Title: “’That was me up there”: Teaching the Sociology of Everyday Life through Research’

Author/s and Affiliation:

1. Dr. Eduardo de la Fuente, Topic Coordinator, Flinders University
2. Dr. Jordan McKenzie, Teaching Staff, Flinders University
3. Katey Bereny, Teaching Staff, Flinders University
4. Erin Carlisle, Teaching Staff, Flinders University
5. Tamika Sharrad, Teaching Staff, Flinders University

Name of Corresponding Author: Jordan McKenzie

Email: Jordan.mckenzie@flinders.edu.au

Mail to:
Jordan McKenzie
School of Social and Policy Studies – Sociology (SSN320)
Flinders University of South Australia
GPO Box 2100
Adelaide, 5001, SA.

Autobiographical note:

The authors taught the introductory course ‘The Sociology of Everyday Life’ together in Semester 1, 2013, in which the teaching methods discussed in the paper were developed. The authors range from senior academic staff, to recent doctoral graduates, to doctoral candidates. Their interests vary from cultural and aesthetic sociology, to political critical theory, to gender and work studies.

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Abstract:

This article explores the introductory course ‘The Sociology of Everyday Life’ at Flinders University, where the students engage in the sociological understanding of the ‘taken for granted’ through research. In doing so, students shift between researchers and subjects, and illuminate the sociological meanings latent in the survey data collated. In engaging students in research tasks, students are able to connect concepts and theories to their own lived experience. Such tasks are situated within a student-centered approach to curriculum and student learning. However, using findings of the survey to shape future course design raises some sociological dilemmas: what does everyday life mean to different social actors, who are actively constructing their social reality amongst the pressures of institutions and late modernity? What then are the implications for teaching and learning sociology?

Key words:

Everyday life; students; research; curriculum design; teaching sociology
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In their introductory textbook, *Sociology: A Biographical Approach*, Peter and Brigitte Berger (1976: 19) declare: ‘Our experience of society is, first of all, an experience of other people in everyday life’. They define everyday life as the ‘familiar routines within which we act and about which we think most of our waking hours’; and add that those experiences which are often ‘most real to us’ are part of our ‘habitual and ordinary habitat’ (Berger and Berger 1976: 19). But as anyone teaching introductory sociology knows, the familiar is also the ‘taken-for-granted’; and there can be resistance, on the part of students, to studying what either seems mundane, obvious or well-known. How then to render the world of ‘immediate experience’ surprising or meaningful?

In this paper, we outline a new teaching and learning innovation at Flinders University where the introductory class *SOCL 1010 Sociology of Everyday Life* is organized around research-led teaching; where students create and interpret data about everyday life for use in class and in assignments. As one student proudly proclaimed after the qualitative responses were drawn upon in class: ‘That was me up there on that PowerPoint slide’! As such, the course raises interesting questions about the ability of students to shift between being researcher and research subject, analyst and the analyzed, whilst also allowing them to construct connections between personal experience and larger social trends. And also about how we teach introductory sociology.

**Background to teaching innovation**
Teaching an introductory sociology course around the theme of everyday life is not entirely new. There is a long and distinguished list of sociology textbooks espousing such an approach:


Long before current educational fashions, C. Wright Mills’s (1959) *The Sociological Imagination* had defined the task of learning how to be a social scientist as the acquisition of the tools associated with ‘intellectual craftsmanship’. In the famous ‘Appendix’, the sociologist-cum-motorcyclist-and-domestic self-reliant (on C. Wright’s non-sociological passions see Mills and Mills 2000) suggests it is important that the student of social science learn, as early as possible, that good ideas come from a ‘great deal of often routine work’ (Mills 1959: 211). This echoes Weber’s injunction (1948: 135) that ‘No sociologist… should think [her]self too good,
even in [her] old age, to make tens of thousands of quite trivial computation’. But Mills (1959: 211-12) adds the insight that anyone aspiring to be a social scientist should keep diaries and maintain ‘files’ that are routinely ‘re-arranged’ and ‘re-sorted’ to unleash new connections – hence, what he refers to as the necessary ‘playfulness of mind’ in social science research (Mills 1959: 211). Ironically, he claims: ‘I do not like to do empirical work if I can possibly avoid it’ (Mills 1959: 205). Yet, Mills (1959: 195) insists that, for any ‘social scientist who feels [her]self a part of the classic tradition, social science is the practice of a craft’.

