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Learning Sociology: Successful Majors Tell their Story

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Abstract. The focus of this study is to begin to answer the question of how sociology majors come to learn their discipline. In this article, I report on the findings from the first study in a multi-method project on this topic. I conducted a group interview with honors sociology majors from around the United States. Students discussed several questions related to learning sociology. Themes that emerged, and which may be useful in a number of disciplines, included the need to make connections, the importance of other people, talking about the material, experiencing varied pedagogies, and the active construction of knowledge.

Keywords: Learning, Honors students, Student perceptions

I. Introduction.

The central question I pose in this research is "How do sociology majors successfully learn sociology?" The study reported here, using a focus group or group interview of honors sociology majors, is one study in a multi-method project investigating this question. The objective of the focus group phase of the study is to obtain exploratory, qualitative data from the point of view of these honors students on how they believe they learn sociology. In this phase, learning of sociology is not directly measured, rather I assume that these honors students, selected to attend the American Sociological Association annual meetings, are by definition successful learners of the discipline.

I am also gathering and analyzing data from learning logs, qualitative interviews, and self-administered quantitative questionnaires with sociology seniors at one, mid-sized public institution. The primary objectives of the full research project are the following:

1. To uncover the learning strategies, both in- and out-of-class, alone or with others, in terms of study skills or other behaviors, which distinguish more and less successful learners of sociology,

2. To uncover any demographic, learning style, or motivational correlates of these strategies and of learning, and

3. To share this information with colleagues in Sociology and in other disciplines in order to positively impact pedagogy, curriculum, and learning.

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This line of research is significant for a number of reasons. Theoretically, the findings will have implications for several areas of higher education scholarship and for the literature on teaching and learning in sociology. On a practical level, faculty, staff, and students can apply the results at the course and department levels to improve learning. In addition, the results will have implications for faculty and students in related disciplines, as well as staff involved in support services for student learning in higher education.

Based on the literature I reviewed, little past empirical work has been done that focuses on how students learn from the viewpoint of students and, specifically, for the discipline of Sociology. For example, experiments or quasi-experiments have been conducted assessing how different study strategies, note-taking strategies, or assignments impacted learning in psychology courses (e.g., Hartlep and Forsyth, 2000; Kreiner, 1997; Watson, Hagihara, and Tennery, 1999). Novices and experts in a discipline, such as physics, have been compared in their approach to problem-solving (e.g., Chi, Feltovich, and Glaser, 1981).

Some researchers have used interviews, case studies, focus groups or "think alouds" to assess students' study strategies or views of learning in disciplines other than sociology or across multiple disciplines (e.g., Albaili, 1997; Calder, 2002; Jacobs, 2002; Johnson, 1994; Laurillard, 1979; Light, 2001; Nelson, 1998; Van Etten, Freebern, and Pressley, 1997; Yaworski, Weber, and Ibrahim, 2000). Other research has analyzed quantitative data from questionnaires or institutional data sets about students' academic views and behaviors (e.g., Dietz, 2002; Entwistle and Tait, 1990; Jacobs, 2002; Nist, et. al, 1991; Paulsen and Feldman, 1999; Prosser, Walker, and Millar, 1996; Vermetten, Lodewijks and Vermunt, 1999). Questionnaires have also been used to assess the role of demographic variables, academic background, interest, or motivation in disciplinary learning (Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney, 1995; Meeker, Fox, and Whitley, 1994; Neuman, 1989; Paulsen and Gentry, 1995; Szafran, 1986).

Only four of these studies are in the discipline of Sociology and the focus of all of these was on introductory level students, not specifically majors. In addition, quantitative measures were used in all four studies. Over fifteen years ago, Szafran (1986) studied factors influencing prior knowledge and grade in the introductory course. His research showed that year in school, GPA, and parents' education all significantly related to course pretest score, and GPA and pretest score were significantly related to course grade. A few years later, Neuman (1989) extended Szafran's work. Neuman writes "This study confirms Szafran's finding that pretest scores and GPA predict posttest (final exam) scores with no direct effects from demographic, family background, or prior course work variables. Both studies found few effects on pretest score, course grade, or learning from gender, high school sociology courses, or age" (p. 25). Neuman also looked at pre-post test score differences (amount learned in the course) and reports that "Students learn more if they enter the course knowing less, have a higher GPA, and studied a foreign language" (p. 25).

