

# STUDENTS TELL US ABOUT LEARNING SOCIOLOGY

Kathleen McKinney  
 Cross Chair in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning  
 Professor of Sociology  
 Illinois State University  
 2003-2004 Carnegie Scholar  
 kmckinne@ilstu.edu

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. To obtain the perceptions of sociology students about how they learn Sociology.
2. To uncover the learning strategies which distinguish more and less successful learners of Sociology.
3. To assess demographic, learning style, or attitudinal correlates of these strategies and of success.
4. To share this information with colleagues in order to positively impact pedagogy, curricula, co-curricula, and student learning.

## FOUR RESEARCH STUDIES

**Focus Group** of 9  
 Sociology honors  
 majors from around  
 the nation

**Learning Logs**  
 from 8 Sociology  
 seniors from  
 Illinois State  
 University (ISU)

**Face-to-face  
 Interviews** with 21  
 Sociology ISU  
 seniors

**Questionnaires**  
 from 54 Sociology  
 seniors from ISU

## KEY RESULTS FROM EACH STUDY

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Fit” of the discipline to “who they are”</li> <li>• Importance, for learning, of “making connections” including interpersonal ones</li> <li>• Preference for diverse pedagogies (“there is not one way to learn Sociology”)</li> <li>• Active/constructivist learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Stronger” students were more reflective</li> <li>• Time is a major issue or concern</li> <li>• Recognition of the need to integrate, retain, &amp; apply prior learning/knowledge</li> <li>• The important role of others in learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application, relevance, examples</li> <li>• Rewrite, review, note cards...</li> <li>• Interactions with peers and teachers</li> <li>• Completing reading and assignments</li> <li>• Core, required courses can be problematic</li> </ul>	<p>(Preliminary Analysis Only- small N)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Younger &amp; white students more “successful” on some measures</li> <li>• Engagement in the discipline related to more frequent, good study/academic behaviors</li> <li>• Common strategies for learning include talking with others, making material relevant, &amp; repetition</li> <li>• Successful students more frequently do all homework on time &amp; come to class well-prepared</li> </ul>
--	--	---	--

## EPIPHANIES

<p><b>Summary of Results</b>  <b>FIVE TYPES OF CONNECTIONS PLUG STUDENTS INTO LEARNING</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Interpersonal</i> via Collaboration, Relationships, Interaction</li> <li>2. <i>Across Courses</i> via Integration &amp; Retention</li> <li>3. <i>To the Discipline</i> via Engagement &amp; Interest</li> <li>4. <i>Among Related Ideas or Skills</i> via Review and Repetition</li> <li>5. <i>To Student Lives and the Real World</i> via Application &amp; Relevance</li> </ol> <p><b>THREE CONTINUA OF THE LOCATION OF STUDENTS ON THE PATH OF LEARNING</b>  <i>Less to More - Success</i> in the Major &amp; Developing the Sociological Imagination</p> <p><i>Surface to Deep</i> - Learning Strategies and Epistemologies</p> <p><i>Novice to Expert</i> - Learners/Learning</p>	<p><b>Example Pedagogical and Curricular Implications</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More/better “authentic” assignments and other learning opportunities including relevant out-of-class learning opportunities that involve application,</li> <li>• More/better peer review and team work in my courses,</li> <li>• Encourage and reward students for talking to faculty about sociology and learning even when they don’t think they need help,</li> <li>• Working with students (via the department and/or university learning centers) on the most effective ways to use review/repetition, strategies and which might be most effective for Sociology or given classes in Sociology,</li> <li>• Help students understand and apply the differences in surface vs. deep approaches to learning,</li> <li>• Need to discuss additional integration across the curriculum and between curriculum &amp; co-curriculum,</li> <li>• More emphasis on engaging students,</li> <li>• Use strategies and assignments to encourage metacognition and reflection.</li> </ul>
--	---

## OUTCOMES

- Sharing with Sociology colleagues via presentations, publications, web sites.
- Future studies – assess whether the learning strategies offered by students actually enhance learning; focus on the learning strategies of “struggling” students in Sociology and majors earlier in their academic career; look at engagement in the discipline; study the development of the sociological imagination over time.