



Reflexive Pedagogy and the Sociological Imagination

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Abstract: This article suggests that enabling students to develop their 'sociological imagination' is best accomplished through the use of 'reflexive pedagogy.' Reflexive pedagogy is here described as the dual process of guiding students through different modes of sociological learning while maintaining a critical and reflexive self examination of one's own approach to instruction. Using Jennifer Mason's (2002) description of the three ways of 'reading' data, this paper indicates that sociological learning can be seen to occur in three similar modes: literal, interpretive and reflexive. In progressing through these modes of learning, students are able to acquire the sociological imagination more fully. Further, instructors who model these practices by being transparent about their own pedagogical practice provide an example of how the sociological imagination can be employed even within the context of sociological instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Some fifty years after the publication of *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills, students of sociology often have difficulty grasping the "interplay of man (sic.) and society, of biography and history, of self and world" (Mills 1959:4). In this paper we suggest that in part this is due to our inability to publicly model our own sociological imagination given the compartmentalized demands that are all too often placed upon us. Michael Burawoy suggests that our professional lives as academics are divided into four separated compartments: public, policy, critical, and professional (2005). The tendency is for these areas to remain

distinctive, with little to no interchange between them. In what follows, we begin to demonstrate how the theoretical and methodological understandings derived from our 'critical' lives—that of our research work—can be incorporated into our 'professional' lives as instructors, and how the practice of what we call 'reflexive pedagogy' can open students up to fully grasp and cultivate the sociological imagination.

Our own research work has exhibited the importance of 'reflexivity' for our qualitative methodological practices and we have chosen to integrate this into our own pedagogical practice in order to introduce students to the sociological imagination. This occurs through the purposeful posi-

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tioning of ourselves in relation to the materials we choose to instruct, the university locations of our instruction, and, most importantly, as a purposeful process of educating our students. It is this dual process of self-reflection as instructor and engaging students into self-positioning within their own sociological learning that we describe as reflexive pedagogy.

In this article we draw upon some of our experiences teaching Canadian undergraduate students at both Memorial University of Newfoundland and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, to demonstrate an orientation toward reflexive pedagogy. These are two very different universities with distinctive student bodies and ethos, yet we believe our reflexive relation toward course instruction at these universities drew students into a mode of reflexive learning. The paper describes modes of interrogating qualitative data by Jennifer Mason (2002) as analogous to modes of sociological learning. Tailoring courses to integrate popular culture, questions of social identity, and relevant local concerns into sociology courses, is part of the distinctiveness of what we are referring to as reflexive pedagogy. Though this certainly happens to varying extents in sociology classrooms, we believe the modes of sociological learning outlined in what follows provides for a compelling pedagogical practice, specifically as it draws on an increasing centralization of the notion of the self and emphasizes both individual and collective identity.

Though there are a number of alternative views of pedagogy within sociology, we believe that issues of individualization (see Bauman 2000) and the concept of reflexivity (see Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994) provide the tools necessary for a new generation of sociology students to acquire the sociological imagination. This may "open up new and previously unsuspected possibilities of living one's life with others with more self-awareness, more compre-

hension of our surroundings ...[,] and perhaps also with more freedom and control" (Bauman and May 2001:10).

REFLEXIVITY AND INSTRUCTION

Reflexivity has been a fairly prominent term in sociological literature for the past twenty-five years, seen as the capacity of people to be both subjects and objects to themselves (Weigert and Grecas, 2003:280). It is also a core concept within the sociological theory of Anthony Giddens (1991), who with Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash brought the term its most prominence, specifically in relation to identity and social institutions. There has also been an increased awareness and call to use reflexive methodology when doing qualitative research, particularly with post-structuralist critiques of qualitative methods that made explicit the need for researchers to situate themselves within their data (Brewer, 2005). Within the framework of qualitative research, reflexivity is seen as a two-pronged understanding of the role of the researcher, both as someone who possesses knowledge and as someone pursuing knowledge (May, 2002). It is our contention that this understanding of reflexivity is also well suited for the practice of teaching, and specifically well suited for the practice of teaching sociology.

