Dear Editor, What’s School Got to Do with It?: Making Transitions to Real Life

Abstract

This essay focuses upon a writing assignment designed for an entry-level interdisciplinary social-science course. The aim of this assignment is to promote engagement with, and an appreciation of, the “academic” by having the student apply course concepts and perspectives to a personally relevant “real-world” issue, in a way he/she might continue to do even after graduation. It reports on an initial trial with the assignment, describes efforts to facilitate the project, reflects on some pitfalls encountered, and offers suggestions for significant improvement.

Introduction

As many recent Showcase presentations affirm, pedagogically conscious professors want their student to “engage with” their course material. In other words, we want to spark interest in the ideas that we present. We hope that our students will internalize the knowledge we offer, make it their own, and use it to better understand the world and their place in it. Whether based upon educational theory or our own seat-of-the-pants experience, we believe that by “taking ownership” our students will learn more effectively. Rather than having them imbibe information merely to serve abstract extrinsic goals (i.e., grade performance), we want them to develop new habits of mind that transform their way of seeing and relating to their environment (Paul, 2004). Intellectual growth is, after all, a fundamental purpose of higher education. Liberal arts education, in particular, aims not so much at transferring concrete technical skills, as at developing analytical and creative problem-solving capacities. It aims to facilitate that most important of transitions, from student to thinker, and ultimately active agent in the world. (See Kuh, Nelson Laird, & Umbach, 2004).

Clearly, students come to our classrooms with a highly variable package of interests and talents. None of us can reach every one of them. But we can and should seek strategies that promote ownership, and release whatever potential for engagement that our students bring with them. An obvious first step is to provide some basic conceptual tools. For example, we seek textual material that is lucid, and elucidate that which is challenging. We design courses at progressive levels of difficulty, hoping to take them lock-step with us on an intellectual journey. Beyond that, we can model the behavior we hope to induce, for instance, by adopting texts that concretely illustrate abstract concepts, and by also supplementing them with classroom examples that seem particularly apt. The danger here, of course, is that students will construe such illustrations merely as material to be committed to memory in preparation for testing, rather than as demonstrations of the productive power of knowledge. Thus we need to go further. One way
to do so is by conducting classroom exercises that provoke active involvement (see, for example, Krug, 2004; Powers & Clews, 2003; Sable, Van Esch, & Driscoll, 2004). We might also induce personal engagement, and signal its significance, through testing procedures (e.g., constructing questions as hypothetical but not unrealistic situations they might confront) and take-home assignments (see Rogers, 2004, which combines classroom workshops with assignments).

The remainder of this presentation concerns one such assignment, which I set for my first-year “Introduction to Anthropology and Sociology” class: composing a social-scientifically informed “letter-to-the editor.” Since social life is ubiquitous, getting students to make connections to the “real world” would seem to be relatively simple. But it has always proven to be easier said than done, and my experiment with this assignment underscored that point.

**The Trial and Errors**

Let me begin by outlining other, practical parameters within which I designed the assignment. First, the traditional term paper seemed inappropriate for a variety of reasons: (a) most undergraduates will not become academics; (b) novices too often produce derivative, descriptive pieces that do them little good; and (c) term paper assignments lend themselves to different forms of plagiarism. I wanted to be able to monitor and control the latter without allowing it to dominate my grading. Workload considerations were another factor. I wanted to be able to grade efficiently and without compromising the amount of feedback I could offer. Likewise, the task should not appear so demanding as to discourage; it should be one that today’s students could find time to do well. Further, students in first-year classes are very heterogeneous; their interests and program intentions vary. So, the assignment should be suited to students heading for various specialties and walks of life.

There were also other pedagogical considerations. Students need to develop the ability to think through an issue and reach a position on which they can compose an orderly argument. Finally, it is ultimately important to enlarge the students’ relevancy framework, to encourage them to develop interests in a wider range of issues and events. This is best done by meeting them “where they’re at” and helping them connect their current interests and circumstances to broader ones.

