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Boring, Monotonous, and Humdrum: The Nerdification Process of Academia on Presentation Style

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of sociology, diverse evaluations of the direction of the discipline have been used as a means to assess the effectiveness of the methods and theories in the analysis of social forces in the lives of humans. One area has been the presentation of the material. Typically the emphasis has been on the language used, or statistical analyses. This study however focuses more generally on the overall presentation of material. Sociologists have lost touch with the very population they are attempting to study. In so doing, their presentation of material has become boring, monotonous, and humdrum. Without the ability to identify with the subject population, they have distanced themselves not only from the population under study, but the population they are attempting to reach. The following is a review of commentaries on the state of the discipline, and also the results of a survey of 270 students addressing their ideas of what they want from professors in the classroom. These surveys are then extrapolated to seek a wider understanding of the problems associated with the presentation of material within sociology.

INTRODUCTION

Often, sociological association meetings can yield interesting ideas about research as well as insights into the state of the discipline. One paper suggested sociologists had: (1) become complacent and negligent in research; (2) no longer asked the tough questions concerning everyday life; and (3) cloaked themselves using academese as the language of choice, which alienated further those sociologists tried to reach (Sandstrom 2000). These were not new issues to the discussion on the discipline. Over the years, several prominent sociologists had stated similar ideas (Small 1916; Sorokin 1954; Turner 1990). The idea of the ‘presentation of the material’ however, was interesting. It was not simply the language, but also the mind numbing statistical tables, as well as the presentation of self. Sociologist’s presentations often appear boring and monotonous, over-rehearsed, or worse yet, unrehearsed. These dysfunctional academic presentations are contemptibly dull, unsophisticated, and ineffective. This process is facilitated in two areas in sociology, (1) research methodology; and (2) reflectivity of presentation. The lack of field research stifles understanding of the environment and therefore fosters the inability to ask the tough questions (Berger 1992; Whyte 1998). The second problem is the failure to listen to the audience as a means of self-reflection in teaching or communicating this information (See Conkling 2006; Dewey 1896; Mead 1894; 1896; 1897; Seidel 2006). The result has been the numbing of the discipline. What follows is a review of commentaries on the state of the discipline, and also the results of a survey of 270 students addressing their ideas of what they want from professors in the classroom. The surveys can also be extrapolated out as a means of understanding what the audience is looking for beyond the classroom, including research published, and the language used.

Learning Sociology

Sociology exposes students to new ways of thinking, such as how people are shaped by the world, and in turn reshape that world (Berger 1963; Dewey 1896; Mills 1959). This is found in the words of C. Wright Mills when speaking of the sociological imagination,

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues. (1959, p. 5)

Sociologists are to be professionally concerned with edifying activities on behalf of individuals and of the community at large (Berger, 1963, p. 2). This is the cornerstone of what such theorists as Durkheim, Hobhouse, and Ellwood hoped it would be.

Various journals have routinely published pieces addressing the problems within the discipline. Some suggested that we needed to return to more grassroots sociology by focusing our attention towards social responsibility, our responsibility to our students, and our responsibility toward other disciplines (Harris and Wise 1998; Plaut 1998; Seidman 1992). Similarly, Seidman gave an account of the state of the discipline by suggesting we forego the alleged objectivity and rationality of research and theory, and focus more on understanding people. He stated that sociologists had yielded not a defense of reason but a bewildering proliferation of texts, discourses, and disputes that render sociological theory intellectually obscure and make it irrelevant to broader public concerns (1992, p. 48).

Turner (1990) suggested that sociologists had lost their historical way, and were in

need of finding their identity once again. The result of this lack of identity had been the saturation of multiphrenic tendencies in research that removed consistency within the discipline. This lack of consistency created research with little in common other than the names of the departments or organizations of their members. Still others (Luebke 1998) suggested sociologists do a better job of publicizing their endeavors and remembering with whom they were talking.

Coser (1990) addressed the processes experienced by many. He stated:

. . . I feel justified in asserting that the majority of them [sociology graduate students] decided to become sociologists because of felt dissatisfaction with the working of their society. While in college, they were dissatisfied animals; they were drawn to sociology because they perceived it as a medium not only for a better understanding of their society but for its radical or reformist reconstruction. (p. 208)

He continued:

. . . critical undergraduates are being influenced in graduate school into relegating their critical impulses into half-forgotten liminal layers of their mind. When exposed to the influence of teachers fascinated by the continuous growth of methodological refinement, they are too often trained to become sophisticated computer specialists rather than critical thinkers. To them, the methodological tail wags the substantive dog. In their highly skilled hands, sociology is in danger of abandoning its critical birthright. While they may mightily contribute to the growth of sophisticated research techniques, they fail to enhance the critical bite of sociological ideas. Lacking this bite, their work is too often dull, as tedious as a laundry list (pp. 208-209).