Within our own pedagogical practice, it is our intention to bring to our students a reflexive pedagogy that challenges them to recognise where they are socially located and question the knowledge they are trying to gain in sociology and to be reflectively mindful of our role as instructors in this practice. We will show that using popular culture and focusing on the everyday lived experiences of ourselves and our students amid course lectures allows us to tap into the students' knowledge of the social world and create an environment in which students themselves are able to be more reflexive. We are positioned as instructors who both demonstrate a way of knowing and

seek to learn from our students about their social world and the potential application of their sociological knowledge beyond the university.

In large measure, reflexive pedagogy intends to utilize and enrich the very framework of C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination, grasping "history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (1959:4). Mills' intention for sociology to study the intersection between private troubles and public issues must not be lost in our instruction of the discipline, and although this was problematic in his own life (see Brewer 2005), it is essential that we reflexively draw upon our own biographical histories and those of our students. The distinctiveness of reflexive pedagogy lies in the contextualization of the self in the learning process for both instructor and student. How we reflexively evaluate the intentions we have for our courses and how this influences its delivery is certainly analogous to our reflexive positioning within our research, something that again must always be considered in the practice of instruction. We articulate our own experiences with this a bit more below, but we must also recognize that the development of students' reflexivity can be conceived of as a process, and it is to an understanding of this process that we now turn.

SELF POSITIONING AND MODES OF LEARNING: AN EXAMPLE FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND (MUN)—LYNDA'S REFLECTIONS

MUN's main campus is located in the provincial capital of St. John's. It is the largest university in Atlantic Canada that had approximately 17,000 students during the time I was an instructor. It is the only university in Newfoundland and Labrador; therefore it serves a unique function. Its mission states in part:

Memorial University recognises a special obligation to educate the citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador, to undertake research on the challenges this province faces and to share its expertise with the community (www.mun.ca/memorial/mission.php).

Part of this obligation becomes manifested in the composition of the student body. Close to 95 per cent of my students are from within the historically isolated and marginalised province. This means that the undergraduate classes are relatively homogeneous, with the most noticeable distinctions being those from St. John's and those from rural 'outports' and smaller communities.

In preparation for course lectures, I was acutely aware of the position of the students and myself in two distinctive ways. First, right before students started coursework at the university, a yearly 'news' item came out about what first-year university students had never known life without—that year's list included *The Simpsons*, Personal Computers, and CNN. While I recognize that as a young graduate student at the time I was not much older than they were, this information reminded me of how integrated these popular culture references were to daily life. I realized that my lessons needed to be sensitive to the fact that these students had more personal contact with mediated pop culture than I had at the same age due to a proliferation of information and communication technologies.

Second, as a "CFA," a Newfoundland term for one who "comes from away," I needed to be sure that when I prepared my lessons they spoke to the Newfoundland culture. As citizens of the newest Canadian province, they had limited exposure to earlier socio-political realities within Canada and any notion of national identity came second to their identity as Newfoundlanders. Yet, despite relative geographic iso-

lation, Newfoundland was not isolated from predominantly American television. Classroom discussions often revealed that students tended to be more aware of events and popular culture trends in the United States than they were of these in Canada. Given this, I purposely chose to use examples that were either Newfoundland specific or that drew upon American popular culture, though I intentionally used other opportunities to integrate Canadian specific examples as further illustrations of sociological concepts.

In an introductory course—Principles of Sociology—one of the concepts that I paid particular attention to was ‘agents of socialisation.’ My desire was to have my students see how our identities are shaped by various social institutions and groups of people, and how they internalise the ‘messages’ they receive from different social institutions. As will become apparent below, this process engaged students in what we describe as three modes of learning that parallel Jennifer Mason’s description of three modes of data analysis.

First, the course began with straightforward textbook learning. I had the students read the chapter on socialisation in an introductory sociology text, specifically *Sociology: First Canadian Edition* (Schaefer & Smith, 2004). This text defines ‘agents of socialisation’ as: “those groups and people who influence our self-images, attitudes, and behaviours” (99). The text itself focuses on family, school, peer group, mass media and technology, workplace, and the state, and my course lecture largely reiterated these while also giving more concrete definitions for each of these institutions. Though these basic definitions did provide for common ground for ensuing discussions, this abstracted view rarely connected with students at any sort of personal level.

