

# **Sociology Students Tell Us About Learning Sociology**

**Kathleen McKinney**  
**2003-2004 Carnegie Scholar- Final Report**  
**Illinois State University**  
[kmckinne@ilstu.edu](mailto:kmckinne@ilstu.edu)

About three years ago, frustrated by what I perceived as inadequate understanding of my discipline and limited sociological skills by some students in my Sociology senior experience course, it occurred to me that we don't really know how students learn Sociology or develop the sociological imagination, and certainly not from the students' point of view. Thus, as a 2003-2004 Carnegie Scholar, the goal of my project was to further our understanding of how sociology majors believe they learn the content and skills of my discipline. In addition, I hoped to gather some data on what learning strategies, behaviors, or attitudes correlate with success in the major. Ultimately, my long-term goal is to apply the findings to improve student learning in Sociology.

Past research on learning in Sociology has focused on Introduction to Sociology students and used primarily quantitative methods (e.g., Dietz 2002; Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995; Neuman 1989; Szafran 1986). Other work has assessed the impact of one specific teaching strategy or assignment (see many articles and notes in *Teaching Sociology*). My focus was on sociology senior majors, using primarily qualitative methods, to give the students a voice in telling us how they learn. I wanted to "hear" what they have to say about their strategies for learning, to find out whether more and less successful learners differed in their learning behaviors, to see whether the students' reflections mirrored the theories and research on learning in higher education, and to develop practical interventions to enhance learning based on the findings.

My project was a multi-method adventure involving four studies. The work is in the tradition of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), and classroom or program action research (Cross and Steadman 1996). I report briefly here on the first three of those studies and include some preliminary findings from the fourth study, which is still in progress.

The first study in the project was a result of serendipity as I was offered the chance to conduct a focus group or group interview at the 2003 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association with Sociology senior honors majors (one type of successful learner) from around the nation. I spent over two and one-half hours conducting this group interview with nine students, using several open-ended questions. The questions focused on becoming a major and on learning strategies in Sociology (McKinney, 2005, in press).

These honors students expressed thoughts about learning that often fit with models about learning 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 for integrated learning, and the importance of interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the students' comments confirmed some of the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson 1987)

including cooperation among students, active learning, student-faculty contact, prompt feedback from others, and respect for diverse talents and learning styles.

With few exceptions, the responses of these successful students pointed to their ability to acknowledge their role in learning and to make internal attributions for their successes. They also highlighted some particular academic or study behaviors that they believed positively impacted their learning including attending class, writing, reading, and reflecting. The strongest theme in this conversation, however, was what students and I labeled “connections.” Students noted the importance to their learning of making connections with peers and faculty, between in- and out-of-class learning opportunities, among courses, over time, between lecture and readings, between the abstract and the concrete, and between material and their lives. Perhaps connected and integrated learning experiences increase time on task and level of challenge, two other best practices in undergraduate education (Chickering and Gamson 1987).

The second study was an analysis of the content of learning log entries submitted by the eight students in my fall 2003 Senior Experience in Sociology course (McKinney, 2004, in review). Students were given prompts to which they were required to respond but they were also encouraged to reflect on other issues related to their learning. The prompts or questions focused on what and how they learn sociology, study style, problems in learning sociology, and reflection on how they might improve their learning. The assignment also specified a minimum number of entries over a course of a minimum of two-three weeks. Students could create the logs using handwritten journals (only one did) or computer files.

This small but fairly diverse group of sociology seniors mentioned learning strategies similar to some found in the national focus group including making connections, finding relevance of the material to their lives, talking with others, working with peers, interacting with faculty, and reviewing and writing. Also similar to the focus group, the students discussed strategies that fit current “best practices” such as collaboration with peers, obtaining feedback, interaction with faculty, time on task, and active learning. Their ideas on making connections and increasing relevance to their own experiences 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).

Though limited by the small number of learning logs, I attempted to look for similarities or differences in the patterns of responses between subgroups of students. “Stronger” students were defined as such because they had earned higher grades in the course, used fewer excuses for problems in their coursework, appeared more intrinsically motivated, had consistently good participation, used required email routinely, and performed better on a brief sociological imagination (the way of thinking in my discipline) essay question compared to the “weaker” students.

The main difference between these two groups of students in this study was in the quality of the learning log itself. The stronger students had lengthier learning logs with more detailed reflection. They were more likely to be critical of their own study behaviors and to respond to all the probes, as well as to include additional reflections compared to the other students in the class. Whether these differences simply reflect the fact that the stronger students worked harder than others on the learning log because they do so with all their assignments and/or that something about the process of reflection is

related to learning or success is not something that can be answered by the data from this study. Some prior research, however, indicates that when engaging in self-assessment (a form of reflection), stronger students are more accurate in that self-assessment (McCourt, Ballantine, and Whittington 2003).

