The Model Seminar:
Teaching Critical Thinking in a Large Introductory Sociology Class

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Imagine (or remember) a typical graduate seminar: about a dozen students gathered around a table with their professor, discussing a text they’ve read in advance. Now please adjust your picture. First, make the students younger: first and second-year undergraduates. Add a teaching assistant (TA). Then open up the seating arrangement, creating a broad, shallow arc. Now push three of the walls of the room back, way back, and populate that new space with the tiers of seats of a lecture theatre. Fill those seats with 145 other undergraduates and re-imagine the whole. This is what we call a “model seminar”; this is how we teach introduction to sociology.

The model seminar originates in a crucial question for undergraduate education: what should an introduction introduce? While this question is taken up every year by countless instructors and administrators in countless institutions, the apparent diversity of the answers is belied by how they characteristically reduce the issue to a decision of content. In sociology, the content of an introductory course invariably refers to that subset of disciplinary knowledge established (and thereby elevated) as “the fundamentals.” Less commonly, such a course also aims at teaching critical thinking.

Both fundamentals and critical thinking are traditional terms of pedagogical rhetoric, even if they are much more fraught and complex than generally acknowledged, but their mutual familiarity obscures the severity of their differences. This article resurfaces those divergences to illuminate the implications for intro sociology and teaching in general. We might have attempted an objective and neutral comparison of these orientations, but that would have been disingenuous. Instead, we admit our bias from the outset: we are committed to teaching critical thinking as an introduction to sociology—and perhaps to the life of the mind in general.
We do not necessarily reject other approaches, even those that make us anxious. On the contrary, we believe that introducing students to sociology in different ways is essential for the vibrancy and openness of the field. The alternative—standardizing the introduction to sociology—surrenders the best of the discipline to the worst of its institutionalizations. C. Wright Mill’s (2000) sociological imagination has long been a touchstone for the discipline and it remains so for us, since imagining has never flourished under bureaucratic regimentation or the eradication of diversity.

Nor do we concede that we ultimately face a forced choice between fundamentals and thinking. Instead, by insisting that teaching critical thinking is radically different from teaching fundamentals, we attempt to shift the very understanding of fundamental. Appreciating the real distance between the two approaches allows the gap to be closed, just as recognizing the specifics of the vastness of the world allows its circumnavigation to return to the same place. In the best case, we insist, critical thinking is the most vital of fundamentals, and certainly more fundamental than any possible assertion of “core” knowledge.

Following the logic of this paradoxical coming together through attending to difference, this article is both a theoretical argument with pragmatic consequences and a return to pedagogical tradition through poststructuralist heresy. In other words, this is not a standard empirical study that measures the effects of particular interventions or compares them to those of other approaches. Instead, this article close-couples our classroom techniques to our theory, for our aim coincides with our method: theorizing teaching through its concrete practices. To be more specific, the particulars of the model seminar integrate five key theoretical moments:

1. The performativity of discourse
2. Teaching as embodied in its forms and structures
3. The disruption of knowledge by critical thinking
4. The deconstructive inversion of center and supplement
5. The return to tradition as a means of contesting convention.

In a recent survey of 301 mostly American sociologists, Wagenaar (2004) found that “postmodernism” was one of the concepts considered least “core” to introductory sociology (feminist theory was another). This professional consensus might suggest that our approach is so outside the discipline that it is irrelevant. But our position is inspired by the noted sociology student, Saul Bellow, who writes, “He had drawn back to the periphery in order to return to the center from one of his strange angles” (1989, 54). The marginality that poststructuralism still maintains with respect to a sociological core (that is, in the end, subject to no general consensus) affords us a particularly effective means of returning to the heart of its teaching.

The performative return to tradition

We begin with performative theory, in three easy steps. The first comes from Lacanian psychoanalysis—appropriately so, for it is the first step taken by Jacques Lacan (for example, 1966, 1973, 1975, 2001) himself: to think all human relationships in terms of language. This is hardly controversial for teaching, which has long been recognized as a practice in and of language. The crucial transition from language to poststructuralist discourse is made by Michel Foucault: the definition of discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, 49). The final step is taken by Judith Butler: more specifically, discourse is language recognized for its performativity, for how it performs or constitutes the social world (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1997). In pedagogical terms, discourse produces the classroom and everything within it. The happy consequence is that teaching and its effects are highly susceptible to discursive tactics. But which of those tactics promote critical thinking? To be more specific, which pedagogical structures work?