Sociologists are losing touch with humanity by practicing methodolatry (Janesick 1994).

That is, utilizing methods that are technical, but restrict interaction with the human element.

In doing this, sociologists weaken their abilities to connect to those around them. Berger (1992), nearly 30 years after publishing *Invitation to Sociology*, questioned that invitation in *Sociology: A Disinvitation?* Berger discussed how sociologists at one time focused on the

big questions and robust empiricism while getting their hands dirty. He wondered aloud to the reader whether many sociologists had even interviewed a live human being or participated with curiosity in a live social event (1992, p. 12). William F. Whyte, the great ethnographer, voiced similar concerns when talking about a lack of field work in sociology:

When I reported this at a meeting of the Southern Sociological Society, a professor from Penn State told me what had recently happened in his department. They had invited nine candidates for an assistant professorship to present a report on their doctoral theses. All but one simply reported the results of a survey, without having done any field work. When professors asked the candidates what behavior might explain what they had found, they were at a loss to answer. The eight candidates seemed to assume that, if they had the statistical data, that should be enough to satisfy any sociologist. (p. 18)

In addition, Gary Marx (1997) stated that the image of the profession presented to our students [is] . . . unduly timid, antiseptic, laundered, formal and scholastic (p. 103). Further, Marx stated it is imperative for us as teachers and mentors to discuss the more personal and professional sides of the discipline, even as we encourage students to find their own answers. It is important to see the bigger picture, to locate ourselves within it, to reflect on why and how we do our work and on what gives meaning to our lives (p. 103).

Coser, Berger, Whyte, and Marx point to a problem that has evolved in sociology: If part of the problem within sociology is that sociologists do not spend time interacting with human beings, they may be gradually removing themselves from the fabric of the life attempted to be explained. Some graduate students' interaction with human beings has been to ask permission to pass out a survey to a class. If they wanted to get a high n they would access the many databases which are now available for research. This is witnessed at sociological conferences. The fall-out from this method of analysis has arguably been the

atrophy of sociologists everywhere. How can someone present the humanity of life when he/she does not interact with that life?

METHODOLOGY

A cursory investigation began asking students through class discussion what makes a good classroom and/or a good professor. They discussed that professors could make a good classroom by being sincere, making the material relevant to the lives of the students, demonstrating its importance, showing interest in the material they were teaching, facilitating discussion, and also being entertaining. The idea of relevancy to ones lives has been identified by Light (2001) as critical to the learning process. One student stated:

I think that any professor who is able to organize academic work in a way that draws students deeply into the ideas, yet simultaneously invites them to make connections between abstract ideas and their own real lives, becomes an unforgettable professor. The learning that takes place in such a class transcends what I would call purely academic learning, and is really seared into our consciousness. And I stress how I especially appreciate any professor who does this while maintaining the highest academic standards. (p. 113)

A survey was developed based on the comments of these students. The survey instrument had 32 items addressing various aspects of teaching or presentation style. Items were scaled from one to five (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). Two-hundred-seventy students were surveyed in ten courses (six sociology, four psychology)

Table 1:

Students in Sample

Item	n	%
Gender		
Male	80	30
Female	190	70
Class Level		
Freshman	8	03
Sophomore	136	50
Junior	80	30
Senior	46	17

These results are only meant as a guide for further discussion.

RESULTS

>Giving clear examples= (1.34) rated the highest. See Table two

Table 2:

Table Two

Means of Students= Preferences on Presentation Style

Items	Means
Give clear examples	1.34
Welcome questions	1.37
Be friendly	1.44
Welcome comments	1.50
Explain why the material is important	1.54
Care about the material	1.54
Care about the students	1.59
Smile	1.67
Be sincere	1.69
Use visual aids for explanation	1.69
Use visual aids for continuity	1.70
Explain the relevancy of the material to the students= lives	1.74
Be exciting	1.74
Know students= names	1.75
Use visual aids for direction	1.79
Entertain discussion	1.80
Lecture integrating material from textbook with new material	1.90
Be funny	2.11
Lecture 50% of the time	2.67
Be serious	2.74
Lecture 75% of the time	2.77
Lecture 25% of the time	3.50
Lecture using only new material	3.51
Ignore questions that are not relevant	3.51
Lecture directly from the textbook	3.75
Ignore stupid questions	3.90
Lecture 100% of the time	4.03
Criticize students	4.20
Never explain relevancy as students should know this	4.30
Never explain importance as students should know this	4.33
Never lecture	4.44