More recently, in a study on developing the sociological imagination by Catholic and non-Catholic students at a private, Catholic institution, Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney (1995) found significant relationships between some student demographic variables and successful development of the sociological imagination. More specifically, non-Catholic students and students from less privileged backgrounds (measured by both social class and income) were more likely to successfully develop the sociological imagination. Finally, Dietz (2002) defined success in the large introductory sociology course as total points earned in the course. Factors significantly and positively related to total points included attendance and reading the required materials. Factors unrelated to success included self-reported study time and use of virtual

learning tools. Interestingly, study group participation was negatively related to total points earned.

In summary, the extant theories on learning in higher education emphasize, to varying degrees, biological mechanisms, individual development and learning preferences, the role of interpersonal variables, and particular experiences or contexts as related to learning. Past empirical work has used a wide range of research methodologies. Learning was defined and measured in many ways in this past research including test score improvement, course grade or points earned, student perceptions, and understanding of the sociological imagination. This work supports the idea that more and less academically successful students do vary somewhat in terms of their study and learning behaviors. Furthermore, some demographic and academic background variables are related to learning. Finally, the efficacy of various study strategies, even for the same students, appears to be context specific. In the study I report here, nine honors sociology majors, in a group interview, discuss the factors and strategies that impact their learning of sociology.

II. Methodology.

I obtained the focus group by soliciting volunteers (using fliers and an announcement by ASA staff) from the group of 33 honors undergraduate sociology majors attending the 2003 American Sociological Association annual meetings in Atlanta. Nine of these students (27%) volunteered and met for over two hours to discuss the questions. The focus group consisted of eight females and one male; all appeared to be Caucasian. Of the nine, seven were traditional and two were nontraditional students. They were all juniors or seniors. The nine students were from diverse types of schools from around the nation. I make the assumption here that these nine students are examples of successful learners of my discipline.

Participation was voluntary and confidential, and verbal informed consent was obtained. As an incentive, I provided the students with food. For a variety of reasons (nine voices, semi-public place, greater confidentiality), I chose not to audiotape the focus group. I took detailed notes, using abbreviations, on the student responses to the focus group questions.

The following questions guided the conversation of the focus group. The students each conceptualized learning in their own way.

1. Why did you become interested in sociology? How did you get into the sociology major?
2. Tell me about the strategies you have used that you believe have helped you learn sociology, understand the sociological imagination, and so on.
3. We often learn things outside of class. What types of out-of-class learning experiences have been helpful in learning sociology?
4. Think about an example of a difficult moment in learning sociology. How did you manage to get beyond this moment of difficulty?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share on how you learn sociology?

Immediately after leaving the focus group, I reviewed my notes and added clarification and details. The notes were then typed up question by question yielding about four pages of notes and brief notations when something was repeated multiple times. I analyzed the responses on a question-by-question basis looking for similar or common phrases and ideas in response to each question. My goal was to find themes for each question that had been repeated or supported by several members of the focus group.

III. Results.

In response to the question about what drew them to the field of sociology and how they became a sociology major, students often told brief life histories about what led them to the major of sociology. As part of this history, they sometimes noted their place in the social structure (e.g., from a single parent family or parents with low education levels or older nontraditional status) and/or critical experiences (e.g., a family member with a social problem, no criminal justice major at their school, taking a great sociology course). From this discussion, three themes emerged. Several of the students stressed that the discipline "fit them," it was "who they were," it contained the material or areas in which they, personally, were interested, and it was relevant to who they were and to their lives. Second, the students frequently mentioned the critical influence of a particular person such as an "inspiring teacher," "good professor," and involvement with a particular faculty member. Finally, key positive out-or-class experiences were also noted as pathways into the major, including study abroad, internships, and research opportunities. These themes related to selecting the major, then, included characteristics about the students themselves, interactions or relationships with important others, or positive out-of-class learning experiences.

Many ideas surfaced when I asked about their study and learning strategies. The themes I pulled from the data were making connections, the role of special others, talking with others about the material, diversity in pedagogy, and active construction of knowledge. Students repeatedly talked about the need to make connections-- connections between class and text, between the abstract and the concrete, between the material and their lives, between the teacher's style and their own, and between the teacher's work and their own work. Connections involving relevance and application were seen as very important. A particular type of connection made up a second theme, the role of or connections to others. As in response to the first question, students mentioned the importance of faculty members, and of caring and enthusiastic faculty and staff for their learning. A third theme was also interpersonal. Several students stressed that the best way to learn was to talk with others about the material or to try to explain the ideas to another person, verbally or in writing. They were clear that this "other" did not have to be a faculty member but could also be a friend, a classmate, a roommate, or a relative.

