

# Awakening Students' Sociological Imagination

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## ABSTRACT

*Students who experience a transcendent moment as they vicariously walk in the shoes of another person demonstrate the utilization of sociological imagination. Even though the concept of sociological imagination was advanced more than 50 years ago by sociologist C. Wright Mills, there is high value to revisit this concept and for its application to engage students in active learning in contemporary classroom environments. The objective is to better prepare students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to better assess contemporary events and social problems with a more accurate and realistic understanding.*

**Keywords:** Sociological Imagination; Inclusive Thinking; Preparing Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; Scholarship of Teaching; Popular Culture, Transcendent Moment

## INTRODUCTION: DISCOVERING A TRANSCENDENT MOMENT

A transcendent moment may take many different forms and may happen at different times in our lives, but when it occurs, the individual experiences a new-found enlightenment or a life-enriching shift in viewpoint.

This writer and educator remembers a transcendent moment which occurred many years ago in the fall of 1965 when an influential, high school English teacher motivated the class to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Even though this novel was required reading, it was also a key part of the popular culture in the 1960s. The teacher introduced it in such a way that all the students knew they were about to read something great. Stories that unfold through fiction and fact often become the life lessons for students to apply in the real world.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* centers on Atticus Finch and his sense of humanity at a time in American history when lessons in tolerance and appreciation of diversity were rare. Impressionable teenagers who read *To Kill a Mockingbird* are struck with numerous passages that capture the essence of truth. These insights will undoubtedly influence their emerging leadership qualities in dealing with social complexities of the time. That was certainly true for this writer. A student who utilizes his/her own imagination is transported into the lives of Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout. This technique allows the student to vicariously experience racial turmoil brewing in a small southern town. A transcending and memorable passage takes place as Atticus tries to explain to Scout how to understand the diversity of people. This is a very difficult and complex topic to discuss with children; but Atticus finds just the right words when he says,

*If you learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.* (Lee, 1960).

Pondering this passage, students begin to appreciate the impact that words and stories may have on their own life. Discovering the capacity of one's own imagination can create greater understanding of something not yet personally experienced. The words on the printed page will transport the student to another time and place, while igniting their imagination to think and wonder beyond the bounds of self.

Is it not possible to imagine through the story of others the meaning of prejudice and the inhumanity of racial hatred? Might we use the human gift of imagination to teach life lessons to all children? Might we learn of things and events beyond our place and time by using our imagination to extract moral principles to guide us through the complexities of life without having first-hand experience?

This writer believes an imaginative experience allows an epiphany or transcendent moment to occur. This action may enable students to develop insight into social issues and strengthen their leadership skills. Students who practice and apply the power of imagination allow themselves to transcend from a limited, local perspective to a boundless view unconstrained by geography. Being mentally transported, in order to view and appreciate another person's worldview, is simply a matter of imagination.

### **NEW AWARENESS OF AN OLD CONCEPT**

Students may have to go out of their way before they encounter the works of sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-1962). However, studying the writings of Mills will infuse clarity with an ability to synthesize other theories and perspectives into a finer focus. This new focus can yield valuable insights into the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Back in the 1950s, Mills was out of the mainstream of academia, yet he produced a brilliant body of work that became a significant contribution to sociology. Mills wrote a trilogy on social stratification - *The New Men of Power*, *White Collar*, and *The Power Elite*. He culminated his writing career with *The Sociological Imagination* which provides a foundational basis for this article.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION – A QUALITY OF MIND**

Mills (1959) describes *sociological imagination* as simply a “quality of mind” that allows one “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society.” A sociological imagination is the ability to view one's own society as an outsider would, rather than only from the perspective of personal experience and cultural biases (1959, p.6). Mills offers a promise to the person who adapts a *sociological imagination*. This promise is an “ability to understand the larger historical events of society so that individuals can understand their own experience and gauge their own fate by imagining how others in society act and feel” (p.5). The ability to use our sociological imagination is exactly what Atticus Finch asks Scout to do:

*You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.* (the words of Atticus Finch)

*...to view one's own society as an outsider would...* (the words of C. Wright Mills)

In order for students to better understand their local and global neighbors, educators need to encourage students to suspend their own personal bias of how they view others. Instead, there is value in teaching students to use their minds to imagine walking in another person's shoes. Students using a *sociological imagination* can achieve greater insight and perspective into other societies and cultures.