Students also want professors and instructors to care about the material (1.54). This should come as no surprise when talking with others, caring about the material adds to the message being delivered. Furthermore, the students said they wanted their professors to care about them (1.59). This would be analogous to parents. Throughout life people work to achieve things not only for self-satisfaction, but also to seek approval from their parents. At many universities, students are away from home, and while they enjoy their independence, they often rely on faculty for approval and guidance. The motivation is found in the relationship with the professors, and how the students are motivated by the professor caring. Professors demonstrate this by being friendly (1.44), smiling (1.67), being sincere (1.69), and knowing the names of the students (1.75). If professors welcome questions and comments (1.37; 1.50), and entertain discussion (1.80), they will develop a rapport with the students and audiences in general. This makes it much easier to demonstrate the relevancy and importance of the material (1.74; 1.54) as professors become more familiar with the students, their lives, and their views on life. If combined with this behavior is research that forces interaction with humans, sociologists should be able to translate this information to students and invigorate them to use their sociological imagination to identify the many social forces occurring within their own everyday lives. By doing these things students are given what they want most: clear examples (1.34). Through these interactions, sociologists would begin to see and experience the lives of those who are in the classroom. They would have a greater knowledge base of the lives, wants, and needs of the students and people in general. In so doing sociological principles would be brought to life as they relate to the experiences of the students, and then branch out to larger communities.

If professors do few of these things by never explaining the relevancy nor the importance (4.30; 4.33) of the material; criticizing the students (4.20); lecturing continually (4.03); or ignoring questions (3.90), they arguably will alienate their students from the subject material. They become boring, the presentations become monotonous, and they do not connect the dots for their students or audiences, therefore the information becomes humdrum.

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS

While sociologists can talk continuously about what should be studied, our theory being obscure, and losing our historical way, the bottom line is that if the information is not presented in a way which facilitates the learning process, we as sociologists have failed. We need to take the time to understand how our audiences define their situations. In every Introduction to Sociology course we speak of the importance of practicing *verstehen*, taking the role of the other, and understanding that if we define situations as real they are real in their consequences. We tell our students the importance of practicing cultural relativity instead of ethnocentrism. Yet, in graduate and undergraduate departments, we spend our time excusing or justifying the alienation of our students and others by stating that students are here for the grade, that they never read, and that all they want is their diploma so they can get on with their lives.

Sociologists such as Lewis Coser, Peter Berger, William F. Whyte, and Gary Marx suggest this is a systemic problem within not only sociology but academia as a whole. Pragmatists such as Peirce, Dewey, and Mead have provided both an explanation and a solution to the problem (Dewey 1929; Mead 1926; Peirce 1934). Within their

methodological focus of inquiry, the key to a better presentation of material can be achieved.

This is found in how we obtain knowledge. They suggest that knowledge follows a process of musement, retrodution, deduction, and induction (See Figure One).