My next focus was on providing examples to contextualise how agents of socialisation influence the students’ everyday lives. For example we discussed how the in-

creasing number of working mothers means that daycare has an increasing role in shaping people’s identities; the idea that there is a ‘hidden curriculum’ at schools which teach more than just academic material; and that peer groups and parents often create conflicting identities amongst teenagers. Examples such as these are common practices within sociological pedagogy, and served as points of discussions to start the students off toward thinking critically about their own identities.

At this point I showed the then recent documentary *Bowling for Columbine* by Michael Moore. Most students that year had not yet seen this film that explores gun violence in America by using the high school shooting rampage in Columbine High School, in Littleton Colorado, as a case study. Before the documentary began, I asked the students to watch for agents of socialisation. They watched as Moore’s film weaved together the threads of influence, what students began to recognize as agents of socialisation, on the two teen shooters. They saw these two shooters in light of their social context, as the film showed students at Columbine High School, acquaintances of the teens, representatives at Lockheed Martin, K-Mart, Matt Stone (co-creator of *South Park* and graduate of Columbine), victims’ parents, Marilyn Manson, and clips from Charlton Heston’s speeches at National Rifle Association conventions. After viewing the film students were readily able to identify the various agents and start to interpret and critically think about how each one had some influence on the shooters—peer groups that made outcasts of the two boys, military families that provided some direct exposure to weapons, state sanctioned mass violence, Marilyn Manson’s music which encouraged teens to engage in violence, and more. Through the use of this film, students demonstrated that they were able to take a concept that they had been given a definition for and use it to interpret a specific social context.

Though it was heartening to see students use this concept of agents of socialisation as a means for interpreting something tangible in pop culture, I wanted them to start to be able to see how it works in their everyday lives. For most of these students, this was the first term of their undergraduate career and they were not used to looking at their own lives in the context of their education. However, when the question of how agents of socialisation affected how they saw themselves was posed, they readily talked about how things like the choice of university was shaped by parents, peers, and schools. They discussed membership in cliques and interactions with bullies, some even admitting they themselves were once bullies. Pop culture and fashion also came up, students talking about how what they decided to wear identified them with certain groups.

The discussion demonstrated how students began to challenge the self-assumptions they held about their identities. Identity, and identity formation, was not merely a matter of their choosing, but was rather clearly social in nature. Future discussions that integrated the importance of Newfoundland culture and how it shaped their sense of identity became progressively more important in subsequent weeks. Though not all students were readily willing or able to begin 'thinking sociologically,' many began to place themselves within what is described below as the production and consumption of knowledge—something that was nearly absent from their previous educational experiences.

AN EXAMPLE FROM QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY—JASON'S REFLECTIONS

Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, prides itself in being one of the top universities in Canada. It is an institution that seeks to remain an internationally rec-

ognized research intensive university, and boasts almost 14,000 undergraduate students with an average entering grade of 87% from Canada and over 90 other countries. Many of these students come from affluent backgrounds, and a high percentage attended private schools.

The university's heritage and high expectations are things that new students are made well aware of in their first days on campus, with cultural traditions glorified, rival Canadian schools disparaged, and administrators ritualistically affirming new students as the 'best of the best.' This institutional fervour and the social expectations laid out for these students, hundreds of whom choose sociology as their major, is often subject to a fair bit of scrutiny from the very first introductory course in sociology and beyond. Students who choose to pursue a degree in sociology are often made aware (though to differing extents) of the taken-for-granted nature of the rhetoric of the institution, and increasingly are encouraged to question the social world(s) to which they belong.