What kind of project would reach my goals within the extant constraints? What task would lay a foundation for an activity that students might undertake as members of society, irrespective of profession or position? In what sort of situation might an ordinary citizen be likely to take a stance on a public issue and formally articulate it? The answer was delivered with the morning paper, in its letters-to-the-editor column. A letter-to-the-editor would be a short and relatively simple product. Letter authors write on topics about which they feel deeply, but their offerings must address concerns that have some social significance. In choosing a topic, students would have to identify an issue about which they care, and scan their environment (e.g., peruse the media) for an incident or story that could trigger a response. Moreover, since such letters appear in quite ordinary venues, models abound. But therein lies the rub.
Anyone who reads the letters column of a typical newspaper will concede that many missives are ill-conceived and ill-composed. They are not necessarily good models, so students would have to be warned against their dangers, and instructed to do better. The assignment would need adjusting. In my “modified” letter-to-the-editor assignment, students were charged with producing a social-scientifically informed op-ed piece. It would have to demonstrate the utility of their course work, showing how specific concepts and perspectives contributed to the construction of the argument presented. This, in effect, required another change. Students would have to explicitly acknowledge the source of the disciplinary knowledge upon which they drew, in effect, practicing scholarly conventions on the use of citations and references. Finally, their writing style would have to meet a first-year university standard, and, of course, students need to serve as their own copy editors.

In addition, I set a flexible deadline: Once they had settled in and had covered a few substantive topics (that is, after the first mid-term test), students could begin to submit papers, and I would accept them until a week before the last class. This arrangement offered practical and pedagogical advantages. Students could use it to help balance their individual workloads. More importantly, it would allow students to opt for a favored theme irrespective of when pertinent course work was scheduled. Ideally, students would do their papers on the heels of the topically relevant class unit. Finally, the arrangement would facilitate the feedback that is crucial to the learning experience; that is, it would be easier to carefully attend to each paper if the work of grading were distributed. (See Pettigrew, 2003, for a discussion of a similar scheduling design.)

Despite deliberate planning and careful preparation, the assignment proved to be more difficult for my students than I had anticipated (revealing, perhaps, my own stubborn naiveté, and, possibly, also the need for such an assignment). For example, papers were very slow to arrive. By the end of September, we finished the “what is” part of the course. Having general descriptions of Anthropology and Sociology behind us, we moved on to a “nature/nurture” unit, taking up topics of sex and gender, then race and ethnicity. This was followed by the mid-term test, and the start date for submissions. Although gay rights were high on the public agenda, and ethnic conflicts were raging across the globe, no papers arrived. This was not surprising. The material had largely been framed as an ontological issue. Connecting it to political agendas would present a real challenge to novices. Moreover, students would naturally feel there was still plenty of time.

We then studied language, and did a classroom exercise using the students’ own informal dialect. Later, I read the class a newspaper article about “culture,” comparing the colloquial usage to that developed and employed by anthropologists. When we moved on to examine deviancy, I asked them to play at making up “neutralizing techniques,” which were described in their sociology text. These sorts of activities were meant to demonstrate real-world connections. Still, through November, no papers came. But this was still no great surprise, procrastination being a common enough social tendency, and students would now be turning their attention to their first set of university examinations.
Yet I not only understood the dangers of procrastination, but, as an experienced teacher, I also realized the importance of concrete guidelines. So, over the winter holidays, I wrote a detailed set of specifications, which include a rationale and statement of goals. Anticipating the difficulty that some students would have in getting started, I provided suggestions about how they could build from lived-experiences and personal circumstances to public issues, as they perused the media, attended intellectual gatherings, or even just brooded about their own stressors.

Second semester began with an ideal topic, which might have had me swamped with multiple essays on a common theme. It was marriage and family in cross-cultural perspective. The first reading assignment, from Kottak’s Cultural Anthropology (2002), directly addressed the question of same-sex marriage, which was a prominent issue in the media at the time. I deliberately refrained from suggesting the topic, hoping that students would themselves discover its relevancy. But I did periodically remind the class of the assignment. Nevertheless, there were no submissions, or even talk of them, until early February, when one young fellow promised to be finished before the Reading Week break, and an older female student actually submitted one. This, in a class that, despite a fair bit of attrition, still had 37 official registrants.

By the time March arrived, I, at least, had become quite concerned. Despite my reluctance to influence student choices and my fear of monotonous submissions, I broke down and suggested same-sex marriage as a timely topic. More than once, I began class with a warning that the final due date was approaching. On one such occasion, my hopes climbed when a student raised her hand. Her request was less encouraging. She asked for advice about getting started; she reported that she could not identify a topic. Obviously, my written guidelines had hardly been provocative, at least (but surely not only) in her case. I took the opportunity to refer to the handout, repeating, in brief, the hints it offered, including the suggestion that students should prowl the media. But, she explained, she neither read newspapers nor followed the other news media. She clearly had no intention of starting to do so.

