in which the syllabus was changed based off student data – wrote about his or her experience in an anonymous student evaluation at the end of the term. The student wrote, “I knew from the first day when she took our votes on what we wanted to learn that... she was going to be a great professor. She was able to keep a lecture interesting and engage her students through humor and relevant examples so that we could actually relate...” Overall, including more professors who are willing to alter their course content based upon survey results would strengthen future analysis.

The most frequently occurring themes between both interested and disinterested student responses were based upon specific student preferences. Our results showed a large variance from participant to participant, which means that professors could observe a noticeable difference in student interests across semesters. By implementing critical pedagogical instruction methods, such as the survey used in this study, professors will be able to determine which topics will produce the most student interest each semester and change their curriculum accordingly, thereby increasing student engagement and control in the classroom.

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