### **KEY LESSONS FROM MILLS**

It is in the present that the *sociological imagination* can be applied to the understanding and solutions found in contemporary social problems (Mills, 1959). This was true then and is certainly still true today. Awakening a *sociological imagination* and utilizing these qualities is a valuable skill for students to learn as they become better prepared to navigate through a complex 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Another theme that C. Wright Mills (1959) developed is the usefulness of sociology, not just as some academic discipline to be studied but how a general working knowledge of sociology can assist the average student or the trained social scientist to become a better observer of social events and, thus a more enlightened and informed citizen. Mills recognizes that the social events of the world are often viewed as a tangled-up mess of factual errors

and unclear conceptions. Only after those events “have been logically untangled is it possible to know whether issues really do involve a conflict of values” (p.77). The task of untangling the multi threads of society is the job of a teacher. Mills argues that the teacher’s job is “to reveal to students as fully as he can just how a supposedly self-disciplined mind works.” In this sense, “the art of teaching is, in considerable part, the art of thinking out loud but intelligibly” (p.79). Mills does not define the teacher solely as the professional teacher found in the traditional classroom and he does not imply that the teacher is the only individual responsible for the role of creating in others a ‘self-disciplined mind.’ Rather, Mills says everyone can develop the qualities of a *sociological imagination* and use their own creative teaching skills to assist others in the ‘art of thinking out loud but intelligibly.’ Again, drawing from the beginning illustration from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we can more clearly see how Atticus Finch is teaching his daughter, Scout, to use her *sociological imagination* to appreciate and understand human behavior and societal issues. The capacity and usefulness of *sociological imagination* is within us all as we teach and lead others.

The *sociological imagination* is such a simple yet captivating concept. It is nothing new or revolutionary, but C. Wright Mills describes the concept and crafts a simple methodology which can be used by social scientists, leaders, teachers, and parents attempting to explain seemingly complicated social issues.

Mills (1959) contends that “no one is outside society – the question is where each stands within it” (p.184). Even though there are inescapable problems in becoming a part of the decision-making process, the key in overcoming the problem is to “help the individual to become a self-educating man” (p. 184). Mills recognizes that even during his era, society was facing the possibility that “the human mind, as a social fact, might be deteriorating in quality and cultural level” (p.175). The additional discouraging fact is that American society may not even notice this deterioration of the mind because of conspicuous accumulation of technological gadgets and consumer goods during the economic boom of post-war expansion. In other words, the material stuff we possess may distract us from critical thinking and thoughtful discourse. Mills’ view of American society in 1959 was not very optimistic. The deterioration of mind in the average citizen today would be even more acute based on Mills’ assertion that accumulation and preoccupation with things would dull or deteriorate the mind. Most would agree that today there is an imperative and immediate need for students to broaden their skills in order to meet the needs and demands that are playing out on the global stage. No doubt, people from all corners of our global community are more interconnected today than ever before in human history, yet there is strong evidence that people are increasingly becoming more self-absorbed and less knowledgeable in global matters.

## AWAKENING THE POWER OF SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

What can be done? How can students of today benefit from the lessons of C. Wright Mills many years ago? The answer may lie in awakening the power of our *sociological imagination*. Utilizing this power spans geographical/cultural borders and adapts to societal events of today and of the future. Mill’s challenge is for all students - young and old - to educate themselves with a broad multi-knowledge in the social sciences and view all societies through the lens of a *sociological imagination*. The purpose of this article is to encourage educators to ignite and awaken a *sociological imagination* within their students and use it as a teaching tool to inspire and lead others, just like Atticus Finch sparks the imagination of his daughter to think about another human being by asking her to “climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.”

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The concept of *sociological imagination* offers a link between what we learn and its application to the real world. Every person has a role as an educator. This role is not exclusive to professional educators. All citizens have a deep responsibility to teach others, both young and old, about societal development and social problems, as well as how to apply knowledge through service to others. The ability to do this is even more imperative in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because we now understand that all people around the world are intrinsically interrelated. Perhaps more than ever, educators need to create learning environments in which students can exercise the use of their *sociological imagination* as they expand their vision of others locally as well as globally. It is with a *sociological imagination* that students can transcend borders and begin to understand how others perceive the same world events. Gardner (2009) advocates the importance of seeking transcendent moments and expanding consciousness of wholeness. This quality resonates well with the value of awakening *sociological imagination*.