Interestingly, if Mills had bemoaned the separation of ‘theory’ and ‘method’ in mid-20th century sociology, arguably, a more pressing contradiction to have emerged during the last 25 years is between ‘research’ and ‘teaching’. While pedagogical thinking has moved in the direction of student-centered learning and research-led teaching, academic prestige has become more focused on research over teaching (Kain 2006). But if sociology is – as Mills asserts – a ‘craft’ can it be taught solely through induction to key texts and socialization into a purely ‘ideational’ academic culture? In what follows we present the 1st year course that we teach and outline how we attempt to meet aims, which include: ‘To cultivate in students the kind of ‘sociological imagination’ that allows them to make sense of their own experiences of culture and other everyday contexts”; and for students to ‘be able to engage in basic analysis of data and other evidence in relationship to everyday practices and routines’. As a result, this project draws upon a constructivist approach to student learning whereby personal experience is key, and original interpretations are encouraged.

The Student as Research Participant-cum-Subject
The key piece of research that the students engage in is the SOCI 1010 Survey and Narrative Self-Reporting which consisted of both qualitative and quantitative sections, and was conducted through the FLO or Flinders On-Line platform. This was the second time that the in-class project had been undertaken and some revisions had been made since last year’s pilot study (2012). The key motivation of the online survey and open-ended self-reporting was to capture a snapshot of the class members’s everyday activities during a 24-hour period; and also to learn a few things about the sample itself. For example, in 2013: the class was predominantly female (75%); aged between 18-25 (80%); employed in some kind of paid work (64%); and living at home with parents (60%). It also tells us a great deal about the student body at a university such as Flinders, that 56% of students came from families where neither parent had attended university.

The survey asked participants to record the frequency with which they had performed particular activities in the previous 24 hours, and then asked participants to highlight the most rewarding, enjoyable, boring and obligatory activities from the list. The chosen activities were organized into domestic (cleaning, cooking, using the internet, playing an instrument) and public (visiting church, catching public transport, shopping, visiting a bar). Finally, four qualitative questions asked participants to reflect on experiences, in the last 24 hours, that they considered to be the most predictable, most unusual, most conducive for personal space, and most beneficial to feelings of connectedness.

The response rate was around 50% with 130 of the students enrolled in SOCI1010 responding to the survey. Although we would have liked to see a higher response rate, it was interesting to note that many of the students who forgot, or ran out of time to complete the survey, expressed regret and lamented being left out. The sense of ownership over the data was
quite strong among the group and this certainly had a positive effect on the students’ interest in research activities that were based upon the data.

Arguably, the qualitative component of the survey provided the most revealing data in this project. Although we had originally encouraged students to think of the data as becoming sociological through analysis rather than being sociological in a manner that is self-evident, many of the responses were highly reflexive and self-aware. The responses contained narratives that contextualized experiences with an active sociological imagination. Participants reflected on both the routine and the unusual aspects of their behavior, often acknowledging that their everyday activities were embarrassing or dull. In many cases the participants identified aspects of their own behavior as being quirky or unusual for someone of their age, gender or class. These responses highlighted that the participants clearly had a practical grasp of the aspects of everyday life that were considered to be normal, and were readily comparing their own behavior to these normative standards. Whether or not the participants had already developed a sociological understanding of this in an academic sense, many identified the social expectations associated with their roles as a student, housemate, parent or partner.