Figure 1: Pragmatism Method to Knowledge

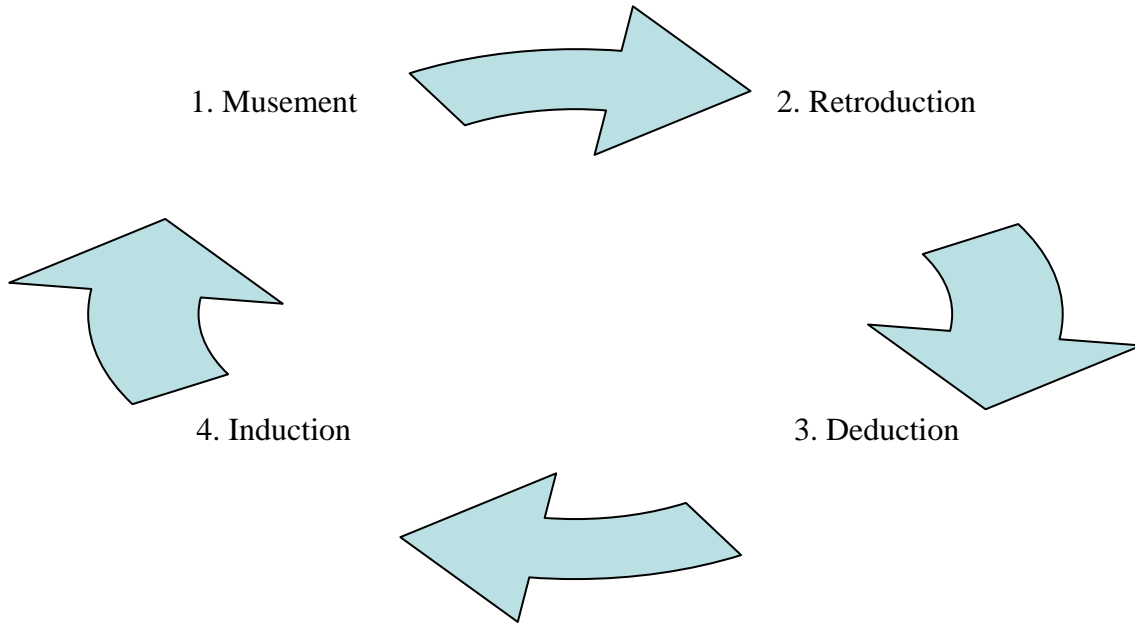


Figure Two

Goals For Optimal Presentation

- Give Clear Examples
- Welcome Questions
- Be Friendly
- Welcome Comments
- Explain Why the Material is Important
- Care About the Material
- Care About the Students
- Smile
- Be Sincere
- Use Visual Aids for Explanation

The first step of musement arises out of ‘pure play,’ or “aesthetic contemplation, or that of distant castle-building (whether in Spain or within one’s own moral training), or that of considering some wonder in one of the Universes, or some connection between two of the three, with speculation concerning its cause” (Peirce 1934, p. 313). Musement begins during those moments of ‘pure play’ in which we begin pondering the connections between and the causes of those things we are observing/experiencing.

Retroduction refers not only to the apprehension of something magnificent garnered through musement, but also to an ensuing hunch. Once formed, the hunch is deliberately and recursively taken backward for analysis and adjustment. This is secured through the development of a hypothesis.

The testing of this hypothesis is the next step found within the science of deduction, i.e. the scientific method. Here, inferences are made as to whether the conclusion stems from general or universal premises (Peirce 1934). During this process, an attempt is made to make the conclusion as distinct as possible. At this point, the conclusions or particulars are formalized as universal principles of nature. Classifications are made wherein general ideas are attached to experience. Classifications are then tested time and again. The conclusions become fact for the scientist, or “just the way things are” for the average person.

Lastly, the inductive state develops. Here is the sequential stage as Peirce referred. This is where the different probations are appraised singly, and then in their combinations. Through these combinations, we are able to distinguish the universality of the particular. In doing so, the particular becomes more expansive, and we come closer to truth.

The problem within many academic disciplines and specifically in sociology is that

we are often skipping the musement stage toward knowledge. Instead we are assuming we know what is best and not looking to muse or in other words, to look for alternative methods to achieve our ends. We believe we know what is correct, so we no longer 'ask the tough questions'. We no longer pay attention to what the audience is saying, doing, or thinking. In doing so, we fall prey to creating hypotheses that validate the induction and therefore eliminate the development of new ideas, or thinking outside the box. So we keep repeating ourselves with our research, ideas, and how we present information (Small 1916; Sorokin 1954; Turner 1990). To alleviate or solve this problem, we present a seven step process to understand and avoid the pitfalls of dysfunctional academic presentations.

First, understand the learning process. We as sociologists must first take into account the process of learning as stipulated by Peirce, Dewey, and Mead. If we see students failing or not learning, and do not take the time to understand that we play a part in that process, we have already dug ourselves a hole. We become the ethnocentric people that we often criticize within our classrooms. We should never be so certain within our stock of knowledge that we refuse to think outside the box. If we do not, we are doomed to repeat our past mistakes. This is true for research *and* presentation.

Second, be more actively involved with human beings. The lessons of the research of such people as Berger, Coser, Whyte and others should not be forgotten. Be actively engaged with people. Remember that the 'social' is part of sociology. If we as sociologists do not take the time to be involved with people, there is little hope that we can actually present information so others can understand it, relate to it, and get excited about it. We will not understand it well enough to present, and will inevitably not study things people are

passionate about.

