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Reflections on first sociology learnings: the phenomenology of sociology

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REFLECTIONS ON FIRST SOCIOLOGY LEARNINGS

1. INTRODUCTION

Tertiary students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds can find the study of sociology a confronting experience. By implementing reflective practice, students make connections between their own lives and the sociological theories they study. In this paper, a socially and culturally diverse cohort of students from the culturally diverse and low socio-economic environment of Melbourne's western suburbs were asked to reflect on the learning of sociology, a discipline that traditionally views the social world from an objective perspective, where the research and thinking is directed toward considering the discipline as a science, outside the self. Students were invited to bring that knowledge to their immediate and inner experience, by writing guided reflections on what interested, inspired, and enlightened them about their introductory engagement with sociological theories. This application of reflection as a pedagogical practice was found to be transformative for both the student participants in the study, the pedagogy of educators in the course as teachers of sociology, and potentially sociology as a discipline.

2. BACKGROUND

Recent work in the education of oppressed groups, such as refugees, have emphasised the importance of "agency" in the pedagogical process (Baak, Miller, Johnson and Sullivan, 2022). Furthermore, transgressive ego-protective resistance to assessment processes in the classroom have thwarted many attempts at growth-oriented pedagogy (Harris, Brown and Dargusch 2018). Even more recently, the importance of 'non-academic attributes' in initial teacher education has been emphasised (Sheridan, Coleman and Durksen 2021). A shift in focus from dry 'chalk and talk' teaching methods in classrooms to utilising reflection as a means of learning has elicited research on perspectives on teaching students from traumatic backgrounds and the potential for reflective circles (Southall, Gardner and Baxter 2021). This research paves the way for utilising initial teacher education students' reflections on their first encounters with sociology.

This research is concerned with grassroots knowledge, or knowledge that is sourced from students' own experience and background, or the social and cultural capital they bring to the classroom. I am therefore interested in literature that challenges social and educational conventions, such as Freire, for example, and those who have explored the value of grassroots sociology. For example, Burawoy (2005) argues there is a distinctive "organic public sociology" (p5), that includes, for example, sociologists working with a labour movement, neighbourhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, or human rights organisations. In the dynamics of resistance and emancipation, "public sociology" engages in this project of "mutual education" with 'subaltern counter politics' and questions of who and what constitutes a public involves sociologically informed questions of power, structure, oppression and justice, and about the dynamics of resistance and emancipation." (Burawoy 2015, p.8) This process of questioning authority and encouraging resistance can be deeply problematic in a classroom setting that relies on the operation of authority to maintain power. By cultivating students' reflections and voices in the context of sociology studies, we risk what I would call an informed disengagement, where students begin to see the problems with class, power, and authority, and choose to disengage with the system, as they understand themselves as members of a subaltern class within that system. Rather than resist this, as a teacher of sociology, I believe it is more fruitful to teach from the perspective of the oppressed classes, or the subaltern, and to consciously include these groups in our definitions and portrayals of the public.

This disruption and redefining of the public is an overtly transgressive and a political act that occurs within the classroom and is founded in the notion “that all sociological knowledge can be mined for its pedagogical significance” (Halasz & Kaufman 2008, pp. 301-317). The idea of social pedagogy is crucial to our sociology class in the Diploma of Education at Victoria University, where students are asked to reflect on learning about class, race, and social inequality, connecting these with one’s own experience and observations. Dewey (1859-1952) Freire (1972) and Horton (1999), for example, whose works are premised on the same assumption of social pedagogy, that is, that education can make an important contribution to changing individuals and societies for the better.

The method by which we ought to teach such knowledge is laid out by Freire (1972) and Myles Horton, and Grundtvig, all of whom adhere to the practice of social pedagogy, despite originating from diverse historical and social contexts. Consider this statement from Freire (1972),

For the dialogical, problem-posing teacher-student, the program content of education is neither a gift nor an imposition— bits of information to be deposited in the students—but rather the organized, systematized, and developed "re-presentation" to individuals of the things about which they want to know more (p. 91).

My experience is that the teaching of sociology can be more effective when it is incorporated into students’ everyday experience through the practice of reflection. This fosters “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959) and facilitates “unlearning and relearning much of what we take for granted about society” which, I claim in this paper, creates an emancipating learning experience for Diploma level students of sociology (Ferreira & Serpa, 2017, p.30). Hjelm (2013) describes a classroom practice that provides a structured framework for collaborative and critical pedagogies that ‘empower’ students in higher education, with a special reference to sociology classroom practice and its ability to foster critical thinking. Whereas Johnson (2005) identifies an inability to solve social problems, when there is no linkage between social problems and individual behaviour. Through the utilisation of reflection, we encourage students to draw connections between the theoretical foundations of the learning and their personal, everyday lives and experience. Making the connection between the body politic and one’s own place in the social world and allowing students to express this in their own dialect, free from the formalities of critical literacy and conventional academic writing central to the unit of study. However, the reflective task, which forms the data for this paper, allowed students to absorb the learning and articulate it in a tone and style of their choice. This is apparent in the data below and allows for a fruitful narrative and discourse analysis, undertaken throughout as part of the data.

