Teaching Introduction to Sociology: A Re-Introduction to the Student World View

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Abstract

The author reports on a class exercise conducted in two sections of an introductory sociology course. This class exercise emerged after an evaluation of the examination 1 test scores and averages class averages that were considered unacceptable. The project involves student’s reactions to and a comparison of in-class examination test scores with two take-home examinations each of which were composed of the same type true/false and multiple choice questions. The test results and issues relating to the experience in a general principles course are discussed within the context of recent evaluations of the organization of education.

Introduction

It is obvious, as Dreeban (1967) notes, that schools contribute greatly to the socialization of children, especially the learning of social conduct norms or principles of conduct most generally referred to as situationally specific standards for behavior. Robert Dreeban’s analysis is germane to this study in that he evaluated the process by which children become socialized to the norms relating to economic and political participation in industrial societies. Of the four norms (independence, achievement,
universalism, and specificity), the first two norms are of particular interest in that these relate to personal responsibility and accountability (independence) and, secondly, to behavior directed toward mastery of the environment according to standards of excellence (achievement). Schools, as agency, must not only work to establish general norms that are acceptable over time and space, but these institutions often are required to work to displace norms students learn early on in the home environment and from their peers.

We assume that over a period of years students have learned the conduct norms that ultimately prepare them for college life. These assumed learned patterns of conduct, according to Dreeban (1967, p.220-221):

...will lead to the successful accomplishment of tasks and bring gratification, they adopt those patterns as the right way to act—that is, they value them.

It is within this context that an ideological dilemma emerged caused as it were by a recent teaching experience which, in turn, led to the thinking required for the development of this article.

A Reintroduction to the World View

Given the abstract ideas and concepts that students often refer to as “vague” or, as Eckstein, Schronike, and Delaney (1995, p.353) observe, “ambiguous definitions” of terms, teaching the principles of a sociology course a challenge. After a hiatus of twelve years, I was presented the opportunity to teach the gateway course to the discipline, an experience I found to be interesting as well as cause for concern.

As observed by Babcock and Keith (1995 p.215), a critical element in the teaching/learning process is the choice of an introductory textbook. During the fall 1998 term, I selected Sociology (Stark 1998) for use in two sections of the introductory course. Despite the organizational similarity to other
textbooks on the market, Stark’s publication differs from the clone type complaint posed by Agger (1989) in that the author’s approach is much like an engaging discussion with the reader albeit the subject matter pertains to the substance of the discipline. Consistent with the analysis of Babchuck and Keith (1995) who identify the major characteristics of the most popular sociology texts, the book authored by Rodney Stark relies heavily on scholarly books and journal articles. But the text is easy to read and it is full of important historical and contemporary facts and issues that are cast by the author into interesting sociological explanation.

In class, I discussed Stark’s easy writing style, relating his method to what could be described as “a discussion” with the reader, a style I thought, given the clear presentation and integration of fact and concept, would be appreciated by all. As is usual for an introductory text, the number of topics cover the entire discipline in a total of 21 chapters, only 16 of which were assigned as outside reading.

Although the class is freshman level, many students who enroll in the introductory principles course are at an advanced stage of the educational process; few students are true freshmen. Indeed, the majority of students are at the junior level; a significant number also were seniors, some of whom also were anticipating graduation at the end of the term.

The course requirements were neither unusual nor rigorous. Initially, four 80 point true/false and multiple-choice examinations based on the reading assignments and the lecture material were scheduled. The lowest score of the first three examinations was to be eliminated prior to the determination of the final grade.

The contemporary issue germane to this project appears consistent with the commentary offered by William Glasser (1969, p.35):
Today much of what we call education is merely knowledge gathering and remembering.

Problem solving and thinking, never strong parts of our educational system, have been
downgraded in all but a few scientific subjects.

Glasser was of course referring to high school students. But many of these same students
become stymied at the college level where such thinking is both encouraged and expected.
Unfortunately, as noted by Eckstein, Delaney, and Schoenike (1995, p.361), our own college textbooks
also may contribute to this problem:

Most textbooks put the jargon in boldface, provide a glossary of alphabetized terms, and offer
multiple-choice questions on demand so we can test the successful memorization of those
terms.