For my part, having taught two different second year courses for several years, engagement with students at the level of their current social position begins with questioning the social nature of the world around them. For instance, though almost universal in the developed world, references to information and communication technologies such as instant messaging programs and the online networks of 'facebook' and 'twitter' made relevant and tangible the concepts of sociology for students at Queen's. One of my students posted in an online class discussion board at the end of term that he specifically appreciated the numerous discussions about these new social technologies because "after much deliberation we begin to identify and understand those inner social structures and institutions, which we all seem to adhere to in our daily social lives" (Second year Social Psychology student, Web post-

ing).

Orienting class discussions toward the lived reality of these students and their use of the internet clearly worked well in my courses as they were about microsociology and an evaluation of the social nature of new technologies. Yet it was the design of these courses that allowed for the application of sociological knowledge to both interpret the social world and to reflexively evaluate the student's position within that social world. In these courses, students were evaluated on the basis of examinations, article response papers, and class participation. While the participation practice will be discussed in a moment, the choice of content within examinations and personalised response papers was purposefully oriented to an integration of the three different modes of learning. The course examinations contained questions drawn directly from the course materials, both in the form of multiple choice questions and short and long answer questions. This required students to appropriately select either information raised in the course or simply reproduce information in an essay form. However, in the short and long answer sections, the students were informed that their answers must also be interpretive in nature, connecting and comparing their response to the questions with their perceptions of how sociological concepts exist and can be understood in the social world within which they function. In addition, the long answer essay in these examinations often gave the student the option of going beyond this integrative framework and to position themselves into a more reflexive way.

Course lectures, even in sizable classes of 75 students, also were geared toward discussions that engaged the student to think about their particular social position using sociological concepts. These discussions were intended to raise a student's awareness of how certain sociological concepts helped make sense of experiences. For instance, the prevalent psychological notions

of an independent or a priori notion of 'self' were contrasted with more sociological understandings of the self as a social creation and on-going activity. As with Lynda's case above, this was made tangible through the use of pop culture mediums—movie and television clips—to demonstrate how social relationships affect the social formation of the self. One of the most relevant clips was from the movie *Castaway* starring Tom Hanks. Even with his complete social isolation on a desert island, the social was demonstrated as ever present as the character was able to bring with him the social knowledge (such as songs, skills, language, etc.) he had maintained prior to his isolation. Admittedly, it would be naïve to think that an examination truly engages students in more ways than a reiteration of what has been taught in class or the ability of students to compare and contrast different ideas. Yet, the integration of questions that ask for students to personally reflect on how they connect with course materials allows students to potentially move beyond simple 'book learning.' This occurs further in the context of course assignments that requires students to either directly or indirectly position themselves within the sociological conceptions they have learned (and are increasingly able to compare). In lieu of writing full term papers for these courses, my courses used reflexive assignments designed to have students position themselves in the context of their own sociological learning. Assignments took the form of article response papers which required students to both reiterate the ideas and concepts in a selected article and to make comparisons with other course materials. However, the most intensive portion of the paper required students to make personal critiques of the concepts raised and/or demonstrate how the knowledge presented in the article applied directly to their everyday lives.

Clips like this and discussions that surround frequently used information technol-

ogies, helped students to grasp both the literal and interpretive modes of sociological learning. It was when questions were raised regarding their specific use of these products—like new mobile phones for instance, or their personal reading of an advertising campaign such as Dove’s recent campaign for ‘Real Beauty’—that students demonstrated a knowledge and critical awareness of their own social position(s). This was observed both in class discussions and, perhaps more importantly, in an online discussion board where further reflexively-oriented questions were posed for students to respond. The course discussions, in class and online, also allowed for a full integration of relevant life experiences within these courses.

Throughout the process of presenting course materials to my students, I was also cognizant of my own social position in the teaching process and publicly reflexive about this. For instance, as a graduate student in a university in which there were also undergraduate students, I discussed our mutual pursuit of a university degree as the acquisition of a particular ‘brand.’ My critical assessments of the role of institutional learning, specifically this at Queen’s University, were always connected with my own awareness of my social position within the institution. I actively made clear my own political, social and philosophical biases publicly and suggested the ways in which these influence my thinking and my selection of course materials. The very act of instruction with the intention of helping students become sociologically aware, to grasp the sociological imagination, both caused and required from me to be more reflexive in my teaching practices.