For example, one participant elaborated on their fixation with anime and Harry Potter, claiming that ‘Those who don't know me ... find some of the things I engage in to be quite unusual and that, I find, to be quite unusual in itself’. While another participant stated that ‘The most unusual activity was sitting in the middle of a shopping mall eating a can of tuna and beans’, but then explained that ‘I have gotten over feeling self-conscious about eating ‘odd’ foods at ‘odd’ times a long time ago, but it is still unexpected nonetheless’. Many students used humor (often in a self-deprecating manner) to describe awkward or embarrassing aspects of everyday life. The survey was held mid-week and during the semester, when leisure time was
limited, and as a result many of the responses used humor to make light of the uneventful nature of their everyday lives. This suggests that for many of the participants, talking about the mundane was awkward or uncomfortable – as though they felt obligated to think of something more interesting. But, participants were able to spontaneously and anonymously reflect on their experiences; and in doing so exercise an element of the sociological imagination.

Noteworthy in terms of how students narrated everyday activities were the complex and often contradictory statements about Facebook. 88% of the students identified that they had used Facebook at least once in the survey period, with 24% logging on more than 10 times a day. The central narrative tension in the self-reporting of Facebook use was between seeing it as a boring, perhaps unrewarding routine (albeit one that offers comfort in its habitualness), and those that saw it as the source of entertainment, escape or transcendence. As one student identified, ‘I felt connecting to people on the social media site to be boring and unrewarding but also sadly entertaining’. Students remarked that they were constantly ‘tapped in’ to Facebook, they were also disparaging of its omnipresence in everyday life: ‘I felt like I needed to be on Facebook all the time which was invasive. I feel as if I’m addicted to the internet’. The ever-present role of Facebook in students’ everyday lives demonstrates the convergence between ‘cyberspace and real life’, as deeply embedded routines that offer communication and connectedness, but also a sense of compulsion (Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic 2004: 29, 156). We return to this issue in our Conclusion.

The Student as Researcher-cum-Sociologist
The data that was produced by the on-line survey was present throughout the semester in various forms. In addition to staff drawing on the data in the classroom, the data also formed an important part of the assessment: a research report worth 30% of the overall grade; and two exam questions were also set on the data and the reasoning one may use to make sense of it. In this section, we focus exclusively on how the students responded to the task of analyzing the survey and self-reporting data in the research report. We have quoted – with their permission – from the essays submitted.

When analyzing the data, students often conceptualized the everyday in terms of what one described as the ‘most menial and commonplace’; and another described as ‘unavoidable or highly necessary activities of daily life’ (S2 2013). However, the written assignments seemed alert to the fact that obligatory tasks of bathing, cleaning, cooking, et cetera, could be contrasted with the more enjoyable and meaningful acts of social interaction, exercise and personalized rituals. Students, highlighted that some of the most highly-rated activities amongst the class were ‘those that involved interactions with other people’. This not only demonstrated the ‘social’ aspect of everyday activities, but also reaffirmed to them the oft unnoticed significance of face-to-face interaction within social experience. Further to this, one student captured a common view amongst the cohort that, despite the commonplace view mediated interaction may be replacing face-to-face communication, the latter are still considered ‘a lot more valuable than internet and text’. When discussing the value of these everyday interactions students connected their observations to theoretical frameworks and concepts ranging from ‘structure and agency’ to social norms, Goffman’s ‘Interaction Order’ to Durkheim’s notion of ritual (Scott 2009; Collins 2004). Some students even related aspects of the data to the condition of modernity including the prevalence of technology and the influence of rationalization/routinization of human activities.
In their endeavors as social scientists, the students showed an impressive understanding of the limitations of the survey, both in its construction and as a methodology. Students critiqued the design of some survey questions as rendering the length of activities indeterminable. Additionally, the timing of the survey may have ‘potentially created anomalous data’, as it was conducted mid-week and mid-semester. The students rightly tweaked to the fact that many leisure and religious activities were under-represented as the survey did not include weekend or holiday periods. Whilst noting these limitations, students also showed an understanding of alternative methods and how – as a group – we could have improved the validity of the findings. In these and other respects, the research report pointed to a greater degree of methodological and conceptual sophistication than one might have imagined amongst sociological novices.