Students also wrote about issues that were not direct responses to the prompts I offered. For example, time is a problematic issue for these students who frequently indicated they were overwhelmed and distracted, not spending enough time on studying, procrastinating, and lacked time management skills. Second, several of the students expressed concern about the need to retain learning from past courses and use it, later, in other courses. This concern may have been especially salient to these students at this time because they were enrolled in Senior Experience, which explicitly draws on content and skills from several past courses.

In the third study, my graduate assistant conducted brief face-to-face, structured interviews with 21 Sociology seniors from Illinois State University course (McKinney, 2004, in review). These students were all volunteers from our full cohort of seniors taking our Senior Experience course (about 75 students). The focus of the interviews was on students' beliefs about what helps them to learn sociology. Each interview lasted between 25 and 60 minutes. To ensure greater confidentiality and comfort (as they were still in Sociology classes, including my own, at the time of their interviews), we chose not to tape record the interviews. Rather, the graduate assistant took summary notes during the interviews and read, corrected or added to them immediately following the interview. Soon after, she transcribed her notes. Each typed interview ranged from two to three single spaced pages.

The results from this study overlap and, generally, support those of the previous studies. These students pointed to application and relevance as key to learning the discipline. Most also indicated they used one or more study techniques involving some form of repetition, rewriting, note taking/organizing, and reviewing. Interactions with peers and instructors were often reported as important for learning as were completing readings and other assignments, and attending class. These students indicated that core required courses were often a source of difficulty in learning sociology. They also tended to report the use of fairly similar learning strategies for sociology in general, for the sociological imagination specifically, for difficulties in learning sociology, and for learning in other disciplines. Exceptions were the tendency for a larger percentage of students to report using interpersonal strategies (getting help from faculty and peers) and a smaller percentage of students to report use of application and examples when they are having a difficulty in their learning compared to learning sociology in general.

Finally, I have conducted preliminary analyses of self-administered questionnaires from 54 Sociology seniors at Illinois State University. I will be collecting data from the remaining seniors in one full cohort this fall and rerunning the analyses. At this time, however, I can offer some tentative results.

The three most commonly mentioned study strategies that work best in Sociology were talking with others about the material, using application and "real life" examples, and various forms of review and repetition. Greater engagement in the discipline of Sociology was significantly related to greater frequency of six positive study/academic behaviors. In this study, measures of success include Sociology GPA, expected senior thesis grade, level of engagement in the discipline, score on a sociological imagination

essay question, and measures combining these variables. Age and race, were each related to four of these measures of success in Sociology with younger students and white students having greater success. Making internal attributions for success in Sociology courses, greater frequency of coming to class well prepared and greater frequency of completing all homework on time were each related to more success in Sociology on three measures of success. Thus, this study is hinting at demographic variables, attitudinal variables, and study behaviors that may distinguish more and less successful Sociology students.

As I reflect on the results from all four studies, two conceptualizations of the data emerge. First, I see a typology of five types of connections that students across two or more of the studies stress are important for their learning. These are the following: 1. *interpersonal* connections via relationships and interactions with peers and faculty; 2. *connections across courses* through integration and retention; 3. *to the discipline* via engagement and interest; 4. *among closely related ideas* through repetition and review; and 5. *to student lives and the 'real world'* via application and relevance. Second, students appear to be located and moving on three paths or continua of development: *less to more success* in the discipline and learning of the sociological imagination; *surface to deep* learning strategies and epistemologies; and *novice to expert* learning/learners.

We must focus, now, on designing studies to assess whether these strategies, perceived by students as effective for learning our discipline, actually are effective, when, for whom, and what processes underlay that effectiveness. In addition, we need to extend this work to at least two other populations: 1. majors who are struggling to learn and succeed in the discipline and 2. Sociology students on other campuses. Should these themes be confirmed and elaborated, they will provide ideas for practical interventions to improve the learning of Sociology by our majors. Tentatively, however, I am working on ways to do the following:

- Offer more/better “authentic” assignments and other learning opportunities including relevant out-of-class learning opportunities that involve application,
- Structure more/better team work and peer review in my courses,
- Encourage and reward students for talking to faculty about sociology and learning even when they don't think they need help,
- Work with students (via the department and/or university learning centers) on the most effective ways to use review/repetition/rewriting strategies and which might be most effective for Sociology or given classes in Sociology,
- Help students understand and apply the differences in surface and deep approaches to learning,
- Develop ways to increase student engagement in the course and the discipline,
- Create strategies and assignments to encourage metacognition and reflection, and
- Increase discussions and actions for additional integration across the curriculum and between curriculum and co-curriculum.

Outcomes of this work (beyond Carnegie), thus far, include several presentations at local and national levels. In addition, three articles are currently in review at refereed SoTL outlets. My gratitude goes to the other Carnegie Scholars and the staff members at the Foundation but, especially, the eight others in my workgroup, *the Quivering Epiphanies*, from whom I have learned a great deal about teaching, learning, and SoTL in other disciplines that has helped me with my project. I can hardly wait to see additional

data from, and consider the practical implications of, the final phase of my project and future related research.

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