REFLEXIVITY AND STUDENTS

In our experience, the academic orientation of undergraduate students, based on the skills acquired at a secondary school level, has been toward a reproduction of

knowledge. Students are taught the means for properly articulating knowledge on the information they are presented or that they are able to research, but this is done in a very literal fashion, with limited critical or reflexive engagement. While this practice provides for foundational learning, it is only a first step toward recognizing how knowledge itself is embodied. We have employed strategies in our pedagogy to draw out more critical and reflexive modes of learning which bear evidence of this embodiment.

As is evidenced in recent qualitative research literature, it is important to recognize how the engagement with data/information, whether from empirical research or sociological teaching, by both an instructor and researcher serves to produce knowledge in particular ways. Jennifer Mason (2002) argues that researchers need to ask difficult questions of their research and of themselves as they begin to articulate the knowledge being produced through their work. In particular, one of these difficult questions is: how does one ‘read’ the data we collect? Mason suggests that we can divide the ways of reading this information into three distinctive modes: literal, interpretive, and reflexive (2002: 149-150). It is our contention that this helpful means of engaging research data and understanding the questions we ask of that research can be extended for us as instructors to the way in which we engage in teaching. We believe that as instructors we need to guide our students through these different modes of learning sociology as best as we can with the goal of equipping them with the necessary tools to gain the sociological imagination.

Mason’s discussion of a literal reading of data suggests that the researcher focuses directly on the content of the data, including its style, structure and form. She suggests that this mode of reading data centers its attention on “documenting a literal version of ‘what is there’” (2002:149). Likewise, we

Table 1: Connecting data to learning

	Data (based on Mason, 2002)	Learning (Harling Stalker and Pridmore, 2009)
Literal	Content, style, structure and form	Memorization and reiteration of core definitions and concepts
Interpretive	Contextualisation, synthesis, comparison	Concepts contextualised within the everyday lived experience, rudimentary critical analysis
Reflexive	Locating the researcher as part of the data generated	Critical conceptions of self within the context of learning

hold that it is essential that students are equipped and become increasingly comfortable with the terminology of the discipline in a very literal form. As is evidenced in our own teaching practices outlined above, this occurs through definitional discussions of basic concepts, in which students grasp the fundamental meanings of sociological ideas as data to draw upon for future use. As a literal mode of learning, this includes the basic memorization and reiteration of core definitions. It is through the basic acquisition of concepts' meanings that students can begin to converse within sociology. At this literal mode of learning, students are merely reproducing established concepts at the core of the sociology cannon.

As Mason suggests in her discussion on literal readings of data, this mode of learning cannot be clearly delineated from other modes of learning, particularly since it is impossible to separate definitions given from the instructor or the student's interpretation of them (*ibid.*). Instruction of basic sociological concepts—norms, values, social facts, etc.—is always presented in conjunction with comparative examples. These comparative examples form the basis of what we call an interpretive mode of learning, corresponding to Mason's interpretive reading of data. In this mode, concepts are

contextualized within everyday lived experiences—students are encouraged to ask how the sociological concepts they have learned through definitional practice occur in their everyday life. In this process, students begin to interpret the society and culture within which they are located and to synthesize the sociological information they have acquired. As suggested above, though literal and interpretive modes of learning are intertwined, the distinctiveness of this latter mode lies in the student's increasing ease in making critical comparisons between sociological concepts and everyday ideas. In the interpretive modes of learning, students are readily engaging in rudimentary forms of critical analysis on a continual basis.

One of the more effective ways we have found to engage students in a more critical dialogue with their social world using sociological concepts is through popular culture. We have found that in using these examples, specifically because of its pervasiveness in the everyday lived experience of our undergraduate students, we can draw upon its easily accessible and recognizable form and content for the purposes of social comparisons. Our discussions of movies and technologies facilitate a contextualization of the sociological concepts learned at a

literal level, and assist students in a move toward an interpretive mode of learning—a synthesis and comparison of their sociological knowledge. By applying sociological concepts to popular culture, our students are encouraged to see the many complexities that exist in a taken-for-granted social world that surround them.