Focusing on but one function of the human brain; memorization (the certainty principle)
diminishes the major function of the brain; that of creative thinking and the thoughtful exchange that
emerges from the educated thinking person. Realistically, student concerns are perhaps more
consistent with what Glasser refers to as “the measurement principle,” or the measure of how well the
certainty principle has been applied. In other words, students, among others, have become conditioned
to rote memorization and the use of high grades as the measure of their academic success.

The Results of Examination One

The first examination, covered the first four chapters of the text (pages =107) and related lecture
aterial, produced a class average that was considered to be less than satisfactory. Based on a standard
of 90+ for A, 89 - 80 for B, 70 - 79 for C, and 60 - 69 for D, the overall test results for each of the two
sections were low. (See Table 1)
Table 1. In-class 80 Item Examination Number1:

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With 48 correct (out of the 80 test items) equal to a minimal passing grade of 60, the average class grade of D (64.3 and 62.1 respectively) was cause for concern and, in turn, raised several important questions. The first was, how could material presented in this easy and most readable text along with the fully outlined lecture material result in such a low test score average? Second, given the results of what was considered to be an easy examination, what could be expected in the future? Third, what could I, as the course professor, do to assist these students to perform at a higher level? And, finally, what could the students do to improve their scores?

With all its vigor and cause for individual anxiety, test taking is an analysis of individual achievement, denoting preparation and mastery of the assigned material (Dreeban 1967, p.225). Through the use of a standardized grading scale the relationship between quality preparation and achievement (whether high or low) appears, as Dreeban notes, almost self-evident. But if the norms of independence (responsibility and accountability) and achievement (mastery of the material) fail to take root in the primary and secondary stages of the educational experience, then there is little reason to expect students who do not perform well on examinations will accept the result as being related to the
failure to govern their own activities. Rather than accept responsibility for the less than “expected” outcome, student reactions often take many other forms, not the least of which is to place the blame for personal failure on the course professor who creates examinations that are “unrealistic,” “unfair” or “too difficult.” This reaction may be attributed, as noted by Dreeban (p.232), to the “equity principle,” or from the perspective of students, a lack of equity or fairness.

Several students complained. One student, “a graduating senior,” stated the lecture delivery was at too high a level, as were, he stated, the assigned readings. Perplexed, I soon determined what the course professor would do. That is, my intent was to embark on an exercise in learning. But it was also important to receive student reactions. This input was garnered by requesting the students’ response to the following question: “What can I do to improve my grade on the next examination?” The responses were varied if not surprising. One student offered a less than inspirational statement such as “memorize the book.” Yet another male student, who scored one of the highest grades (81 percent), indicated his needs as follows: Stress what is important. Review for the exam. Tell us what things are important to study for the exam. However, most individuals responded in a more reasonable manner. The following statements are representative of student reactions to this question.

One female student, who scored at the 50 percent level (40 correct out of 80 questions), responded: What I can do is to actually read the chapters. This first test sort of caught me off guard, and I was really unprepared for it. Taking better notes can also help with the studying.

Another female, who scored 50 percent, stated:

Study. Read the chapters. Look at my notes. I didn’t study at all because I had three papers due that week. Since the lowest grade is dropped, I decided not to worry about it. I think most people felt this way, so grades should improve. This is my last semester, so I really have to pass.

I will study next time.
Yet another woman wrote:

What I think is my main problem is that I don’t understand everything that you say in class,
which makes it hard for me to know what will be on the exam (scored 69.6 percent).

One student, who was unable to purchase a copy of the text until only a few days prior to the
examination, but earned a C grade (72 percent) on the examination, wrote:

I could enhance my performance on the next test by doing the reading. Because I got the book
so late I did not read the chapters. Also, I could begin preparing for the exam earlier than I did.

Finally, a female, who achieved a low B grade (80 percent), responded:

I need to do the readings more than 1 week before the test. I should spend more time working
in the Study guide. I feel the information in class stayed with me; was easier to understand.

Mostly it is bookwork.

Results of Examination Two

Somewhat encouraged by some of the above statements, the decision was made to schedule a 100
question take-home examination. Similar in format to the first examination, the second examination
was passed out in class on a Monday along with the following instructions: “This is a take home
examination. You are bound by the student honor code; you are to work alone on this test without
receiving assistance from anyone.”