Reflective writing not only fosters a sense of “civic duty”, as Johnson (2005) proposes sociology does and ought, it allows students to absorb the knowledge and its purpose and may even combat what Jonson (2005) characterises as” doom and gloom”, a kind of bleak outlook that comes from understanding our powerlessness over our own circumstances through learning about various social structures that form around race, class, and gender, for example. Jonson (2005) attributes this at least in part to our preference for social problems over social progress in recent times in the teaching of sociology. By encouraging students to articulate their own experience in the learning of sociology, we at least nurture a sense of self development where we perhaps cannot provide social progress, due to the nature of our current circumstances and social contexts. For example, the pandemic and lockdown featured heavily in our recent sociology classes, the environmental crisis before it, and local and global inequality has always featured in our sociology classroom as a deeply problematic or personally confronting issue at different times. For instance, when Islamophobia was prevalent in Australia, it was a rather confronting subject for a student population in a Victoria University classroom, acknowledged for its “linguistic and cultural diversity.” (Hallpike 2014, p.107).

The sociology of education unit, at least as I taught it to Diploma level students, initially considers the work of Durkheim and particularly his contributions to functionalist theory in the context of education. For example, an article used quite extensively is Durkheim's (1925) 'The General Influence of the School Environment' which suggests that school performs a socialisation function for children and young people, integrating them into society's value consensus, contributing to a harmonious, collaborative society, with all the parts working together to contribute to a cohesive whole. We then critique this view, utilising some contemporary Marxist theorists in the field of education, for example, Anyon (1980) and Martin (1976), who both argue that social class plays a crucial role in a learner's life chances. This then leads us into a reflective space, where students incorporate the knowledge from the unit into a reflection on their own lives and social experiences of class and gender.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to the Reflexive Method

Reissman (1993) speaks of the 'natural' tendency of respondents in qualitative research to narrate and embody the self, where the self has been disembodied. Throughout the study of the sociology unit, students are asked to take an objective position in the scientific study of society. Whereas the data collected below involves reflecting on oneself in relation to those theories and the stories of the self that emerge from this process. This reflective practice contained in the data collection is complemented with a reflexive method adopted by the researcher. Reflexivity in research has recently been defined as:

a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes. (Francisco et al. 2022)

This paper considers concepts sourced from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). It attempts to consider the voices of marginalised tertiary students in their reflections on the study of a sociology unit at a Western suburbs' university in Melbourne, Australia. In this section, I will outline the aims of the research, its context, the ethical concerns, and the procedure undertaken to collect the data below.

Aims

1. To establish the potential of reflective practice to contribute to students' learning in the social sciences.
2. To understand how the study of sociology is embedded into students' lives and understandings of past, present, and future experiences.

Context

The context for this research was a Diploma of Education Studies sociology classroom at a university with a diverse student population.

Ethics

Ethics approval was sought and granted by the Victoria University Ethics committee. Application ID: HRE21-166. Information and consent forms were distributed and signed by participants prior to the data collection. They were informed of an 'opt-out' clause.

Procedure

Over two years, eighty student participants were invited to reflect on the following guiding questions, of which approximately 20 responded. They were instructed to write informally, in their own dialect, paying very little attention to formal grammatical norms, spelling or punctuation. Indeed, it was the intention to capture their voices in the data. The process took approximately forty minutes, with four separate cohorts of students.

The following guiding questions were distributed, in writing, with the instruction that students could write whatever they liked:

1. *Has studying sociology changed the way you see and/or behave in the world? How?*
2. *How has it changed your perception of yourself and your life experience?*
3. *How has it changed the way you see others?*
4. *As a future teacher, how has seeing your own and others' class, race and gender affected your approach to education?*

Throughout this unit, we have explored inequality in education. How has this influenced the way in which you approach your studies and your future teaching?

Some students participated; others chose not to.

RESULTS/DATA

This project involved a classroom activity that invited a sample group of Diploma students to write short, one paragraph reflections on how studying sociology changes the way we view the world, our place in it and ourselves. When Diploma level students encounter sociology, they are confronted and enlightened with new and challenging knowledge.

