Three Lessons Learned

As a doctoral student in Sociology, I often teach such theoretically and empirically difficult subjects as class/classism, race/racism, gender/sexism, and sexuality/heterosexism, and how such social constructs intersect. Teaching and exploring these issues in the classroom can be a challenge for me and my students, especially during discussions when students express their own experiences living within a classed, raced, and gendered society. To facilitate the best environment for a respectful dialogue, I attempt to build a classroom community that creates an atmosphere that is safe and stimulating. The 2013 Lilly Conference provided me with three crucial guidelines to obtain my goal of an effective classroom community.

1. Consequences of Internet-use by students

I’ve struggled with whether or not to allow laptops in my classroom, and have experimented with both banning and allowing them. I considered both the plusses (i.e., direct access to information, including class readings) and minuses (i.e., temptations to access social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook) in each approach. However, I’ve now decided to stick with not allowing laptops in my classroom, especially after attending the Ryan Curtis and Scott Roberts’ presentation at the Lilly conference: No Texting in Class! No Facebook in Class! They empirically demonstrated that laptop use, though sometimes beneficial to students, tends to distract students including their classmates sitting within screen view. While these distractions negatively impacted students’ grades they may also hinder the construction of communal camaraderie, as students are tempted to engage with people and information outside of the classroom rather than focusing on their peers and classroom activities. My personal experiences are similar to Curtis and Roberts’ finding. When banning laptops, students tended to be more engaged in the classroom

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more engaged in the classroom and earned a higher grade on exams, papers, and assignments.

2. Creating a safe space

In my few semesters of teaching, I have encountered a number of students who experience either one or both of the following when taking a sociology course: 1) the course takes them out of their comfort zones, and/or 2) they fear that they are “just not made” to understand the subject successfully. Candice Munoz and Sunni Samuels’ Lilly presentation, But I’m not a (Fill-in some despised subject), spoke to reconciling these two potential experiences. Specifically, they discussed: 1) how to break down anxiety and fears of failure, and, relatedly, 2) how to break down elements of seemingly complex theories and applications. Munoz and Samuels emphasized the need for instructors to empathize (i.e., consideration of how students think and feel when surrounded by new knowledge) with their students in order to assist them in overcoming obstacles such as fear of failure and self-esteem issues. Munoz and Samuels demonstrated the effectiveness of self-reflection and scaffolding exercises (i.e., learning the base elements of a subject, slowly over time). This approach also stresses the importance to comprehend a subject matter both individually and within a community.

3. Fostering dialogue between classroom peers

In my classes I purposefully introduce social justice, as a “concept and goal” that ensures “full and equal participation of all groups” (Adams, et al. 2007). I introduce social justice as both a sociological concept and a classroom practice, as I aim to create a safe community where students can experience relational trust that ensures knowledge-gain and -creation. Though not simple, Sheryl Perlmutter Bowen, et al. showed at the Lilly conference how to effectively teach social justice, demonstrating the importance of critically connecting self-reflection exercises (i.e., reflection essay assignments; small group discussions; “pair and share” activities) to assigned course materials (i.e., theories; research). In doing so, they introduced leadership and dialogue skills that emphasize active citizenship with their student peers, instructors, and wider relational networks.