My overture to this class of students was intended both as a learning experience and a
challenge. The challenge was to learn the material and do well on the examinations. The intent behind
what I considered to be a unique opportunity to learn, encouraging these students to again review the
chapter material. Assuming each student had previously read the chapter material and had a
reasonable set of class notes, it was thought students would perform well on the examinations and,
perhaps, in spite of what may represent an unconscious resistance, learn something about their society.

The examination was to be returned the following class period (Wednesday) at which time the students
were to attach a signed statement indicating whether they had worked on the examination alone or if
they had sought assistance. The results were encouraging; the class average increased to 82.6 and 83.1
percent respectively, a low B grade.

Table 2. Take Home 100 Item Examination Number 2:

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Inspired by the results I again requested students provide an evaluation. Focusing in part on the
student honor code, one male student responded:

One thing about this kind of test is that the majority do not prepare like they would for an
ordinary test. I would almost prefer the regular kind of test because then I would know I earned
the grade on my own, rather than something to refer to…. While I admit that I partly worked
with another (2 viewpoints are better than 1), and I did check I received assistance, I will bet
most received assistance from a classmate, but checked they didn’t receive assistance…. I will
say I did get to evaluate each question in depth and bring up questions to each solution. So, in essence, I did probably learn quite a bit from this test. (Scored 86 percent on examination two).

Lamenting that he had not taken advantage of the opportunity presented, a male student wrote:

This approach does have value. I do think that this approach can help students truly learn the material. But, unfortunately, I personally did not take full advantage of this opportunity. I did not spend the time on the test that I should have. (Score of 80 percent).

Focusing on the time required, a female student stated:

Though the test was still difficult & there were questions I was not sure of—I learned a great deal from the exam. 1st it was lengthy & covered a great deal of text so I had to make myself allow the appropriate amount of time. 2nd it made me pay attention to the details in the readings rather than just general ideas. Even if I didn’t do that well, this was a valuable learning experience. The only problem was that even when I knew an answer (because of notes, lecture etc.) I still felt I needed to try & find it in the book! Very time consuming!

Another woman wrote:

I believe that the take-home test was very valuable because it required me to think and to learn more. I like the idea of the take home test because there wasn’t as much pressure on me as far as having to be ready by the exact class time. I had a couple of days to do it instead of just 1 hour. I believe I learned more with this test because I was actually trying to learn instead of just memorizing the material. I spent more time reading the material and learning than just memorizing definitions. I understand the material better. (She scored an 85 on the second examination, a 68 percent on examination one).
Although no one spoke out in class against the take home examination, not everyone was in favor of the idea. One female wrote:

Before taking this test, I was against having a take home exam because I tend to be somewhat competitive and I didn’t want anybody to cheat. But when I took the test, I was able to be much more relaxed & spend much more time reading the questions before answering them. I read the chapters before the test and went over my notes. I think I was better prepared going into the test because I had so much more time to fit studying for it into my schedule. I do think I learned more from this section than I did the last exam, and I think a lot of that is due to the nature of the way the test was given. I took me about 4 hours to complete the exam, and I learned a lot more. (Scored 84).

Focusing on what is perhaps an unintended aspect of the exercise one woman wrote:

I thought this experience had both positive & negative effects. Positively, I didn’t feel pressure to complete the exam, as I would have in a classroom. I was able to relax and read through the questions and think them out. On the negative side, I didn’t feel the pressure to study as much as I would have—not to say that I didn’t study. But, I didn’t feel the “do or die” mentally that usually comes along with test preparation. I think that the experience was beneficial to the class. It showed your willingness to help us and made us responsible for ourselves by saying here it is but please be honorable about it. (Ranked at 93 percent).

With a focus on learning, an obvious intent of the exercise, a male wrote:

The questions were asked in such a way that I needed to understand the material, for the most part, rather than to memorize it. Understanding far outweighs memorization in benefits, even if
my grade is lower. I was able to spend plenty of time (about 3 ½ hrs) on this exam to take in and
digest the material. (Scored 90 on examination two, improving from 75 percent on test 1).