Because our aim is to teach critical thinking, the model seminar strategy is both dictated from above, by the theoretical consequences of that aim, and informed from below, by practices, demands, and effects in the classroom. A curious paradox results: the model seminar may appear radical, but it actually derives from both established practices of teaching and modest, though consequential, shifts in established thinking about teaching. This is no accident. We are by no means advocating an extremist rejection of traditional teaching. Despite our criticisms, proposals, and provocations, our primary mission of teaching critical thinking is a very traditional goal: most teaching sociologists at least talk that talk. What makes our approach different is that, by taking that mission very seriously, we drastically transform conventional sociological pedagogy. In other words, by hewing radically to tradition (historically honored principles, aims and practices), we end up no less radically contesting convention (uninterrogated hegemonic presumptions).
Trading teaching spaces

The institutional obstacle to teaching critical thinking in intro sociology is typically logistical and depressingly familiar: too many students and too few resources. A class the size of a seminar, small enough to allow a wide range of innovative and effective teaching techniques, has long been a mainstream. Of course, for most large universities, an intro seminar is unthinkable for economic and institutional reasons, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. If we are not to resign ourselves to the inevitability of lecturing—and the lecture has been, whatever its other virtues, traditionally problematic as a means of teaching critical thinking—we must look to other methods, which are practical for large classes. One such approach, the model seminar, has worked successfully in our department for the last seven years. It derives from both the fantastic and the traditional, from the seminar as an unattainable fantasy at the introductory level and as an established institution in graduate school.

The impossibility of an intro seminar is not a complete negative, since it suggests that a workable approximation could be just what we need. The specifics of that approximation, however, are not at all obvious. Still, there is a very familiar undergraduate model: the tutorial that traditionally supplements a large-scale lecture. We ourselves would have happily adopted the conventional multiple-tutorial system, were it not for funding restrictions which limited each course, regardless of enrollment, to a maximum of one teaching assistant (TA). Necessity thus prompted the invention of the model seminar, which both sustains and inverts the tutorial. While the tutorial has been widely acknowledged as good for critical thinking, the unsettling correlative is that the mass lecture is not nearly as good, whatever its other virtues. At the level of theory, the policy implication is straightforward: the lecture should be replaced by the tutorial. This is a standard Derridean move: displace the center by its supplement (Bennington and Derrida, 1993; Derrida, 1976, 1981, 1982).

Of course, a 160 student tutorial isn’t feasible, so some drastic modifications are necessary. Our solution once again adapts traditional classroom procedures, and returns to the lecture that we have just rejected. If heeding a lecturer is a legitimate way to learn, then observing critical thinking should be just as valid. Without falling into the behaviorist ideology of modeling, we contend that students can learn to think by observing other students thinking. So if a seminar is a privileged venue for critical thinking, then many students can learn to think by witnessing a few others in a seminar. There is an established precursor: “fishbowl” pedagogy, in which students learn by watching a small group of their peers in action (Bean & Brynildsen, 1969; Beck, 1999; Dutt, 1997; Neimeyer et al., 2003). This is the structural heart of our strategy: a seminar that operates in front of the rest of class, in order to teach both seminar participants and “audience” members to think critically.

Twelve to sixteen students, depending on class size, join the instructor and the TA at the front of the lecture hall, constituting the “model seminar.” Each class, a different set of students comes down to convene a seminar around different texts and issues. Unlike the typical graduate seminar, which closes roughly into a circle, the model seminar forms an arc that gently concaves towards the audience. This shape is both instrumental—it allows the model...
The lecture versus the model seminar: resisting the logic of knowledge

Insofar as the displacement of the lecture by the model seminar radically reconfigures the structure of our course, it effects no less a change in its “substance”—conventionally framed as content. Intro sociology is troubled by a particular incoherence: on the one hand, there is widespread agreement that there is “core” knowledge—fundamentals by another name—for
the discipline. On the other hand, there is equally widespread disagreement about exactly what knowledge is core. That dispute is echoed by the differing content of introductory textbooks (Keith & Ender, 2004a, 2004b; Wagenaar 2004a, 2004b). A recent survey that aimed at identifying the core of sociological knowledge ultimately didn’t come out as expected: “90 percent or more of the sociologists in the study [held] somewhat different perceptions about what it means to study sociology” (Keith & Ender 2004b, 39). The lack of consensus undermines the very notion of fundamentals for the discipline. This foundational problem does not make the study of any particular set of fundamentals worthless, since sociology, while eminently criticizable, still sustains itself, albeit by introducing itself to students any of a multitude of cores. But it does suggest that what is crucial to introductory sociology cannot be discovered in any particular knowledge or configuration thereof, but rather in something that develops through the consideration of what, in current and historical institutional practice, are distinctly different sets of concepts, topics, and skills.