This invitation to the margins creates a momentary instability of the centre that is threatened by it. Because we 'propose the transformation of reality itself,' as Freire (1972, p.17) suggests, through rigorous reflection on the success of structural functionalism in maintaining an oppressive and unjust system, where the students are the oppressed, the learning outcome is bleak indeed! However, it also reveals the foundations for bitter and rebellious undertones that contain the foundations of a revolution of sorts. Whilst it is my hope that revolution will take the form of a violent appropriation of ideas and education, the intensity of the experience of seeing the way in which society operates for the first time can be confronting for students and damning to their sense of empowerment. For this reason, it is important that we handle students with the utmost care and implement an objective sociological method, as the students themselves grapple with the idea of human completeness, coupled with its opposite of incompleteness, a void that we attempt to fill in the pedagogy that takes place when teaching Diploma level sociology.

Learning Sociology this unit has caused me to think a lot more about a potential hidden curriculum and about whether the socioeconomic background of your family really impacts your future.

We are engaged with theoretical learning about the hidden curriculum and how the classroom contains unintended lessons about class, race, and gender, for example, and though encouraged to view these issues from a somewhat objective standpoint, we inevitably seem to fall into a state of self-reflection. It somewhat shows the rudimentary beginnings of social scientific and

autoethnographic thinking. For example, this participant reflects on an article concerned with a study of teaching methods, differentiated by class:

Jean Anyon's study has made me incredibly curious as to whether or not there is still such a dramatic difference between schools and their curriculums based on the money that the families within it produce. (Student A)

Anyon's (1980) now classic study of education according to class tends to trigger an anxiety in the students that is indeed counterproductive to the goal of education, though to omit such a study from the curriculum would be fallacious and deceitful. Hence, within the context of the current system, both educator and student are doomed. We must teach the revelation that class plays a role in how the curriculum is taught, as does race and gender. However, in teaching this we are teaching for a revolution and endangering the very means by which we can teach and learn such revelations.

For other students, this idea could be quite personally confronting. For example, consider this reflection that incorporates ideas borrowed from the social movements of Black Lives Matter and the Me Too initiative:

Sociology has changed the way I view the world by making me question my own upbringing and opinions I look at recent events such as the BLM and the me-too movement and how different people view those movements, and whether I agree with the protests or not. Sociology has made me question how my everyday life is affected by my education and family. (Student B)

To some degree, the knowledge itself is secondary to the experience of encountering it. The empowerment contained in a phrase like "Sociology has allowed me to understand how society works." (Student C) And the implication that one does not know how society works prior to undertaking sociology is an important observation. It suggests that sociology has the potential to build agency. However, as we shall see, it also introduces the deeply problematic notion of understanding oneself as the oppressed class. This realisation can be quite troubling the first time it is encountered.

For example, this student offered the following somewhat confronting observation regarding the role social institutions play in an individual's life, including myself. (Student D) Said the student,

Before sociology, I just had a very brief understanding of the role society has in an individual's life.... I am now able to see situations and these issues from a different perspective than before. (Student E)

There's a very heavy and intense realisation here that, not only is there oppression, but I am one of the oppressed, who has suffered injustice, inequality and exploitation as a result of the broad social structures. The student is saying, 'Just as I am expected to play a role in society, so too society plays a role in my life and this will also help me to improve my skills to work with a different range of people.' It is only through the activity of reflection, embedded into the curriculum that we come to learn the students' relationship with the content and material. It indeed advances both the learning of the subject matter, which here is sociology, and the pedagogical relationships in the classroom. Ultimately, it has the potential to enhance the practice of both teaching and learning of particular subject matter by embedding it into experience through reflective writing.

And finally, there was this response to the assessment task prompt, written as Paulo Freire would have instructed in the dialect of a student who has been taught Marx; in discussion, some reading and in relation to one's own life. However, from my perspective as the educator in this context, I had-as Macbeth says "commended the poisoned chalice to my own lips". The students were instructed to write a speech, a presentation for a debate, with less emphasis on the critical literacies of referencing or even correct grammar, than previous submissions. Part of the idea here was to bring the learning into one's own experience and dialect, also to embody a theorist. Here is an example of a student embodying Marx and critiquing the contemporary Australian Higher Education system in a structured classroom exercise, exploring Freirean methods, using a drama based approach, where the students was 'playing' Marx:

Education is the engine room of equity, debate in teams, each embodying a theorist.' (He was Marx).

in say medieval times the lower class of society would be jealous of the class divide & therefore revolt, but now the tables are turned & lower classes help upper classes by unknowingly furthering a gap by teaching them false ideologies in education- this idea that you can do anything and it's somehow "their" fault when they're not a millionaire when they're older despite being predisposed to a life of misery. overwhelmingly when you are born poor you stay poor, vice versa, that's just a proven fact. The mechanisms of Marx's idea of capital indicates that class consciousness will never happen within education and that universities are not exempt, the methodical and materialistic prestige of these places claiming to be leftist & proudly asking questions for essays like this is super ironic while they're standing there underpaying their staff and overcharging their students the students are expected to be wealthy enough to pay for egregious costs, you can't be poor and get an education. (Student F cont.)