## CONNECTIONS AND SUPPORT FROM CONTEMPORARY RESEARCHERS

### Narrative Imagination

The words of Heater (2002) and Kingwell (2001) squarely tie into the words of C. Wright Mills (1959) in addressing a student's lack of interest, boredom, and the difficulty to engage in what Heater refers to as the "narrative imagination." The narrative imagination is the ability to read or listen to the words of theorists, historians, and other social scientists. Most students find the narrative form of learning to be the boring stuff of traditional education. Reading an endless text does not engage students into an active mode. However, awakening students' *sociological imagination* with the narrative imagination will engage them into an active learning mode in which they can now read and explore how others view a particular issue, and also be transported in time and space so they can vicariously "walk in the shoes of another person." Creating this type of inquiry into global thinking is a worthy endeavor of a well prepared education system.

### Capacity of Human Imagination

Philips (1972) examines the capacity of the human imagination. Modern humans have a tremendous advantage in "our ability to move outward conceptually to encompass an ever-expanding number of forces which affect a given phenomenon and to reach far back into the past to gain perspective for reaching ahead into the future" (p. 3). These words offer a complement to the foundation of *sociological imagination*, as created by Mills, and expand a student's ability to examine the past in order to gain a clearer view of the future. When imagination is based on a broad knowledge base, it can serve as a useful predictor of the future and can allow students to vicariously envision how to act and respond in a positive and meaningful way.

### Inclusive Thinking

Janet J. McIntyre-Mills (2000) discusses many elements of social thinking. Her ideas add to the theme of awakening a *sociological imagination*. The main goal is a convincing argument on the importance of "inclusive thinking" (p. 2). Inclusive thinking is defined as a thinking tool that can enhance a person's ability to trace common webs of meaning across the separate frameworks of cultural and social values. McIntyre-Mills (2000) argues that inclusive thinking can be taught. Students can be educated to work with ideas and assumptions beyond the bounds of their traditional locus of thought. In this manner, thinking tools, such as a *sociological imagination*, can also be taught and allow individuals to have confidence in their ability to imagine and thoughtfully peek through the metaphorical curtains that separate societies and groups. Thinking tools and communication skills help individuals sort out and rework the categories that limit our thinking. Educators demonstrating and applying thinking tools, like inclusive thinking, offer students an ability to forge transcultural webs which enrich their learning experience.

McIntyre-Mills (2000) urges us to "think about our thinking" in order to develop a realization that a balance between diversity and commonality is essential... (p.74). C. Wright Mills (1959) offers "the promise" that the *sociological imagination* will "enable its possessor an ability to understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period and becoming aware of all individuals in his circumstances" (p.5). Both are asking society to foster within its citizenry a quality of humanity and inclusiveness, much like that found in the lessons taught by Atticus Finch to his daughter, Scout, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## LESSONS TO APPLY AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The intent of this article is to ignite a new awareness on the concept of a *sociological imagination* as a thinking tool to better prepare students for the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Awakening a *sociological imagination* not only enhances a student's capacity to empathetically understand and appreciate another person's plight, but, more importantly, it expands a conversation that elevates private troubles into public issues. The reality is that societies - from local to global levels - need to actively engage in efforts to develop and prepare a student's global mentality. The challenge is for educators to nurture a student's mentality to actively listen to the stories of others, to vicariously walk in another person's shoes, and to learn crucial life lessons through their own transcendent moment.

To achieve this deeper insight, educators need to create learning activities that allow students to awaken and utilize a *sociological imagination* to transport themselves through space and time in order to “get inside the skin of another person and walk around.” Through the power of their minds, they can begin to free themselves from the constraints, often clouded with bias and prejudice, to explore a world of human commonality.

There is not a prescriptive model to follow in awakening one’s *sociological imagination*, nor is one person’s transcendent moment better than another person’s epiphany in appreciating the situation or plight of another person. This article began with an account of how this writer’s imagination was ignited by reading the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Through popular culture, the arts, literature, film, music, theatre, and simply being a keen observer of human interaction, all students can find sufficient stimulus to spark a transcendent moment. We live in a complex world - one that challenges everyone to become even more mindful of their own transcendent moments when their *sociological imagination* awakens.

#### **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

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