Perhaps the following set of comments provide the kind of student reaction professors seek when
attempting to encourage the learning experience. As one woman noted:

The exam really challenged my thinking. It also made me realize within the 1 hr + 15 min we
took the first examination (about 50 minutes); and I compared this to the take home it took to
answer the questions on this second exam (about two days 6-1/2 hours: 3-1/2 (Monday night, 3
hours - Tuesday). This exam I was well prepared for, but the questions were a little tricky. It
caused me to think more & I honestly feel like I’ve learned a lot w/in these 4 chapters. I don’t
know how others feel, but it seems like I put a lot of effort into answering those questions & it
was very challenging, but very rewarding. (81 percent).

Challenge notwithstanding, some students react in an unanticipated manner. One example is captured
in the statement drafted by one advanced-level student:

I have always been a straight A student. I received my lowest test grade since I’ve at the
University on your 1st test. I was very disappointed. This test, however, I think, or at least hope
I did better. I spent many hours beforehand preparing for this test. Even still, I had to use the
book extensively & found it to be extremely challenging. I do feel that I got a much better grasp
of the material. Had that particular test not have been a take-home, I would not have done very
well even though I had spent so much time preparing. (Scored 88 percent on the examination v.
70 percent on the first examination).
Another wrote:

I greatly appreciated the opportunity of being able to do a take-home examination. Although I read each of the chapters, I didn’t completely grasp all of the concepts until I completed the exam. The exam was very challenging & forced me to think carefully about each response. I believe that I got more out of this test than I could have even imagined to accomplish by taking an in-class exam. (83 percent).

Perhaps the following statement best captures the intent behind the exercise:

This test was useful to me as a learning device. It caused me to go into a more in-depth use of the textbook, and in some cases to connect ideas. The test was more of a learning experience than a record of memorization of facts. It allowed me to focus on the issues being discussed as much or more than the grade I would be assigned for what I could remember off hand and what I could not. In addition, this test showed me the importance of being thorough in note taking. (93 percent v. 80 percent).

What is learning really about? Forcing the issue of analytical thinking may not initially have been the intended outcome of this exercise; nevertheless such thinking may have taken place, as noted in the following:

By doing the take home exam, I was forced to really dig and read and understand some of the concepts. Some of the questions required knowing three or four, maybe more, concepts to answer the question correctly. I liked the test. (90 percent v. 70 percent).

**Critical Thinking in Education**
In the Introductory section to Schools without Failure, William Glasser (1969) argues that analysts of school organization generally cast their critical eyes toward the social, environmental, and cultural factors affecting the success of students, but they generally fail to evaluate the role that school organization has in causing student failure. Briefly, Glasser’s assessment is that this organizational structure and the resultant high student failure rate is the result of an educational philosophy:

...of non-involvement, non-relevance, and limited emphasis on thinking. Education must move toward the opposite philosophy – of involvement, relevance, and thinking—or we will not solve the overwhelming problems of children who fail in school (1969, p.xiv).

Perhaps an irony exists here. By responding to the challenge to provide “relevant courses” for students, university faculty and administrators alike reorganized the curricula during the past several decades, but they may have been remiss in addressing the issues raised by Glasser, such as “involvement” and, especially, “critical thinking.”

The future needs of society will require that students develop a higher order level of thinking as opposed to rote memorization of terms and definitions (Steele and Marshall 1996). Indeed, this requirement already exists in the economic marketplace. Sociology as a discipline and especially the introductory sociology course is well positioned to assist college students achieve this higher order. This is the kind of thinking required by Stark’s introductory text, especially when third order analytical examination questions are used. I did not anticipate any problem given the two classes were composed primarily of upper class status students.

Critical thinking is liberating. Shepard (1999, p.xv) offers several reasons for why critical thinking is important for college students. These reasons include the need to challenge conventional wisdom, make informed judgments, and formulate solutions to problems. These reasons extend well beyond
individual need and hold important consequences for society within politics, work, economics, and family life.

**Results of Examination Three**

Based on the test results and the student reactions to the first take-home exercise, the decision was made to continue this method through the third examination. A format similar to the first two examinations was established, but this time students were advised that some additional third-level questions would be selected from the Stark test bank which, along with questions based on the lecture material, would constitute a 100 point examination. It is noteworthy that level three questions require analytical thinking. That is, certain facts must be taken into consideration in order to reach a conclusion and thus the appropriate response to the question or statement. Again, the format for examination three was true/false and multiple-choice.