And then there was this, a true expression of alienation from within the system, as a student:

You'll find anyone with a PhD often either had wealth in the family & lots of help to get to where they were, whereas people like myself, rural kids with no access to the tools that the upper oppressive class have, clawing and biting our way to simply get the average. (Student G)

As a teacher of sociology and education at a Western suburb's university, where Freire's 'oppressed' traditionally reside, aimed at educating first in family, this was an uncomfortable truth being fed back to me through the learning. In terms of my own origins, it made me wonder who I had become.

The biggest thing is probably the inherent divide with public & private schooling, the way rich kids are pruned and cut to be rich and continue to further the class divide, and kids in public schools, especially rural schools, are pruned and cut to be tradies and Woolies (the Australian equivalent of Walmart) workers for the rest of their days and told that that's the meaning of life to serve the upper class also furthering the class divide unknowingly, even further implementing this hyper- masculinity within these places to proudly assume their places as bootlicking & uneducated as to why their circumstances are that way. (Student F cont.)

DISCUSSION

The student participants in this research initially felt a sense of alienation from the knowledge to which they were exposed. Other recent research on this particular unit of study identifies it as '...a challenging unit of study for many within the cohort.' (McLaren et al. 2022). Through the implementation of reflection, which has been identified by historical literature as problematic in tertiary classrooms (Ryan 2013), students were able to gain a deeply personal and embodied experience of the material that was embedded into their own personal lives and experiences. The reflective practice described in this paper allows students to re-constitute what may appear to be personal or subjective memories and experiences into the learning. In this sense, the work of using reflection to allow students to embody the knowledge as a part of their everyday experience answers Freire's for a dialogical and problem-posing pedagogy that allows students to become the knowledge through reflection.

The guiding questions, with the open ended task of reflective writing seems to have elicited data in the form of reflections that are fruitful and have utility, not only in terms of insight into students' experience of learning sociology, but how future pedagogical approaches are framed and delivered. Through encouraging and guiding students through reflective practice, the evolution of a reflexive teaching is made possible that accounts for student experience both inside and outside the classroom. Contained within the reflection data is the understanding of both how knowledge is received and how it should be communicated. This transforms the reflective practice of the students into reflexive teaching practices, reinforcing the value of reflection.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include the small sample size of participants and the social status of the university in which the data was collected. The data collection took place at Victoria University over the course of two years, however there were less than twenty participants who submitted a reflection. Furthermore, the classroom itself is a limitation, in that it may be claimed that the students may be reflecting on the learning experiences that occurred in the context of this particular classroom, and their interactions with other students and the teacher, rather than their engagement with the subject matter more generally.

Victoria University is in Melbourne, Australia, an institution with substantial numbers of students from low socio-economic status (SES) and/or non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) (Messinins & Sheean 2015). Therefore, it may be that there are limits on the degree to which this data can be generalised in terms of the value of reflection. That is, reflection may be valuable to this cohort's learning of sociology, where it may not be of much use to students in another context, or a different institution.

FURTHER RESEARCH

With these limitations in mind, future research that uses reflective practice to compare the first encounters with sociology experiences of students from a low socioeconomic context such as the cohort referred to in this paper, and those from a more privileged institution might constitute compelling research. An analysis of the tone and content of such reflections could inform conclusions around language and class, and the value of reflective practice as a means of fostering empathy in more privileged students, whilst empowering students with less social and economic privilege. This has implications for both the power of reflective practice and the potential of the social sciences to act as contexts for social change.

CONCLUSION

By introducing several reflective tasks into a unit of study that was primarily concerned with sociological theories, we are balancing the somewhat conflicting tasks set by Freire, when he firstly asks, "Who says that this accent, or this way of thinking, is the cultivated one?" (Freire 2014). Students are freed from the shackles of critical literacy when they are asked to reflect on their learning from the unit in their own language and dialect. What is apparent from the reflections contained in our research is that when students are permitted to speak in their own voice, applying sociological knowledge to their immediate experience and inner world, sociology becomes a tool with which to shape the world (or a 'weapon' as I sometimes describe it to my students). Freire also simultaneously defends the duty of the teachers to teach what he calls the "cultivated pattern" (Freire, 2014). This is the challenge of 21st century sociology pedagogy, to balance our duty to teach the dominant cultural dialect and allow the voice and often transgressive dialect of the students to flourish and make the connects between experience and sociological learning.

Reflective practice can transform learning processes and connect theoretical knowledge and experience. It is apparent from the reflections contained within this paper that the teaching of sociology can be significantly enhanced through the practice of structured reflective writing, connecting knowledge and experience. Sociological knowledge can be particularly alienating for tertiary students early in their study. Often contextualised in the theoretical foundations that form its essence, reflective practice can bring sociology into the self.

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