Though daunting, that observation also gave me the opportunity to review another aspect of the exercise. Though the assignment was meant to encourage awareness of public debate, even more fundamentally, it was an exercise in the sociological imagination (Mills, 2005). That is, its goal was to raise consciousness of the often unrecognized relationship between public and private issues, or, in other words, between social structural realities, on the one hand, and personal, lived realities, on the other. The young woman’s comments allowed me to explicitly reiterate the legitimacy of topical concerns arising from students’ lifeworlds, i.e., “world of . . . common, immediate, lived experience” (Good, 1994: 122), such as the stresses of single parenthood or the layoff of a family breadwinner.

In March, I found myself offering increasingly concrete and specific advice. Indeed, I could be accused of growing desperation. The National Post (hardly my ideologically favorite source), I told students, was available free at the bookstore, and the Globe and Mail was being distributed
at the library. As the deadline approached, I resorted to bringing newspaper clips into class—including one from the students’ own Caper Times—and suggesting course themes to which they might be relevant. Despite these escalating efforts, nearly all the papers I received were submitted on the last date permissible, many were mechanical, and nearly a quarter of the class failed to submit.

Troubleshooting

My experiment with the assignment can hardly be called a raving success, so I was left to ask, why was it such a failure, and what should I do about that. The goal seemed laudable, and the rationale cogent; it seemed rash to abandon the assignment after one attempt, however trying it had been. Perhaps, I thought, this particular class was just a bad test case. I certainly perceived the class as being unenthusiastic and non-responsive, relative to other introductory classes I had recently taught using the same texts and pedagogy. But impressions can be deceiving, and such systematic evidence as I have available is unclear. That is, at the end of the academic year, my department conducted a student interest survey. The resultant data indicated that only two students in the class intended to specialize in either of the disciplines covered in the course. While this figure impressed me as low, I have no good basis on which to judge. Enrollment figures form no clear index of interest. For example, many B.A. students take the course because they must take an interdisciplinary social science course, and this course is one of only two currently available options. Others pick it up as an elective for science programs. I do not know how many student specialists come out of the average section. All this aside, though, even if the class were especially uninspired, the assignment must still be judged by its ability to reach a general constituency.

By performance measures other than the letter-to-the-editor (mainly multiple choice tests), this class was comparable to the two sections I had taught the previous year. Without the letter-to-the-editor, the 2003-04 class average would have been 62% (rather than 60%). The class mean for one of my previous year’s sections was also 62%, while the other’s average was only three points higher. I had to wonder whether the task was too demanding for first-year students. But difficult as the assignment might be, it is legitimate to argue that university-level studies should be a challenge (see Neill, 2004; Pettigrew, 2004; Postman, 1985, for example). And, if it takes time to develop the habit of mind that we call the sociological imagination, surely it makes sense to make an early start.

Rather than abandon or defer the assignment to a more advanced course, I decided to assess it with a view to re-modeling implementation strategies. An assignment that students write off, rather than write, is hardly productive, however noble in intent. So, increasing the submission rate is an obvious fundamental. One way to do that would be to raise the assignment’s grade value. Since the scope of the project was so limited, I had assigned only eight points to the project. How could I justify a significantly greater weight for a brief paper that required no
scholarly reading other than the course texts? Moreover, raising the stakes without adding capacity would clearly be a suboptimal approach.

Casting about for a better idea, I surmised that providing a series of activities might make it possible to lower risk and increase facility, while also justifying more grade credit. The following are some progressive steps that I think are worthy of development. First, students could be asked, very early in the term, to survey the course outline and scan the text(s) in order to identify a few course-relevant topics that hold the most interest value for them. This initial assignment might be as simple as asking students to list which chapters they expect to like best, and to explain, in a few words, why. Then, perhaps during the first term, students could amass a “scrapbook,” which could include selections from public media—e.g., cuttings and printouts—as well as reflections on conversations or of their own thoughts. This would serve both as a sensitizing activity and a data bank. Each of these two preliminary steps could be awarded a few grade points, adding to the total value of the project without over-weighting the final product, which would be due sometime in the second term.

Having a data bank at hand might help counteract procrastination and last-minute submission. It would be useful also to design a strategy to support individualized deadlines, given the benefits of the practice (outlined above). For the following suggestion, I have to thank a member of my Showcase audience (who got away without leaving his name): Each student could be asked to set her/his own deadline. This, I would add, could be subject to the same policy on extensions that are used to govern other assignments in this or other courses.

Unfortunately, I am not teaching the introductory course this year. A trial of the revamped project will have to wait. But I welcome input from colleagues who have experience with similar experiments or plan to try them. I can be reached by e-mail at connie_deroche@uccb.ca.

References


Pettigrew, Todd. (2004). The deficilitator; or, how to make things hard for your students. Paper presented at the Atlantic Universities’ Teaching Showcase, Halifax, Dalhousie University. [See elsewhere in this volume].