Inclusion of third level questions made the third examination more challenging. Although the majority of the student evaluations again appear to support the effort, student reactions included a new component. Apparently level three “think” questions represent a challenge that, for some individuals, may be too difficult to realize. The class averages declined to 74.1 and 75.3 (see, Table 3). In the following, student perceptions of the second take-home exercise are provided:

I like the take home tests b/c I can think the questions thru. I all ready read all the chapters & if I would have taken this test in class I would have failed it b/c things that were asked could only be answered if you could look it up in the book. (Male who scored a 68 for examination three; 59 percent and 87 percent for examinations 1 and 2, respectively)
Table 3. Take Home 100 Item Examination 3:

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However, many of the student responses symbolize a different world-view from that which the course professor intended. Rather than perceiving the test exercise as a learning challenge to integrate the material, some students viewed the experience as a task even more difficult than a regular examination, as noted in the following:

I believe that on the whole, this examination was much more difficult than the last one. I spent roughly the same amount of time on the two tests; however, I was twice as prepared for this test. I had come to class, taken what I felt was adequate notes & had gone over the chapters before. With all of this preparation I would think I should be able to take this almost as an in-class assignment & do well. However – in reality I spent well over 6 hours on this assignment. I felt that this test actually took away from my learning experience because I was not focusing on the main ideas and points but rather was looking for specific answers to questions I felt were almost unrelated. I felt that, especially for a 100 level class, this test tested much more than an overall understanding of sociology. In all honesty, I am fearful of the final because I truly do not see how I will be able to prepare. (72 v. 86 percent for examination 2 and 74 for examination 1).
One can only attempt to identify what thoughts and ideas engage the minds of students, especially when the exercise was intended to enhance the learning experience. What could have gone wrong? Perhaps the answer to this question is contained in the following:

I hate to be rude, but this test was a joke. I worked on it for 2 days. Tuesday night I was up until 4:00 in the morning. I felt that about 30 questions were totally ridiculous. About midnight after working for almost 6 hours I was in tears. Compared to the last take-home test I felt like I learned very little. Who really cares about the age French boys leave home or what Japanese artists draw of American soldiers. I feel as though this test was made to be hard. And you succeeded. If I had to take this test for the final— I might have just turned it in. Without my book or notes, I would not have passed it. I think that if you are considering to make the final that hard please consider an open book open notes test. I really would like a B in this class. I am a student who is here all the time, and try hard. (Examination 1 = 69; examination 2 = 89; examination 3 = 76).

Another individual, reflecting on the difficulty factor, wrote:

I enjoyed the take home test, but I also thought it was exceptionally hard. I regularly attend class, listen, take good notes and review & read outside class but this test was Hard. I spent a lot of time reading and thinking about each question. With time the answers appeared but I know I would have flat out failed this test had it been given in the usual 1 hr. and 15 min class period. (Female with examination 1 = 64; examination 2 = 73; examination 3 = 77).

Some light can be observed at the end of the tunnel when students indicate they understand something about the learning process. One woman wrote:

The take home examination was very helpful for me. Having the questions & the book there helped me to grasp the concepts better. Sometimes, I have a hard time seeing the big picture about the ideas
discussed in the book, so being able to take the test home helped me significantly (Examination 1 = 86; examination 2 = 91; examination 3 = 73).

One female captures much of that which every Professor desires to hear (or read):

I honestly do believe I learn a great deal from these take home tests. They are difficult, but I assume you make them that way to make us learn. I think it gives us responsibility. It’s a hard test—it (the final grade) shows your effort. It is a good representation of individual effort. (Examination 1 = 65; examination 2 = 83; examination 3 = 72).

Yet another statement offers some support for the effort to encourage learning:

I approach this test in a slightly different manner. I split the test into a two-day project and found it less stressful. I still took about six hours, but it seemed to go by quicker. I believe the take-home test is still a great learning experience and I enjoyed actually learning the material. Despite my different approach, I did find this test more difficult than test #2. However, I don’t think the material was harder, I just had more controversial views on these topics. I enjoyed these chapters more than any of the fourteen we’ve covered. The theories and the concepts were really thought provoking, and that is why it might’ve seemed harder to me. (Examination 1 = 75; examination 2 = 96; examination 3 = 88).