The core may vary from classroom to classroom, but something more fundamental stays the same: the structural and operational identity between knowledge and text. That is, the core is constituted by both the “things” that are taught—whether identified as social facts, theories, methodologies, histories, or any other objects of knowledge—and the texts that articulate those things. In practice, knowledge and text are barely distinct. The immanence of knowledge to text may seem commonsensical, but it is manifestly a social and political construction of knowledge. To return to the opposition of fundamentals to thinking, the paradigmatic introduction to sociology presumes that it is (core) knowledge that is fundamental. This pedagogical ideology elevates the textbook as a center of the intro course, the twin of the performative center, the lecture. The textbook is the repository of knowledge, directly correlative to the lecture as the established means of its communication.

We take a very different view. For us, introductory textbooks can be valuable and productive because of they are deeply incoherent. A sociological fundamental is that language is an archetypal cultural production. Yet this simple and hegemonic proposition has huge consequences, especially for teaching. It means acts of language are not just subject to familiar social forces, constraints, biases, and influences; they are subject to them in an exemplary way. If we take this canonical fundamental seriously, language should never be regarded as simply a means of communication; writing and reading should never be reduced to skill, competence, or clarity. Instead, every text—including every line of every intro textbook—should be regarded as a situation of language as politics, as a fraught place where power, ideology, and institutional and personal agendas are played out, sustained and—if we are conscientious and fortunate—contested. Every fundamental of sociological knowledge, insofar as it is inevitably spoken, heard, written, read, and thought in language, merits not straightforward absorption as knowledge, but interrogation as a cultural production.

The model seminar strategy thus merely acknowledges what is traditionally fundamental to the discipline. To that extent, it is more sociological than the canonical intro classroom. To adapt our model adage, any classroom in which everyone is supposed to think alike surrenders the right to regard itself as critical. In this regard, the classroom must not be regarded as different from any other socio-political forum. With that recognition, the adage can be turned into a pragmatic pedagogical principle: if our primary purpose is to provoke students into thinking critically, then we should structure a class so that they can think not the same thing, but many different things. The course that devotes itself to critical thinking must relegate the replication of knowledge to, at best, secondary status.
The sociological text versus the sociological textbook

This, then, is the other radical face of the model seminar: to sustain pedagogical consistency and integrity, it must oppose the logic of thinking to the logic of knowledge. Such a cleavage reconfigures the place and deployment of texts. Critical thinking forces us to recognize reading is neither a competence nor a skill, but a definitive social practice. The most important task for the student can no longer be the absorption of texts, the extraction of main ideas, or the learning of facts, concepts or theories, but rather the use of texts to think critically—that is, the use of texts to think independently and differently. Of course, critical thinking is no more susceptible to universal definition than core knowledge (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003; Geertsen, 2003) and no less dependent on cultural and institutional politics. And this is why no definition of critical thinking can be found in our text. We are not proposing and would never propose to establish the “true” nature of critical thought—but we do believe that it can only emerge as sociological imagining insofar as it exceeds the learning of any element of knowledge posited as core or treated as truth embodied in a text.

Since sociological texts are still central to our model seminars, their reading might appear to be an obvious point of convergence between our teaching method and that of the conventional introductory course. In this case, appearances are deceiving. We have abjured intro textbooks and used only primary sources. The modular nature of the model seminars makes it appropriate to use a collection of readings that we assemble ourselves. This tactic is hardly radical in itself. The course reader is a familiar intro resource, so institutionalized that publishers regularly offer companion readers to their big, overpriced textbooks.

Despite the classroom primacy of the textbook, it is the paradigmatic secondary source. To be more precise, the textbook is emblematic of performance of two kinds of work: the “extraction” of the “main concepts” of some primary source and the clear “explanation” of them. The textbook is the end product of a “correct” reading of primary sources. But extraction and explanation do not comprise all of reading. Instead, they merely structure a particular discursive practice. To parallel Foucault’s (1980) notion of a regime of truth, we could say that this is a regime of reading, one that structures a parallel regime of teaching practices (Aoki, 2000). The conventional bundling of textbooks with test banks of multiple choice exams is only too fitting, for reading constituted as (and restricted to) extraction and explanation aims at precisely what such exams are meant to assess: the sustenance of knowledge through its reproduction. The pedagogical logic of this mode of reading therefore recapitulates that of the lecture.