Third, take the role of the other. Sometimes it appears that many of us have forgotten that for a decade or more we were students in college. Take the time to understand what you went through in college, and how you experienced various lectures. Take the time to look at the people with whom you are presenting. Look them straight in the eyes. Taking the role of the other means getting on the level of that person or group with whom you are presenting. It may be here that you create a checklist (See Figure Two) which provides you a way of evaluating how you present information.

Fourth, identify your objective (Hiebert, Morris, Berk, and Jansen 2007). When it comes to the nuts and bolts of presenting, identify to yourself and the audience what you are trying to achieve. Do not assume the students or your audiences are simply going to ‘get it’. Instead, take the time to articulate the material. Ask questions. Deserve answers. If you do not however identify an objective, you will always be hitting and missing when it comes to sharing that material.

Five, create a hypothesis. What is the best way to present the information? The material can be presented in many ways. Do not be ‘fake it’ when presenting information. You are a salesperson, so talk to the audience. A few years ago one of the authors was presenting information on racism at a local high school. Unfortunately, no White students came to the presentation. Upon talking with some of the students prior to the presentation, it became well known that most of the students had lived lives that were very tough. Five minutes into the presentation, the author could see he was losing their attention. He stopped, asked to speak freely, the students said ‘yes’, and for the next hour was very colloquial

regarding the material. In doing so, the students became very interested in the material. They understood. Nearly every student wanted the presentation to continue.

Six, conduct empirical observations (Conkling 2006; Seidel 2006). How do you conduct observation? In the classroom, some of the empirical observations can be garnered through assignments and see whether the students are 'getting it'. Other manners can be through group discussions, and/or classroom discussions. Do not assume the audience or the students know what you are talking about. Instead, take the time to clarify points. In a classroom discussion going over data, one of the authors kept referring to levels of significance. Upon looking closely at the students, many did not understand what he was referring. He asked and nearly all the students in the class did not understand what significance levels were or meant. Taking a few minutes to clarify the point made the rest of the class period and the discussion of the material worthwhile.

Of course, at conferences one cannot give pop exams. There is however a certain expectation that those in attendance are interested in the material. So the presenter must place more of the energy on 'reading' the audience. Gain eye contact, and see if those in attendance talk to you about your paper. Are those in attendance asking questions, making suggestions, and does the presentation generate a group discussion? If so, then you should have your answer. If not, it is possible that the presentation was so unappealing that most did not pay attention.

Last, use this analysis for improvement. Imagine seeing the presentation of material to be consistent with the process of learning. Instead of operating from the assumption that we are good at what we do, or that the listeners are lazy, we operate under the assumption

that we are inquisitive learners. In doing, so we become more effective in the classroom (Conkling 2006; Hiebert et. al. 2007; Seidel 2006). We are active communicators because we are actively involved in presenting material based by what we see and hear from the audience. This requires more flexibility as adjustments would eventually be made both in real time and also between presentations. The educational literature is littered with research now on this subject. It is time that we as sociologists begin listening and understanding what the research says.

CONCLUSION

The material presented in this paper aims at pointing at two key areas that contribute to dysfunctional academic presentations, (1) research methodology; and (2) reflectivity of presentation. Researchers should take the time to get to know the people they are studying. This should provide more relevant research in the future. Also take the time to evaluate your presentation. We are not necessarily coming off of mountain tops. We should not expect others to fall at our feet. If we do not understand the interaction of presenter with audience, there is little hope that the presenter will coincidentally strike an accord with the audience.

If we do not take into account these two areas of our careers then we possibly will facilitate more dysfunctional academic presentations. The problem may eventually evolve into something Weber himself may have prophesied in a different context. Have we or are we becoming so rational within our pursuits that we are losing touch with the human capacity for existence? By removing ourselves from interacting with human beings within research, it becomes more and more difficult to get in touch with the various internal and external forces which shape everyday lives. If we cannot touch base with these forces, it will

continually become more difficult to explain the passion that drove Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim or any of the early sociologists.

Explaining the importance of the material we study will also become difficult. We will simply present numbers to our audiences and forget what drove these individuals to these conclusions. We will forget the processes involved in everyday life which are what we are supposed to be studying. In the end, what we will do is crush the very fabric of life that provides the avenue for our studies. We will become the cheerful robots Mills spoke about (1959). The difference is that we will be trying to tell others of events or ideas we do not understand. And if we cannot understand these events, we will not be able to have our audiences understand either. When that day comes, we will have killed the very life we attempt to study and explain.

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