One woman, reflecting on the worthiness of the assignment, wrote:

I really appreciate the take home exams. I spent well over five hours on it. I think that it makes us go through each chapter more carefully. When I study for exams I do not learn as much about the book/material as I do when studying for take home exams. They are hard, but I spend time on them. I don’t want you to think we don’t take them seriously. I think most of us take advantage of the opportunity. (Examination 1 = 50; examination 2 = 77; examination 3 = 80).
Of course, failure to understand the importance of the achievement standard is not lost on all college students. Many students are aware that the university experience provides an important arena in which to prepare for their ultimate success in other aspects of life around which achievement is organized. The student who drafted the next statement offers some insight into the anticipated future work-related process. The format of the last two exams has been great. I think it benefits the student by allowing time and resources to do the best one possibly can. In the future, all of us will have adequate time and material when facing problems in our careers, so why not allow us the chance to use materials and time during tests now? I think the format is beneficial and am thankful for the opportunity.

(Examination 1 = 66; examination 2 = 92; examination 3 = 77).

The Final Examination

We had reached a point in the semester where continuation of the exercise was impractical. Despite strong urgings from a number of students to create a take home final examination, the decision was made to employ the traditional testing method as originally scheduled. A regular in-class examination similar to the first examination was set. One major difference between the final examination and all previous tests was the decision to include only level one questions (recognition type questions) from both the test bank and the lecture material. Accordingly, the students were informed that no level two (association) or level three (analytical) questions would be included in the final examination. The results for the final examination, as shown in Table 4, indicate the class averages substantially declined (average grades equal 65.6 percent and 66.9 percent respectively).
Table 4. In-class 80 Item Final Examination 4:

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</table>

Discussion

I began my discussion of a dilemma experienced by raising some questions. I now return to these issues in developing a discussion of the class-learning project.

Numerous reasons can be explored in the attempt to explain the disappointing results of this experiment in learning. Perhaps the achievement levels can be attributed to the differences in educational experience, including the assumptions held by professors and the four kinds of students (activists, fun-seekers, careerists, and intellectuals) identified by Nash and Calonico (1993 p.89-94). Although data are not available to test this model, it does appear that not all students view the educational experience in the same fashion.

Philosophical reflection on the class exercise within the framework of idealism (see Theodorson and Theodorson (1969 p.194) may lead one to assume the typical student holds an intense desire to learn, to diligently work in preparation for a special role in the world community, and to contribute toward enhancement of the quality of life. Thus, learning and performance, as an ideal type, would be
expected to correspond to a high degree. And, this may indeed be the case for some students.

However, despite the fact many students claim to have learned from this experience, the overall grade performance bears little resemblance to the expectations held by an idealistic albeit pragmatic professor. Indeed, in general, the empirical observations do not correspond well with the ideal type mental construct initially envisioned.

It appears almost too obvious to argue that the world-view of some professors and that held by the typical student may be based on discrepant ideologies. That is, the values, as characterized by a dominant student ideology, tend to assume a normative set characteristic of a belief system that differs somewhat from that of the past. Learning for the sake of learning is replaced by an emphasis on grade performance simply because grades are rewarded with credentials that symbolize one’s preparation for the professional, informational, and technology oriented reality of a post-industrial society.

The reading assignments for the term were not large; only 16 of the 21 chapters in the Stark book were required reading. Examination 1 included four chapters totaling 107 pages; the other assignments included 94 pages for examination 2, 126 pages for examination 3, and 113 pages for the final examination. In sum, a total of 440 pages of reading and review glossary material required student attention.

The final examination results closely parallel those of examination one; it seems apparent from the class averages that perhaps only a few students gained much insight from the “learning” experience despite the consistency of written comments in support of the professor’s expressed goal. The test scores for each of the examinations are shown in Table 5. Comparing the results of examination one with those of examinations two and three are especially noteworthy; the average scores for the two classes for each of these three examinations are similar. Average scores for the in-class examinations 1
and 4 also do not vary to any great extent; the averages for class I are 64.3 and 65.6 while the averages for class II are 62.1 and 66.9 respectively.