Conclusion: Implications for Curriculum

As the course featured essay/assignment clinics where ideas were workshopped, as well as multiple opportunities for face-to-face and FLO feedback about the pedagogy employed, we feel that we can say with some certainty that the cohort claimed they enjoyed the opportunity to practice sociology through this research. Not only did the students display a solid grasp of research skills, they were able to ‘bridge the chasm between abstract sociological concepts, research methods and students’ concrete experiences’ (Huisman 2010: 106). Students were able to construct their own sociological understandings based on the data, which follows a constructivist, active view of learning via an experiential, student-centered pedagogical approach (Finkelstein 2010; Huisman 2010; Forbes and Kaufman 2008). Moreover, the research task in particular gave the students a sense of voice and ownership toward their work (Forbes and
Kaufman 2008), rarely afforded in undergraduate courses. The task and the student outcomes thus supports the view that strengthening research skills across the undergraduate curriculum benefits student education, and such tasks increase participation and engagement with sociology.

However, as sociologists we also acknowledge that education is a social process and that the dynamics between teacher and pupil complicate notions of ‘relevance’ and ‘immediate experience’. Thus, even if we induct students into the applied or practice-oriented side of sociology, there is a danger in presuming that students are on the same page as teaching staff. For example, age and life-course shape how our students view the everyday; and whether their notions of the everyday differ radically from those that are commonplace in sociology texts. A telling point of difference related to the assumed significance of the home within the sociology of everyday life and, indeed, what home means to different social actors. During the period of the survey, 93% of students did not do any gardening and 95% did not renovate their homes. As one student noted in her assignment: ‘gardening and renovating are not common activities...[these activities] would mostly be done by parents of the house’. The issue then becomes: should future versions of the course lose the sociology of home-making when it raises such interesting issues as class/status, taste and lifestyle, material culture and everyday aesthetics? This is where a multi-pronged approach may be warranted: if students were asked to reflect on contemporary television programming they might be forced to reflect on the high incidence of cooking, renovation and home-buying shows. If such programs are not aimed primarily at them it still raises the interesting issue: how do social actors constitute notions of everyday life? And do different social institutions – including the mass media – come to define the everyday for us? Although the data provides the potential for further insights into the
experiences of students, we cannot allow the interests of students to fully dictate the content of introductory courses.

On the other side of the ledger, a clearer picture of what our students do and how they see themselves, has forced us to reflect on how everyday life is changing in technologically-mediated ‘life-worlds’. While many students reported deeply valuing their face-to-face interactions, 100% of students also reported using the Internet at least once (indeed, it was an online survey); and 34% stated that they had used the Internet over 10 times in the course of the day. But, again, this is sociological as much as pedagogic. A recent study by Awan and Gauntlett (2013) found that online media is used for a myriad of reasons including the convenience of having friends ‘always on’ (2013: 127). In both their narrative self-reporting and in the analyses offered in their written assessment pieces, students were driven to try to contextualize the relationship between technology and social interactions. Many students observed the pervasiveness of Facebook in everyday life, and seemed to concur with the growing body of literature that suggests that Computer-Mediated-Communication (C-M-C) is one of the many sociological environments in which the changing complexities of interactions are presently unfolding (Walther 1996; Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic 2004).

While the presence of such themes will come as no surprise, we think it does reinforce the point that how we see everyday life is a product of our social positioning/location/experience. The implication could very well be that, rather than trying to perpetually keep up with so-called ‘digital natives’, a more reflexive and productive approach might allow our students to surprise us and to challenge our versions of sociology. For students are also social actors; and, the classroom, a type of sociological laboratory. In short, embedding knowledge in context –
especially as it pertains to everyday practices - can only enrich the teaching and learning experience. Sociology as form, as well as content!
Bibliography