Since the model seminar strategy rejects the logic of the lecture, it must also reject the mode of reading embodied and sustained by the textbook. Reading as extraction and explanation, like any mode of reading that valorizes its own correctness, aims at a classroom in which everyone reads exactly the same way and extracts exactly the same “content.” It is deeply ironic that the hegemonic criterion for the excellence of a textbook is how it promotes the easy “absorption” of knowledge, for, if we return to our pedagogical adage, absorption—which is another kind of reproduction—uses knowledge precisely to extinguish thinking (Aoki, 2002).

The model seminar reader is therefore constructed through a very different logic. We seek texts that will push students to think at more than one level; we seek texts that take up positions provocative enough to elicit different responses from students. We reject the indoctrination of students to read the same texts the same way and absorb the same fundamental knowledge. Instead, we aim to demonstrate that real and competent students (and professors and TAs) can read the same texts but come legitimately to different and even opposing conclusions. The model seminar is therefore distinguished from conventional approaches because it takes the intro sociological fundamental of the cultural situation of language to its implacable, reflexive conclusion: reading an intro sociological text is itself a situated cultural practice.

With this in mind, we seek primary sources by sociologists that are, in general practice, distinguishable from secondary sources in how they generate fierce debate as to their meanings, import, and implications. We seek texts that connect with the lives of our students, such as analyses of terrorism, Canadian identity, anorexia, gay marriage, affirmative action, interracial dating, student drinking, masculinity and violence, abortion and Christianity, relationships on the internet, and undergraduate education. But we also seek texts that connect with students’ lives by displacing or undermining their ideological foundations. In opposition to the celebration of the university as a place where students come to slake their thirsts to learn, we proceed in the conviction that our students (and we ourselves) generally come to the classroom “knowing” far, far too much: for instance, that Canada is the best country in the
world, that terrorism wears an Islamic face, that First Nations students get unfairly preferential
treatment in universities, that human life begins at conception or that human life begins at birth,
that the students themselves aren’t binge drinkers, that people who get dates over the internet
are pathetic losers, that the mission of intro sociology is to teach them the fundamentals of the
discipline. Our job is not to add to that surfeit of knowledge-taken-as-truth, but to nudge
students into thinking about its heretofore unacknowledged contingency.

Rereading the textbook

While we have not attempted to measure the effects of the model seminar strategy and its array
of techniques in any comprehensive way, some telling points can be gleaned from the standard
course evaluations by our students. While we have been generally happy with our scores (a
mean rating of 4.6 out of 5.0 over six years) and comments, occasionally students have
complained that they learned nothing.

We interpret their insistence of nothing learned as simultaneously sincere and hyperbolic. As
educational researcher Stanley Varnhagen (2004) has noted, students learn from even the
worst of teachers and courses, although they can learn more effectively from better ones. But
that doesn’t mean that our most dissatisfied students can be dismissed as merely wrong. In
fact, according to the discursive theory that motivates the model seminar, such judgments of
“wrongness” can only be sustained if language acts are speciously reduced to communication
(and if powerful critiques by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Butler, Jean-François Lyotard, Slavoj
Žižek, and many others are ignored).

Despite how intro sociology typically introduces students to language by elevating that
reduction to truth, a better reading is that such students are “right,” albeit unwittingly so. Their
passionate rejection of the sociology of knowledge/language/ideology we teach is in itself an
affirmation of that teaching. That is, students protest the model seminar because they recognize
that it disrupts the close-coupling of knowledge to learning that they have been taught to accept
as the true face of education. Of course, while they decry that disruption, we embrace it as the
foundational trope for introduction to sociology.

This difference in judgment, like any social phenomenon, is susceptible to sociological inquiry.
The claim to have learned nothing from the model seminar is revealing when framed by the
nature of its readings: primary sociological texts. Such readings define disciplinary literature as
such, yet are held by some students as useless for learning sociology. It must be noted that the
complainants did not, in general, reject these primary texts because they were too difficult to
understand. Nonetheless, their rejection was at the level of discursive form—what Lacanian
psychoanalysis identifies as the signifier, the material “stuff” of language, as opposed to the
“content” or signified. A relevant thought experiment is telling: if those primary texts had been
reworked and repackaged in typical textbook format—organized in a standard way, edited
down to digestible summaries, illustrated with photos and colorfully boxed examples, etc.—we think that students would have felt they had learned a lot. This seeming contradiction is eminently explicable. A necessary element of the “hidden curriculum” is that the institution of its un-hidden counterpart performatively and ideologically configures the student to absorb
what constitutes legitimate teaching, modes of reading and pedagogical texts. The students
who complained they learned nothing from the model seminar did so because they had
previously absorbed those ideological forms only too well. Teaching has been and continues to
be defined by the textbook as the exemplar of the secondary text—so much so that it has
become much more primary than primary sources, at least in the undergraduate classroom. For
many students, knowledge is only recognizable as such when it has gone through the
secondary process.