Table 5. A Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class I</th>
<th></th>
<th>Class II</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Score</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Qs</td>
<td>Mean Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam 1</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam 2</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam 3</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam 4</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, some differences can be noted, namely the results for the in-class examinations one and four compared with the performance recorded for the two take home examinations. Each class test, as noted, was similar in format although the content differed from examination to examination in terms of the level of sophistication of some of the questions/statements. Although the in-class performances are consistently low, the average class scores for take-home examinations two and three are more encouraging: 82.6 and 83.1 for examination 2 compared to 74.1 and 75.3 for examination 3.

Less encouraging is the substantial decrease in the scores observed when examination two and examination three are compared. The obvious question is: Why should the two take-home examinations, each of which allowed students to make use of the text and their class notes, differ so dramatically?

A reasoned explanation may be attributed to a student dependency and/or complacency that has carried over from the junior high and high school periods into the college experience. The test
results suggest that a dependency factor may indeed operate in the introductory level courses. Many students appear to be accustomed to having the parameters of examinations laid out for them in a very specific manner. When such direction or guidance is not provided, some students may be unable or perhaps unwilling to function at a level expected. Recall the earlier statement by the student who wrote:

Stress what is important. Review for the exam. Tell us what things are important to study for the exam. Some professors choose to narrow the range of learning opportunity for students by informing them of the material most likely to appear on the examination. Unfortunately, by establishing the “test review” boundaries that identify material that is important to “study” (as well as that which is not), such professors unwittingly support this student “learning dependency” factor.

In their concluding analysis of modern education, Nash and Calonico (1993, p.96) observe that the meaning of education is changing in the American society. Given their assessment of the assumptions upon which the American educational system is structured, and their discussion of student types, these analysts conclude that: 1) the orientations students hold of the academy are formed prior to their entry to a college or university and, 2) the state of the economy and the political mood of the country determine student perceptions toward and choice of course work. In both instances, non-involvement and apathy seem to hold sway. Although this changed meaning may be nothing other than a normal part of cyclical change, the reactions of contemporary college age students to the challenge of higher education may well have roots in a previous experience.

Thus, these findings support William Glasser’s (1969) assertion that the two principles of certainty (rote memory and feedback) and measurement (test scores) dominate the primary and secondary systems of education. Some of these students appear to have been conditioned by what Glasser refers to as the Certainty Principle; that is, they learned from teachers who emphasized teaching
techniques that are consistent with “teaching to the test.” And, during the 1990s, the cultural value placed on scoring high marks has not been lost in the educational milieu. Given that high marks are translated through test scores, the mark of a well-educated person is deemed to result from test scores rather than one’s ability to think and to creatively ponder. Despite the more recent enthusiastic call for high level thinking by analysts such as Persell (1992) and Steele and Marshall (1996), as previously noted by Glasser (1969, pp.38-39), numerical values serve as the high-water mark of educational achievement. Having been socialized to respond to the certainty of an answer and being rewarded in turn through the measurement principle, students cannot be faulted for expecting much of the same when entering into the hallways of higher education.

Ideology or world-view, according to Boudon and Bourricaud (1990 p.208), is “…a species of the genus which is constituted by beliefs [the behavior of social actors depends on beliefs]” where “…most ordinary individual action or collective action, implies support for normative propositions” (p.209). In other words, values and norms are important when assessing human action as well as reaction. Within this context, the extant academic ideology may be under challenge by an administration supported student world-view that values grades rather than the pursuit of and the accumulation of knowledge.

In concluding this discussion, Glasser’s (1969, p.43) insight of the past seems to hold relevance for the contemporary experience:

The goals of education are to give people the mental tools to deal effectively with new situations, to place fewer restrictions on their lives caused by fear of difficult problems, and to enable people to deal with new situations and difficult problems rationally rather than emotionally. None of these goals can be attained by the present emphasis on the certainty and measurement principles.
Such thoughts are consistent with Jon Shepard’s (1999) rationale for why critical thinking is important to college students. Students who are unwilling or unable to think through the problems of life and who care little about the political and social issues that lie outside their secure academic world of student isolation will not provide the maximum effort an increasingly complex society demands for success. As Glasser asserts, both students and their elders alike often fall back on their reliance on the certainty principle. In turn, a failure to resolve difficult situations that require the ability to go beyond easy (recognizable) answers leaves both student and professor at odds over the meaning of an education.

References