Students also noted, in a fourth theme, the helpfulness of being exposed to diverse pedagogies including discussions, good lectures, seminar formats, collaborative work, reading assignments, writing assignments, and multiple teaching styles. They stated this was important to keep their interest and to appeal to students' different ways of learning. They argued that there was probably not one best way to learn sociology. Thus, they had some explicit knowledge and understanding of the concept of learning styles. Finally, there were responses that might best be labeled as active and constructivist, as students discussed the need to think critically, reflect, dialogue, question, write, summarize, and create their own knowledge. These themes indicate to me that the meaning of learning, for these students, goes well beyond memorization of concepts or surface learning. Rather, it is deep learning, learning that is integrated, applied, and long-term that they were discussing.

The importance of out-of-class learning was also noted. Students acknowledged that much learning takes place out of class. They pointed to the importance of connections between class and books, class and internships, and class and watching the news. They also acknowledged the benefits of on-campus speakers and Sociology Club or Alpha Kappa Delta but argued that these latter types of experiences may only help students who "already get it." They

seemed to believe that students with either a predisposition for, or hard work leading to, the understanding of Sociology would seek out and benefit from these experiences but that other students would not—a person by situation—explanation. Finally, they noted the value of independent work with faculty members, especially on research projects.

In response to the question, "Think about an example of a difficult moment in learning sociology. How did you manage to get beyond this moment of difficulty?" the students raised three ideas. First, they talked about persistence and "stepping away" from something tough then coming back to it later. In addition, they mentioned asking questions, getting feedback, and talking with someone else about the difficult material. Finally, they noted that the level of cognitive and emotional development of the individual learner might also be a factor in understanding difficult ideas or skills. Thus, their three strategies included two they could manage—persistence and getting assistance—and one they had limited control over, level of development.

The last question I asked was whether there was anything else they wanted to share about how they learn sociology. They repeated some ideas mentioned earlier in the group conversation including making connections, critical thinking, and personal fit to the discipline. Two new ideas also emerged. These were, first, the importance of attending class. Second, they discussed the need to sometimes "play the game" with faculty, to occasionally adjust to faculty styles and demands. Though several of the students agreed with this, one student was adamant that she never played such games. I found it striking that, even in this discussion, these students never raised the issue of grades. For them, this discussion was about learning, not necessarily about grades. This may be an artifact of the fact that these were all honors students earning high grades.

IV. Discussion.

These honors students pointed to ideas about learning that were remarkably similar to the main components of models or theories about learning espoused in the higher education literature including the importance of experiential and active learning, the role of developmental factors, the constructivist nature of knowledge, the need to make connections or have integrated learning, and the importance of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Light, 2001; Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Pintrich, 1995). Furthermore, many of the ideas expressed by the students support the widely cited seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) including student-faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback from others, and respect for diverse talents and learning styles.

With few exceptions, the responses of these students point to their ability to acknowledge their role in learning and to make internal attributions for their success in learning. Similar to some of the previous studies, these students pointed to the importance of certain academic or study behaviors including attending class, writing, reading, and reflecting. Though some previous research demonstrated relationships between demographic variables and success, these students did not explicitly discuss the role of their own background variables in their learning but, perhaps, their sense that they just "fit" the discipline or sociology "was who they were" is connected to background characteristics or past experiences.

The strongest theme in this conversation was "connections." This concept, and synonyms such as "relationships" and "links," was frequently mentioned by most of the focus group members as key to their learning of sociology. Clearly, learning opportunities that help students

integrate their learning across courses, people, settings, and ideas is critical. Perhaps connected and integrated learning experiences also increase time on task and level of challenge, two other best practices in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The connections noted between new material or course material and current/past experience fit with theory and empirical work on placing new learning in the context of students' existing knowledge (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1994; King and Kitchener, 1994). One form of connections that came up repeatedly was connections to others. These students, though seemingly very secure, independent, and self-confident, strongly valued personally and academically meaningful relationships with faculty members and peers.

I found it interesting that the students did not talk a great deal about the specific processes by which these connections, relationships, active construction, and so on were accomplished. Students provided some examples of process including discussing course material with a mother or using their talent in the visual arts to understand the material. Most of the time, however, there seemed to be an assumption that the specific processes were self-evident. Perhaps, for these successful learners, doing these types and ways of learning is "easy" and, therefore, not as explicit or not something they make evident even to themselves.

