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*A Descriptive, Longitudinal Study
of Sociology Majors: Lessons
Learned about Learning, Our
Majors, and Doing SoTL Work*

**ISU 2010 Teaching Learning
Symposium**

Overview of SoTL

- ◉ International, cross-discipline 'field' in higher education (societies, conferences, journals...)
- ◉ Encourages and offers opportunities for instructors to reflect on or study the learning of their students and to make those reflections/studies public
- ◉ The work is action research, local, often descriptive, small N sizes, part of a bigger picture...

**Kathleen McKinney, Illinois State University
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- ◎ To describe the development of ...
 1. the ability to use the sociological imagination,
 2. an identity as a sociologist,
 3. autonomous learning, and
 4. engagement in the disciplineby sociology majors over the course of their career as a major.

Prior Literature

- Most past literature on learning in sociology has focused on the following:
 1. learning related to a specific assignment in a course and/or
 2. learning by nonmajors in Intro. To Soc. or other specific courses
 3. and/or uses student satisfaction data only.

Participants

- 18 students
- members of one section of our first required majors course in the discipline
- started inspring of 2008

Thus this was a purposive sample within one cohort of our majors.

Methods to Gather Data

- Time 1: self-administered questionnaire; open-ended question on a brief application of the sociological imagination
- Time 2: open-ended question about learning in the first course
- Time 3: face-to-face interviews
- Time 4: self-administered questionnaire; open-ended question on a brief application of the sociological imagination; open-ended question about learning in the major

Overview of Results- Time 1

- average motivation in sociology courses (mean = 4.1)
- level of engagement in the discipline of sociology (mean = 4.2)
- confidence in ability to successfully learn sociology (mean = 4.2)
- the extent to which you are an independent or autonomous learner in college (mean = 3.9)
- extent you see yourself as a sociologist (mean = 3.4)

(all on 5 point scales)

Time 1

- ◉ Why you majored in sociology:
 1. liked the subject matter of the discipline
 2. want to help others

Time 1

- What helps you engage/feel passionate about sociology?
 1. applicability of sociology and 'real world' examples,
 2. learning about new ways of thinking and views of the world,
 3. interesting subject matter,
 4. learning about people,
 5. the passion of their teachers.

Time 1

- What could help you become a more autonomous learner?
 1. interpersonal (e.g., teacher, relationship with teacher, seeking help)
 2. behaviors by self (e.g., attending class, being responsible, working hard), and
 3. environment (e.g., autonomous supporting structure, few conflicts, few distractions).

Time 1

- Most students were ambiguous about whether they saw themselves as sociologists.
- The factors that related to those self perceptions included that they were still unsure about the discipline and were still learning, and that they were not yet or didn't plan to be a 'professional' sociologist.

Time 1

- Scores using the rubric to evaluate the responses to the sociological imagination question could range from 1= no valid, plausible sociological level/type of explanations to 5= excellent, multiple sociological level/type of explanations.
- Actual scores in this group at time one were 1 (46%), 2 (41%), and 3 (13%).
- What most helps you learn the sociological imagination: 'practice and repetition'; 'a teacher'.

Overview of Results- Time 2

- What did/are you learning in the first required majors course?
 1. study skills
 2. sociological theory and concepts
 3. the sociological imagination and thinking sociologically
- What helped you learn in the course? 10 of 19 responses focused on the teacher and teaching assistants while another 5 responses dealt with assignments and homework.
- Perceived barriers to learning in the course:
 1. the amount of work
 2. things going on in their personal lives

Overview of Results- Time 3

- Why you majored in sociology:
 1. liked the subject matter of the discipline
 2. liked courses/teachers
 3. lack of fit of previous major to interests or goals
 4. influence of an advisor
 5. own personal history/status (e.g., being a gay male).

Time 3

- Strategies that help you learn sociology:
 1. Good academic/study skills or strategies
 2. Interpersonal strategies and connections
 3. Application and relevance

Time 3

1. Students reported they are engaged in sociology or in sub-fields.
2. Characteristics of engagement in the discipline... going beyond what was required in a class, wanting to do the work, high levels of participation, applying sociology on their own, asking questions, and being successful and doing good work.
3. Increasing engagement... having challenging work, interested teachers, and class discussion as well as joining sociology club, asking questions, and taking certain classes.

Time 3

- The students appeared to struggle with the concepts of learner autonomy. Most thought that they were basically autonomous learners but this meant balance--balance between trying to learn on their own and looking for resources then asking for help when they needed it.
- Students thought extra resources such as extra/optional readings, study groups and sessions, and faculty members who are open to student questions can increase autonomous learning.

Time 3

- Students expressed a limited understanding of the sociological imagination.
- No one offered a concrete example of using sociological imagination.
- They said the sociological imagination was a “difficult” and “abstract” concept that was “hard to get my head around” and they “kept misunderstanding it” and some “still don’t really get it”.
- As to what helps them learn it, they stressed application.

Time 3

- Being a sociologist means...you think sociologically, are critical, ask questions, are open-minded about viewpoints, analyze society, and ask why.
- As to whether they identify as a sociologist, one student said yes but the others felt they were not yet sociologists or they were “junior sociologists”.
- They stated that this was because they still lacked something: the degree, significant contributions to the discipline, particular knowledge, or certain experiences.

Discussion/Tentative Conclusions

1. One of the main initial reasons for picking sociology as a major, 'to help people' drops out at Time 3. Interest in the subject matter of sociology remained the primary reason.
2. The students reported being engaged in the discipline at both time 1 and 3.
3. Students did not quite feel they were sociologists at either time 1 or 3 but defined this a bit differently over time.
4. At both time 1 and 3, students thought they were somewhat autonomous in their learning in terms of working on their own but knowing when and how to seek help.

Discussion/Tentative Conclusions

- The importance of the role of others and of application was a consistent theme in the student responses about increasing development and learning.
- This finding replicates similar student responses in past work in my program (McKinney 2007) as well as fit with key ideas related to identity formation, socialization, and the development of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda 2009).

Discussion/Tentative Conclusions

- Student responses related to using their sociological imagination at Time 1 were poor but expected.
- Responses at Time 3 were still weak.

Possible Implications/Applications

- Consider more/better ways to socialize students into the role of a sociologist.
- Given that using the sociological imagination is a critical part of the ways of thinking and practicing – WTP--(McCune and Hounsell 2005) in sociology, instructors, students, and student peers need to be doing more to help majors acquire deep and lasting learning about the sociological imagination.
- Given the students' emphasis on others and application as aids to learning, we need to consider how to strengthen and best use these.

Methodological Issues

- ◉ Measures
- ◉ Initial N size; access to students
- ◉ Attrition/student lack of interest in project

Overview of Next Project

**Kathleen McKinney and Melissa Busher,
Illinois State University**

- Focus on the learning and experiences in, and attitudes about, a sociology senior thesis capstone course
- Multi-institutional (ISU and four other schools)
- Multi method (pre and post questionnaire, focus groups, learning reflection essay, review of sample of senior theses)