As students gain a sense of their place in this social world and a knowledge of their immediate social and cultural milieu (May 1998), they begin to understand a basic sense of what we refer to as the reflexive mode of learning. Jennifer Mason's employment of the term reflexive is intended to help us recognize the 'situatedness' and 'contextuality' of sociologists in reading empirical data. It is intended to assist in the sociologist's articulation of his or her own influence over the analysis of the interrogated social world. Mason suggests that such a reading of data necessarily locates the position of the researcher as part of the data generated, exploring the roles and perspective in the process of the "generation and interpretation of data" (2002: 149). To incorporate such a concept from a research setting into a pedagogical setting, we rely on Mason's understanding of reflexivity as "critically thinking about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions and recognising the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape...what you see" (5).

This leads us to a key question about reflexive pedagogy—what does it mean to learn and teach reflexively? Reflexive learning involves students developing critical conceptions of self within the context of the material they are learning. Not only do we want them to be critical of the social world around them, but also to be critical of their position within the social world. Our practices in the classroom were an attempt to have students challenge their own self-assumptions, and to do an evaluation and critique of where these assumptions come

from and how they shape their learning. This in turn encourages a self-awareness of one's own learning, where they realise the placement of self in the production and consumption of knowledge. This reflexive mode of learning allows students to become aware of their 'social identity'—the point of tension between an internal sense of self and an externally imposed identification (see Jenkins 2004).

At the same time, our pedagogical practices were designed to model our own reflexivity. At almost every juncture we indicated our intentions for what we taught and why we chose to use specific texts, specific marking practices, and specific areas of learning. The emphasis in indicating why and how our own personal histories shaped a particular course and our intentions for focusing on reflexive learning is what is distinctive in reflexive pedagogy. Whereas critical and feminist pedagogy maintain a political focus on issues of power and oppression, reflexive pedagogy seeks to position the social self—of both the instructor and the student—within the larger context of these external forces. Reflexive pedagogy attempts to query the tension that exists between structure and agency through a particular focus on the self and its relation to the production and consumption of knowledge. It is through this reflexive pedagogy that students are further enabled to grasp the sociological imagination. Although our own approaches are distinct, and in recognition that every instructor's approach is unique, we believe that the model of reflexive pedagogy is a productive means for us, both students and instructors, to "achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within [ourselves]" (Mills 1959: 5)

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the modes of learning discussed in this article and derived from Jennifer Mason's discussion of

reading data—those of literal, interpretive and reflexive modes—may to some degree be seen as analytically distinct. However, they are not meant to be practically or even empirically separable at all times. In emphasizing and relating concepts to everyday life and in drawing on forms of popular culture to make sociology tangible and relevant to students, the basis for a very practical and reflexive form of learning was created. As our personal experiences demonstrate, we suggest that as instructors in sociology we should attempt to construct a social space in which students are encouraged to engage in a reflexive mode of learning and one in which instructors model this reflexivity in their own classrooms.

We believe that reflexivity itself serves to ground our own and our students' concepts of self-agency and self-motivation. The focus on the self distinguishes reflexive pedagogy from other forms of pedagogy, and while not discounting their attempts to engender political awareness and action among students, reflexive pedagogy's concentration is on the ongoing unfolding and negotiation of position and role of agency within power structures. Instructors demonstrate this by example, recognizing reflexive pedagogy as a dual process of students learning reflexively and instructors themselves being reflexive about their course materials and students. In this practice, instructors locate themselves within the presentation of course materials and employ the three modes of learning—literal, interpretive, and reflexive—to assist students in placing themselves within the learning process.

One of the ways we have found helpful for students to grasp this learning process is through the use of tangible popular culture examples. In this, we attempt to direct our students toward questions about their personal adaptations and reactions to their social identity. As such, we highlight the external and internal elements that constitute our placement and understanding of

the social world. It is our aspiration therefore, that through reflexive pedagogy students truly develop a sociological imagination—grasping “history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills, 1959: 23). Reflexive pedagogy is a purposeful attempt to guide both instructors and their students toward recognition of self and their own self-assumptions.

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