The questions I posed to the focus group asked them to reflect on their personal experiences. I was curious, however, to what extent they would utilize their sociological imagination in responding to these questions. They did so but to a limited degree. They noted the relationship between some social characteristics and their choice of sociology as a major. They recognized that context is important for learning. They did not, however, fit their learning into the broader institutional or societal framework. They rarely used language that might be categorized as reflecting any major sociological paradigms.

V. Conclusion.

Faculty, staff, and students can work with these themes in an effort to recruit strong majors and improve the learning of sociology majors. Some may find the students' ideas to be exactly what they expected, but it is important to confirm our expectations and to hear ideas in the students' own voices. Given the fit of these sociology students' ideas with prior research and theory on learning in higher education, faculty and staff working in other disciplines should also consider ways to apply these findings with their majors.

For example, to enhance various types of connections, strong emphasis on high quality teaching and student oriented instructors in introductory and lower-level classes is important. Additional ways, live and virtual, must be created and supported to increase the quantity and quality of student-faculty and student-student contact. More and better faculty-student mentoring programs should be established. Departments can also make an effort to provide, encourage participation in, and reward meaningful out-of-class learning experiences (e.g., McKinney, et. al, 2004) as well as to help students make connections between these experiences and material or skills from the discipline. In course design, instructors must think about the nature of the readings, assignments, and evaluation tasks both in and out of class, and how these can be altered to help students make the types of connections these students found so important.

Faculty members should also provide additional opportunities and encouragement for self-reflection, analysis, and collaborative work. Appropriate faculty development to assist faculty in creating and implementing diverse and active teaching-learning activities, assignments, and contexts as well as in supporting increased student choice and responsibility is also

important. Faculty will need to be recognized for these efforts, especially in disciplines or institutions where such efforts are less common or not highly valued.

On the other hand, one factor related to becoming a major and "getting it," and mentioned by many of the students, was the "good fit" between who they are and what they believe as an individual, and the content and ideas of the discipline. This person-discipline fit will be a factor much more difficult to control or affect in order to recruit strong majors or enhance learning. Perhaps convincing academically strong, creative students that the discipline of sociology is a good match to who they are, their life, and their goals is a strategy to consider and develop. Faculty members in other disciplines may wish to consider the extent to which there is a similar fit between some characteristic of students and the choice of their discipline as a major, and the implications of such a fit for curriculum and pedagogy.

Those in other disciplines should also consider replicating this or similar work, listening to what their majors have to say about learning in their discipline, and attempting to assess the usefulness of these ideas for learning in their discipline. A critical question for those in other disciplines is whether or to what extent the learning strategies used by the successful sociology students are discipline-specific, general, or a bit of both. The students in this study indicated that there was no one best way to learn sociology, yet they expressed a great deal of consensus on learning strategies that worked for them in their major. I failed to ask these students, however, about how they learn in their classes outside of sociology. What do students in other fields say?

This study includes the data from only one focus group or group interview. In addition, these students were exceptional in a number of ways. Success was measured only by the fact that these were honors students. This must be kept in mind when considering what they had to say about their learning. We have only just begun to answer the question, how do sociology majors learn sociology. There is little knowledge available and much knowledge needed.

Thus, there are many areas for future research for sociologists that would also be transferable to those in other disciplines. Questions include, to what extent do these results generalize to other students or to research using other methods? Do unsuccessful or less successful learners of sociology report similar ideas about how they learn the discipline? Explicit comparisons between more and less successful learners of sociology should be made using a variety of measures of success. Furthermore, do successful learners in sociology share some common predisposition such as personality, interest, or learning style? Are there interactions between learning style or motivation level and the learning behaviors that contribute to successful learning? How do sociology students conceptualize learning in our discipline? This work focused on the views of juniors and seniors. An important line of research would be to look at the development of learning and learning strategies over the course of the major as has been done in some other fields. Do students earlier in the major rely more on surface learning strategies relative to those later in the major, for example? We need to consider the notion of connections in much greater detail. Is the importance of this factor shared by students in other disciplines? What, more specifically, is important about these connections?

Further research is being conducted on my campus to triangulate and extend the results presented here. I urge others in sociology and in related disciplines to gather and share additional, relevant data.

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