We found this inversion of the primary and the secondary both fascinating and troubling. Our
response, this past year, was to reintroduce the textbook, with a suitable adjustment. We
retained our reader, although we shortened most of its texts, and paired each seminar’s reading
with a selection from the textbook. Reprising our essay tactic, seminarists were asked to make
connections between the two texts, as one operational mode of critical thinking. This was a
very conventional exercise, but we tried to move beyond convention by exploiting the
differences between the student perceptions of the textbook and the reader.

Just as the complaint about learning nothing is, at the theoretical level, bound to the
institutional status of the textbook as the paradigmatic secondary source, the debate we sought
to provoke between students is likewise bound to the complementary status of the primary
text. That is, while some students believed they could learn nothing from reading a journal
article, many more believed that they could challenge the positions and arguments of the
latter—for example, arguments on abortion and Christianity, or masculinity and
sexual violence—in a way that they rarely did with a textbook. That difference derived immediately from the institutional legitimation of the textbook and its pedagogy as delivering knowledge qua truth. From our perspective, this legitimation, which is conventionally immune to interrogation, is deeply alarming and completely counter to what we are trying to teach.

It was because we think the textbook was so fundamentally flawed, however, that we returned to it. That return did shift our teaching, so that one of our prime missions became to teach that a textbook should be read, not for knowledge as impossible truth nor the imposture of fundamentals, but rather as a paradigmatic instance of the social, as an ideological object always situated by the cultural politics which pervade it. When we ask students to connect the provocative texts of the reader and the canonical selections from the textbook, what we intend is that both should be interrogated as discourse and neither should be treated as truth. We hope, therefore, that we have productively inverted our relationship to the standard intro textbook: before, we renounced it because it was so problematic; now, we exploit it for the same reason.

What is happy and terrifying about widely used intro textbooks is how well they serve our new purpose. Carrothers and Benson (2003) make that very point with respect to the way such textbooks treat symbolic interactionism, but the problem is much wider than that. For instance, we begin our course by pointing out that while our textbook identifies five theoretical perspectives for sociology—symbolic interactionist, functionalist, conflict, feminist, and postmodern—others give three or four. We note that while our text states that one of the major problems with postmodern theory is that it does not ask questions about power, Michel Foucault, the figure who stands in most for postmodernism in sociology, is best known for theorizing power/knowledge. We show how the book repeats the venerable intro sociology error of telling the tale of the many Inuit words for snow, which linguist Geoffrey Pullum (1991) refuted years ago. Similar instances can be found in every chapter (Henslin, Glenday, Duffy & Pupo, 2003).

Some of these examples are error of fact, but, in good sociological fashion, facts are always social and therefore eminently well-suited for sociological examination. More importantly, though, such failures are not indictments of our textbook or any other particular one, but rather indicative of the general problem with the textbook as a discursive form that necessarily abridges, summarizes, and reduces complex and contested social phenomena into systematic, consistent, and easily digestible chunks, and is always suspect as a result.

Taking the street, not holding the fort

It might be complained that we have proposed little that is new in this article. We would cheerfully admit it. The specific novelty of the model seminar strategy both arises from traditional principles, such as the promotion of critical thinking, and results in traditional practices, such as the essay. Even our theoretical trope of the inversion of supplement and centre is hardly new, inasmuch as it goes back to Derrida of the early 1970s, although Derrida unfortunately remains a novelty to much of sociology.

If what we have proposed and argued seems radical in any way, we would insist that it is radically embedded in tradition—but in a particular way, for we understand the utility of tradition as embodied in its mobility. The inspiration is once again a military trope, proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987): instead of sustaining the *logos* of intro sociology as “holding the fort” of canonical knowledge, we run under the banner of what they call *nomos*—taking the street.

The concept of the fort resonates with the conventional metaphor of fundamentals as the foundation of a discipline figured as an edifice. We are simply recognizing that an edifice is a poor figure for the flexibility and motility immanent to critical thinking, whether in the university classroom or on the streets of the world. We want to introduce students to sociology as something other than a thing so burdened that it can never budge from its foundations. Finally, we also admit that we have raised more questions than we have answered, but, traditionalists that we are, we reiterate the long-established satisfaction in doing so.
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